

LAKE GEORGE MIRROR.

"THE QUEEN OF AMERICAN LAKES"

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The Long View

Best-Selling Author Shares Historical Perspective with Lake George High School Students



Photos of Rick Atkinson's meeting with Lake George students courtesy of Paul Post and Lake George Jr-Sr High School.

By Paul Post

SPECIAL TO THE LAKE GEORGE MIRROR

A Pulitzer Prize-winning author says America's 250th birthday could be a unifying force that brings people together during this extremely divisive time in U.S. history.

Rick Atkinson discussed his Revolutionary War books with Lake George students during a recent visit to commemorate General Henry Knox and the "Noble Artillery Trail, which proved pivotal in the war's outcome.

"I've lived in Washington too long to have delusions, but I am hopeful that this (250th anniversary) is an opportunity for people to think through who we are, where we came from, what our forebears believed and what they were willing to die for, which is the most profound question anybody can ask themselves," he said.

Recently, Atkinson addressed 200 members of Congress and their spouses at the Library of Congress in Washington.

"There were Republicans and Democrats and they were civil," he said, smiling. "That's not always the case. The questions they had and the comments they had suggested a unified desire to honor that Revolutionary War generation, to learn from the events of that time and to be worthy of those founders. I think that's a bipartisan thing, wanting to be worthy of them."

As a young reporter, fresh out of grad school, Atkinson worked for a newspaper in a remote part of southeast Kansas. "I'm old enough to remember well the (1976) bicentennial," Atkinson said. "It was an opportunity for celebration and reflection. We had just come out of Vietnam, Watergate and Nixon had resigned two years earlier, followed by a very divisive pardoning of Nixon by President Ford."

"I think the bicentennial helped put a balm on those open wounds, not completely by any means," he said. "The war would remain divisive for a generation afterwards, but I'm hopeful that this time there's an opportunity to cross party lines, from one aisle

to the other."

But it might be quite challenging as all 436 House seats and 35 Senate seats will be contested this year in addition to gubernatorial elections in 36 states and territories.

Atkinson is currently working on his ninth book, and third in a series called "The Revolution Trilogy." Parts one and two were "The British Are Coming: The War for America, Lexington to Princeton, 1775-1777" and "The Fate of the Day," published last April.

He also has a prominent role in award-winning filmmaker Ken Burns' six-part documentary, "The American Revolution," which premiered on PBS in November.

Seventh-grade students asked



Atkinson insightful questions such as, given the chance, which Revolutionary War figure would he most like to meet?

“First on my list would be Benjamin Franklin,” he said. “He was the most famous American of his day because of his scientific discoveries in the 1740s and 50s when he was a relatively young man. His experiments with electricity – words that we use today like battery, voltage and positive and minus – all come from Franklin.”

“Born in Boston, he settled in Philadelphia, was a printer and writer,” Atkinson said. “Then he was our first and greatest diplomat. At the end of 1776 he was sent to France, crossing the Atlantic in his 70s, which was really old for that time – as

America’s representative to the Court of Versailles, the French king, Louis the 16th. Franklin’s job on behalf of Congress was to persuade the French to send an army and navy; provide gunpowder, muskets and artillery to help the American cause. If I could sit down over a beer or at lunch with any one person from that time it would be Franklin.”

All of Atkinson’s books, including “The Liberation Trilogy” about World War II, are about American wars because his father was an army officer and he became interested in military topics as a young boy.

Following a stint at the Kansas City Times, he spent almost 20 years as a reporter, editor and foreign correspondent for The Washington Post, covering wars in Somalia, Iraq and Bosnia. “So it was a fairly natural step for me to move from writing about war for newspapers to doing it in books,” Atkinson said.



But there's a big difference between writing a 20-inch day story and a 500-page, 260,000-word book. He spends three years researching each work, scouring archives from New York to London, before getting down to the brass tacks of writing.

"The rhythm is different, the solitude is a lot different," Atkinson said. "At The Washington Post I'm in a newsroom with 600 people. Now I'm by myself for years at a time. You have to be comfortable with your own company. That's why

it's good to get out and be around other people, especially kids."

In response to a student question, he explained why the Boston Tea Party was such a flashpoint in triggering the Revolution. Tea, brought around the world from China, was an important source of revenue for the British. But it was also a symbol of Britain's right to impose taxes on the colonies, which angered Americans because they had no representation in Parliament.

Rebels disguised as Indians dumped 40 tons of tea, held in crates on three ships, into Boston Harbor. "Men in boats pushed it under the water to make sure none survived," Atkinson said. "That's how angry they were. When the king, George III, got word about what happened he was furious. He was usually a pretty even-tempered guy. But he said, 'Blows must decide,' meaning we're going to come to war."

Another student asked Atkinson which side he would have supported, if he was alive during the Revolution. "Great question," he said. "We all like to think we'd be on the winning side, that we'd be rebel patriots because they won. But it's hard to put yourself in the shoes of those who were around in 1775 when the American Revolution began at Lexington and Concord."

"There were 2.5 million people in America and 500,000 were slaves," he said. "Of the 2 million white people about 20 percent were Loyalists. My ancestors were Quakers, driven out of England, who settled in Bucks County, Pennsylvania. Quakers then and now are against war. I don't know what my forebears were doing in 1776. My guess is like so many people, in so many wars, they were just trying to stay out of the way."

But he noted that General Nathaniel Greene, second only to George Washington as the most important general in the Continental Army, had a Quaker background. "I like to think I would have been a Nathaniel Greene kind of Quaker who put aside his religious scruples to participate in the cause," Atkinson said.