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Author(s): Jeremy Black

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COULD THE BRITISH HAVE WON THE AMERICAN WAR OF INDEPENDENCE?¹

BY JEREMY BLACK

To ask such a question might appear foolish given the outcome of the struggle, and indeed offensive to an American readership; but it is only if we look at the war from the British perspective also that we can truly assess the nature of the American achievement. Yet any reconsideration may seem irrelevant. The familiar image of the war—of British redcoats advancing in formation only to be shot down by brave American riflemen aiming from behind trees and walls—would suggest that the result of the conflict was a foregone conclusion. European military methods were bound to fail in America.

Nevertheless, it is worth dwelling on the problems facing the revolutionaries. They were seeking to defeat a highly trained army, backed up by both the largest navy in the world and the strongest system of public finance in Europe and supported by about one-fifth of the population of the Thirteen Colonies, as well as by much of the population in nearby colonies, all of which provided the British with bases: Canada, Nova Scotia, Newfoundland, Florida and the British possessions in the West Indies. In their last conflict—the Seven Years War (1756–63)—the British had campaigned with success around the globe. In 1762, their last year of fighting, they helped the Portuguese resist a Bourbon invasion, fought the French in Westphalia, and captured Martinique from the French and Havana and Manila from the Spaniards. Earlier in the war the British had driven the French from Canada, defeated their forces in India, captured the French bases of Goree (West Africa) and Guadeloupe and crushed their navy in European waters.

In addition, the British armed forces had substantial experience of suppressing rebellions. Major risings on behalf of the Jacobite claimant to the throne had occurred in 1715 and 1745. Lord George Germain, who was, as Secretary of State for the American colonies 1775–82, to direct British operations, played an active role as an army officer in the '45. Defeated at Yorktown, Cornwallis, as Commander-in-Chief, crushed an Irish rising in 1798 and took the surrender of a French force sent to support it.

Furthermore, European warfare was not as limited and inconsequential as generally presented. It is held to have emphasized manoeuvre over battle, a wish to preserve armies rather than a willingness to suffer substantial casualties in achieving objectives, in short an avoidance of risk. This caricature has been contrasted with the more dynamic determined, vigorous and violent tactics, strategy,

¹This is the text of the annual Cincinnati Lecture given at the Virginia Military Institute on 15 Sep. 1993. Earlier versions of this paper were read at the universities of Auburn, Colorado (Boulder), Illinois (Chicago), Illinois (Urbana), Oxford, North Texas and Yale, at Harlaxton College, Stillman College, Texas Christian University, the United States Air Force Academy and Wesleyan (Normal) University. I am very grateful for the comments made.

methods and objectives of the warfare of revolutionary France and, as in so much else, the American revolution is held to have anticipated that of France.

This is a questionable view. European warfare could be far from limited, campaigns could be decisive, casualties high, sometimes extraordinarily high. There was no common experience, no uniform model of operations. The conquest of Canada scarcely suggested that European warfare in North America was indecisive. Furthermore, within the constraints created by the nature of American society and the federal and anti-militarist political culture of a revolutionary new state, George Washington sought to create an army modelled on that of Britain, while Nathanael Greene, one of his closest advisers, regarded Frederick the Great as 'the greatest General of the age'. The decision to emphasize the importance of a Continental Army represented the rejection of an alternative path of military development advocated by Major-General Charles Lee, but totally disregarded by conservative Americans, one that would have centred on irregular warfare. The decision for a Continental Army had an important political background: it symbolized the united nature of the struggle by the Thirteen Colonies and was a vital move in the effort to win foreign recognition and support.

Thus the Americans decided to fight with the conventional methods that the British were accustomed to dealing with: the lines of musketeers of European warfare. The Americans did so with insufficient resources. There were never enough troops in the Continental Army. Outside Boston in 1775 Washington had enjoyed numerical superiority, but in 1776 the situation deteriorated. He was outnumbered by Howe and, given the respective size and quality of the armies, Howe's decision to delay his invasion of Pennsylvania was crucial to the result of the 1777 campaign. Thereafter Washington, although sorely tempted by the idea of attacking New York, had insufficient men to do so. French troops, as well as sea-power, were crucial in the 1781 campaign. Generals in the Revolutionary forces responded with frustration. Angered by the small size of their inadequately-supplied units, they were sceptical about the notion that militia support could compensate.

