Fighting the Revolutionary War: How an Underdog Defeated the World's Greatest Superpower

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History 327: Revolutionary America
April 10, 2014

The longest war in American history until the Vietnam War in the second-half of the twentieth century, the Revolutionary War pitted a new and inexperienced nation against an established and superior world power.[1] Colonial resentment toward Great Britain's legislative policies largely originated after the end of the Seven Years' War, during which Britain failed to concede to colonial desires for expansion into new territories and later imposed restrictive tariffs that angered the colonists. After the passage of the 1774 Intolerable Acts, colonial respect toward British authority sharply plummeted and the colonists increasingly expressed desire to form autonomous and representative governments.

The resistance efforts were inspired by the works of several influential political leaders. John Jay declared that they were "the first people whom heaven has favoured with an opportunity of deliberating upon and choosing forms of government under which they should live" and the Intolerable Acts pushed them toward this goal.[2] In his famous January 1776 publication, *'Common Sense'*,Thomas Paine made a case for a new kind (or different) version of American exceptionalism, claiming that "the sun never shined on a cause of grater worth."[3] These enlightening and inspiring works strengthened the colonial desire for independence and sovereignty and reinforced their views of Britain as a tyrannical and oppressive government that needed to be removed from the colonies. Public newspapers were also greatly involved in the revolutionary struggle; by attacking Loyalists groups and criminalizing their ideology, newspapers succeeded in uniting the Patriots. One Whig publication warned that the independence of this nation was "endangered by internal enemies "who "wish to see us

[1] Gordon Wood, *The American Revolution: A History* (New York: Modern Library, 2002), 75.
[2] Ibid., 65.
[3] Thomas Paine, "Common Sense," in *Major Problems in the Era of the American Revolution, 1760-1791*, ed. Richard Brown and Benjamin Carp, (Boston: Cengage Learning, 2014), 140.

conquered and fettered with the chains of slavery." [4] There was a psychological and ideological aspect to American resistance that drew strength from a particular view of America as a place with a special destiny. In this way, incendiary journals buttressed Whig ideology and helped fortify American resistance efforts.

Between 1776 and 1777, there was a growing fervor and enthusiasm toward drafting, enacting, and establishing state constitutions that