The Americans faced severe problems in the supply of provisions, clothing and footwear. An army of 20,000 men consumed about 33 tons of food daily, and, despite the vitality of the American agrarian economy, the demands of the war proved difficult to meet, while difficulties with credit and transportation further exacerbated the situation. The war was fought largely through credit, not taxation, although the unreliable nature of the credit itself constituted a form of taxation. The service departments established to support the Continental Army faced difficulties from the outset with reluctance to accept paper currency and from the competing demands of state agencies. In the bitter winters of 1779–80 and, even worse, 1780–1, the army had to live from hand to mouth. In 1780 Congress devised a new system under which individual states were to be asked to provide specific supplies which would be credited towards their portion of Congress' debt. This did not work well, because of the growing exhaustion and war-weariness of the population, the reluctance of the states to subordinate their priorities to those of Congress, and their own problems with credit-worthiness.

It is therefore surprising that there were not widespread mutinies earlier. This could be attributed to the troops' certainty of the justice and necessity of their cause, but it may also have owed much to the relative ease of taking leave without permission, a very frequent occurrence, as well as to a high rate of desertion. There had been disturbances in 1777 and 1780, but in January 1781, short of pay, food and clothes and seeking discharge, both the Pennsylvania line and three New Jersey regiments mutinied. The Pennsylvania mutiny was ended only by concessions, including the discharge of five-sixths of the men. The entire episode was a salutary warning to the Revolutionary cause and cannot but give rise to speculation as to what would have happened had the army been obliged to endure another harsh winter without the prospect of a victorious close to the conflict created by Yorktown.

The rifle did not make American victory inevitable. As far as the British were concerned, the Kentucky or Pennsylvania rifle was a formidable weapon at long range, capable of hitting targets at up to 200 yards under optimum conditions. Burgoyne wrote of the battle of Bemis Heights in September 1777, in which the riflemen under Daniel Morgan concentrated on picking off British officers,

The enemy had with their army great numbers of marksmen, armed with rifle-barrel pieces: these, during an engagement, hovered upon the flanks in small detachments, and were very expert in securing themselves, and in shifting their ground. In this action, many placed themselves in high trees in the rear of their own line, and there was seldom a minute's interval of smoke in any part of our line without officers being taken off by single shots.

It would, however, be mistaken to exaggerate the success of the rifle, or its novelty as far as the British were concerned. A rifle could carry no bayonet, took one minute to load and an expert to fire it, of which there were relatively few. The British had German riflemen in their army in North America, over 1000 *Jäger* from Hessen-Kassel in 1779. The Americans saw riflemen as vulnerable to musketeers because their guns were not fitted with bayonets. In 1778 General Wayne of the Pennsylvania Line asked the State Board of War to exchange all the rifles in his division for muskets, 'I don't like rifles. I would almost as soon face an enemy with a good musket and bayonet without ammunition—as with ammunition without a bayonet.' Wayne claimed that riflemen often fled in panic when attacked by soldiers armed with bayonets. The British fear of American marksmen was therefore matched by American concern about British bayonet charges.

Rifles could be fouled by repeated firing, and they had a slow rate of fire, not much of a problem if sniping, but a serious problem in close order fighting. Washington employed riflemen as skirmishers and snipers, not as regular soldiers. As in other respects, the early impression of a superior American method of warfare that had been engendered by the New England campaign of 1775 was replaced the following year by a sharper realization of weakness. This was linked to a major change in the war. For most of 1775 the British had been hemmed in at Boston and had not taken the initiative, but in 1776 they both did so and

forced the Revolutionary forces to engage in battle. Sniping could not determine campaigns. Riflemen could make an important contribution when they had good cover, either natural, for example north of Fort Washington in 1776 or at Bemis Heights in 1777, or artificial, but these situations arose less frequently than is commonly supposed in American folklore with its romantic notions about frontier riflemen and their rifles.

If too much weight cannot be placed on the rifle, it is necessary to consider another oft-cited factor: poor British leadership. Both contemporaries and historians directed much criticism at individual commanders and at the general calibre of British generalship. Blame has been widely distributed: Gage for failing to adopt an adequate defensive posture around Boston and for his tactics at Bunker Hill; Howe for his failure to destroy Washington's army and capture Philadelphia in late 1776, and for over-extending his forces in New Jersey then, and in 1777 for failing to coordinate operations with Burgoyne and taking so long to capture Philadelphia; Burgoyne for plunging ahead towards Albany in 1777 despite being outnumbered and unsupported; Clinton for his caution as commander-in-chief and Cornwallis for his invasion of Virginia in 1781. British generals as a group have been criticized for unimaginative leadership and poor and confused strategic planning, an analysis that has been extended to much of the naval command, particularly the First Lord of the Admiralty, the Earl of Sandwich, and to Germain.

It would be idle to dismiss these charges. Specific failures can be ascribed in large part to poor generalship and the individual and cumulative effects of these disappointments and defeats were serious. However, before it is concluded that poor leadership lost Britain the war, it is important to note first that this was not restricted to the British forces; secondly, that the British did enjoy a number of important successes; thirdly that British operations in earlier conflicts, as against the French in Canada, had not always been conducted brilliantly and yet victory had been achieved eventually, and fourthly, that the task facing the British leaders was formidable. It is easy to contrast them unfavourably with such eighteenth-century generals as Frederick the Great or Marshal Saxe, but the latter neither had to coordinate land and sea operations nor to operate at such a distance from their home bases.

The wars of the period commonly ended with a compromise peace. The eventual end of the War of American Independence was in part such a peace, less obviously in the case of the new American republic, which gained recognition and extensive territories, but had to accept the failure to gain Canada, than in that between Britain and her European rivals. It is worth considering, however, the possibility that a settlement might have been negotiated that would have left a constitutional relationship between America and the British crown and even, in the case of a preferential system of foreign trade, with parliament. During the war a new relationship was defined between Britain and Ireland, one in which the Westminster parliament and the government in London surrendered most of their prerogatives. It is not impossible that British victory over the American Revolutionaries would have created the basis for a new political settlement, either as

a result of negotiation or as a consequence of an upsurge of loyalism and a falling away of revolutionary spirit under the strain of defeat. In July 1776 the Marquis of Rockingham suggested, 'if this campaign ends without complete victory on either side, there may be some chance of more temper prevailing', and British victories later in the year led supporters and opponents of the government to speculate on the chance of negotiations.

It is easy to dismiss such a suggestion. There is little doubt of the determination of many of the Revolutionaries and although the Howes were appointed peace commissioners, as well as commanders-in-chief in 1776, they were expected to crush the revolution, to force the colonists to accept that they were subjects and to lay down their arms, before they negotiated such an accord. The British offer of pardon upon submission was rejected. Benjamin Franklin wrote to Viscount Howe in July 1776,

It is impossible we should think of submission to a government, that has with the most wanton barbarity and cruelty, burnt our defenceless towns in the midst of winter, excited the savages to massacre our farmers, and our slaves to murder their masters, and is even now bringing foreign mercenaries [Hessians] to deluge our settlements with blood.

Five months later, with Congress having fled from Philadelphia to Baltimore, many individual rebels wavering or making terms with the British and Loyalism ascendant, the situation looked different. The British military effort still faced formidable problems but that had not prevented victory in battle. Aside from the political reverberations within America, the strategy of cutting America in twain that was to be advanced in 1777 was already a prospect. The Americans had been thrown out of Canada and defeated at the naval engagement off Valcour Island on Lake Champlain in October 1776. The possibility of a British advance via Ticonderoga to the Hudson was made more attractive by the establishment of Howe's army at New York. His defeat of Washington and pursuit of him across New Jersey ensured that New York would serve as a base for offensive operations, rather than being a target. In such a context it was not implausible to hope that Congress or individual states would negotiate. European independence wars had been ended by peace settlements, as in Hungary in 1711, and indeed a feature of early-modern European political violence involving members of the social élite had been conciliation rather than brutal suppression.

If such conciliation is treated as impossible in the American case, the military task facing the British was indeed formidable, especially once the opportunities created in the 1776 campaign had been lost. Nevertheless, that does not imply that the British position was hopeless, militarily or politically. Militarily, it was still possible to hold and gain coastal enclaves, to retain Canada and East Florida, to launch offensives into the interior and to hope to defeat the main American army, although these objectives were complicated by the French intervention. Once taken, New York, Savannah and Charleston were held for the rest of the war.

Politically, it could be hoped that the continued British presence and war-

weariness on the part of the Revolutionaries would lead to an attrition of will, to an upsurge of loyalist sentiment and activity, to conciliation by degrees of a substantial part of America. The eventual consequences of such military and political activity were unclear to contemporaries. They were worth pursuing, however, in the hope that they would bring victory or provide Britain with bargaining counters in any eventual negotiations. In addition, it was feared that abandoning America would allow the Revolutionaries to attack nearby British possessions and would permit France and Spain to concentrate their efforts elsewhere.

Thus the war was not lost because of Bunker Hill, or Washington's dramatic counter-attack in the last days of 1776, or Burgoyne's surrender at Saratoga. Each made it very much less likely that the conflict could be brought to a close by the conquest of most of America, but none of these defeats left Britain without objectives, options and possessions in America. The question of what policy to follow given the possibility of achieving goals short of widespread conquest, was, however, difficult and it was confused by the lure of such conquest. First, the British were unclear about how much weight could be placed on the Loyalists. Hopes of Loyalist assistance increased during the war, especially after France's entry in 1778, and this was linked to the growing concentration of Britain's hopes and efforts on Georgia and the Carolinas. The British hoped to use regulars to drive the Revolutionaries out of the south, leaving mopping up and the re-establishment of the civil government to Loyalists. As many regulars were sent to the Caribbean, while few reinforcements arrived from Britain, British commanders became dependent on Loyalist units to make up their combat forces.

Yet the Loyalist option posed major problems of strategic choice. Organized and significant Loyalist activity in large part required the presence of British forces, as in Georgia and South Carolina in 1779–80. But the dispersal of troops to protect Loyalist areas made operations difficult, for it was only through the maintenance of large, concentrated forces able to manoeuvre that decisive encounters could be sought. Such a dispersal reduced the operational effectiveness of the army in Ireland in 1797–8.

There was also the question of how far the war should be conducted in a manner calculated neither to offend Loyalist opinion nor to make the task of conciliation more difficult. This would entail the abandonment, not merely of any attempt to live off the country, but, more seriously, of ideas of terrorizing the Americans into submission by savage measures, such as devastating their property or laying them under contribution. William Eden, one of the British peace commissioners in 1778, subsequently argued that the British had been wrong to wage war 'with the courtesies of the age as we did in America to a degree which caused the loss of the colonies'. Yet when his generalship was investigated in parliament in 1779, Sir William Howe asked Cornwallis a leading question: 'If I had laid waste the country . . . would it not have had the effect of alienating the minds of the Americans from His Majesty's government, rather than terrifying them into obedience?'

British generals were disenchanted with the degree of support they received from the Loyalists. In large part they suffered from the fatal delay in extending

the war to Pennsylvania and the south, for in the meantime Loyalists had been isolated by the local militia and cowed into inactivity or submission. On the eastern shore of Maryland, for example, where large numbers of the poor had flouted revolutionary authority, a lack of sustained British support and the activity of revolutionary institutions brought a measure of order. The policy after the Seven Years War of entrusting the defence of the colonies to British regulars rather than locally raised units was possibly partly responsible for the weakness of the Loyalists; in addition, the fact that they tended to want peace and quiet affected their willingness to take up arms for the king.

Aside from failing to recruit sufficient Loyalists, the British made little attempt to obtain the support of African-Americans, although they did use native Americans extensively. This was an obvious contrast to the British use of Indian troops in India—over 100,000 in 1782, and to the raising of Black regiments in the West Indies by both British and French in the 1790s. However, the nature of the struggle as in part a civil war ensured that the British were sensitive to Loyalist susceptibilities. At the outset of the conflict, Lord Dunmore, the Governor of Virginia, promised freedom to slaves who took up arms against the Revolutionaries and created an ‘Ethiopian Regiment’ several hundred strong, a move that led many undecided whites to join the Revolutionaries.

Had the British raised the African-Americans or placed greater emphasis on the native Americans, a course urged by Dunmore, the task of reconciliation would have been far harder. This was important as the government needed to retain the final objective of the war in mind. The restoration of the colonies to royal government would be pointless if they required a substantial garrison and if the embers of rebellion remained among a discontented population. This would have led to a substantial tax burden that would have had to be borne by the Americans or the British, both options that would have been politically hazardous.

Just as the American leadership was hesitant about the radical proposals of Charles Lee, so the British did not pursue some of the possibilities open to them. To have done so would have been risky politically, of unknown value militarily, and at variance with the ethos of a military system whose acceptance of new developments was not limitless. If the dramatic expansion in the use of sepoy in India suggests that major changes were possible, this took place outside the structure of the regular army, while the socio-political context in America was very different.

British forces operating in America encountered similar problems to those faced by their opponents, such as supply difficulties and a frequently unfavourable terrain and climate. Most Americans were also unused to the back country: there were few frontiersmen in the army. Nevertheless, transportation and supply problems were naturally greater for an army dependent in large part on a trans-oceanic base and with only limited local sources of supply. The British had operated extensively in North America during the Seven Years War, and had then freed themselves from a total operational dependence on maritime and riverine communications. The logistical problems of acting in the interior had been

largely surmounted, although only after much hard work and several major failures. However, the American war posed greater problems. Whereas in the earlier conflict the British had been able to draw on substantial supplies from the American colonies, and their forces had operated with the benefit of a secure hinterland, this was no longer the case. Furthermore, their adversaries enjoyed local sources of supply and manpower.

During the Seven Years War the British were essentially obliged in their colonial warfare to defeat small armies composed of regular European units supported by native irregulars. Campaigns centred on the capture of major fortresses and centres of government, such as Louisbourg and Quebec, all of which could be reached by water. Experience with sieges was obviously important. Operations in the hinterlands were limited: the British captured Manila and Havana, not the Philippines or Cuba, but they gave effective political and military control of what the British sought, bargaining counters for the inevitable peace treaty. The same was even more true of those French bases that lacked any real hinterland: Goree, Pondicherry, Louisbourg and the principal fortresses in the West Indies. The military objective necessary to secure victory in colonial campaigns was therefore clear: assured naval superiority sufficient to permit the landing and supply of an amphibious force that would successfully besiege the major fortress whose capture would lead to the effective end of Bourbon strength.

Such a strategy was one option in dealing with the American Revolution, complementing the naval blockade of the American coast by seizing the major cities. 75% of Americans lived within 75 miles of the sea. Without occupying coastal bases no magazines (supply dumps) could be developed for operations in the interior. Capturing the leading ports was possible, as British successes at New York (1776), Savannah (1779) and Charleston (1780) demonstrated, although the value of this strategy was only assured if the American forces in the region sought to defend the city and could be decisively defeated, as was the case at Charleston and, although to a less decisive effect, New York.

Unless such a decisive defeat occurred, the principal effect of gaining a base was to oblige the army to devote much of its resources to defending a fixed target: Boston in 1775, Newport in 1776–9 and Philadelphia in the winter of 1777–8. After the French entry into the war in 1778 this was dangerous as the possibility of concerted operations by a French fleet and an American army made British bases vulnerable, as British fears on behalf of New York demonstrated. As New York, Charleston and Savannah were held, it is however difficult to see how the Americans can be seen as having won the war other than in the very important negative sense of denying victory to the British.

It is arguable that a 'seaboard strategy', a concentration of effort on gaining control of ports and blockading the rest of the coast, was the most sensible one for the British, as it took advantage of their major strength, naval power, and minimized two of their principal difficulties: logistics and the problems of fighting inland. The British navy could land the army where it chose and there was little the Americans could do about it. Once inland, and forced to rely on either a wagon-drawn or foraged logistical network, the army, however, was in a different

position. The British pummelled the Americans in both the middle colonies and the south, but the Americans became increasingly adept at trading space for time.

A fully developed 'seaboard strategy' was however, never followed. There were several goals for which significant inland operations appeared necessary, including the need to defend the ports from American forces, and that of protecting Canada, a need that led to the stationing of forces whose use in offensive operations from Canada appeared logical; a sense of obligation towards the Loyalists matched by a belief that they could become militarily decisive; domestic pressures for victory; the wish to defeat the Americans decisively and speedily in a setpiece battle in order to inhibit foreign support for them; and the fact that the 'seaboard' strategy had already failed in New England in 1775. After the French entry into the war Britain could no longer plan on assured naval superiority in American waters and it was largely the French refusal to fulfil American hopes that they would concentrate their naval forces there that provided the British with a precarious superiority for most of the following two years.

The added strain of fighting France increased the stress on obtaining a decisive victory. It was only by destroying the American field armies that troops could be freed from garrison duty in order to extend the range of British control. A successful resolution of the war would from the point of view of British taxpayers require pacification, but that appeared most likely to be a consequence of decisive victory. The alternative of attrition, military and economic, was difficult to implement after French entry into the war, although there are some signs that life was becoming pretty unendurable for Americans and difficult for the American war-effort by 1781.

It is difficult to assess whether a decisive battle was indeed an illusion. The feasibility of a strategy depended to a considerable extent on when it was considered or applied and with what strength. In 1776 a decisive victory, the destruction of Washington's army and possibly the death of the general, might well have been fatal to the cause of independence. In 1777 such a victory by Howe would have been significantly more important than Burgoyne's defeat, although it is by no means clear how this would have helped the British in New England. A substantial force landed subsequently near Boston might well have fared no better than Gage in 1775, though, with bases in New York and Rhode Island, the British would have been in a better position to blockade and raid the coast. Given the military difficulty of a conquest of New England and, at that state, the apparent problems facing one of the south, especially after Clinton's failure at Charleston in 1776 and the Loyalist defeat at Moore's Creek Bridge in the same year, it is not surprising that, irrespective of their clear political preference for conciliation, the Howes should have been so interested in negotiating an end to the conflict. Negotiations were not an illusion, as Prevost discovered at Charleston in 1779, but there were enough Americans who were not prepared to abandon their independence (whatever their disinclination to contribute to the military effort), to make such an option unlikely to succeed, short of a major British military success. Pacification of the south, where negotiations were most likely to succeed, could only be a means to an end, that of the defeat or demoral-

ization of more militant regions. This was equally true of decisive victory in the south, apparently gained at Charleston and Camden in 1780. Such victory had been obtained earlier, in the clearing of Canada in 1776, but that was only a stage in the military struggle. The reconquest and pacification of Canada did not imply that the same was inevitable in the bordering regions of the Thirteen Colonies. As the war in the north increasingly stabilized after 1777 and that in the centre after the British retreat from Philadelphia in 1778, it became more likely that Britain would never conquer many of the areas in rebellion.

By stressing the British need for decisive victory, a greater emphasis can be placed on American skill and determination in avoiding such a defeat. Much can doubtless be ascribed to British indecision and to generals who were arguably insufficiently prepared to take risks, such as Howe, or who were too reckless, such as Burgoyne, Cornwallis, and Clinton when he was commander-in-chief, but there were major engagements and after 1776, whatever the fate of parts of the army, the main American force was not routed. The British were unable to exploit battlefield advantages, because of deficiencies on their part, principally caution, fatigue and the absence of cavalry, but also because of skilful American withdrawals and the toll inflicted in battle by the Americans, most obviously at Bunker Hill and Guilford. Although not a particularly good field general, Washington was an excellent leader and a good strategist.

The British were defeated by the American determination to continue fighting when the struggle became more widespread, bitter and sustained than had at first seemed likely, before the British sent a major army to crush the revolutions. The Americans subsequently had to face the British decision to continue the struggle on land even after French intervention. Casualties were heavy. Although American deaths in battle amounted to about 6000 the number of probable deaths in service was over 25,000, as a result of casualties in camp and among prisoners. This was 0.9 per cent of the population in 1780, compared to near 1.6 for the Civil War, 0.12 for World War One and 0.28 for World War Two. The English speaking world had been rent asunder. America, inhabited by a people of extraordinary vitality, was to be the most dynamic of the independent states in the western hemisphere, the first and foremost of the decolonized countries, the people that were best placed to take advantage of the potent combination of a European legacy, independence, and the opportunity for expansion and growth that were to play an increasingly important role in the new world created from 1776.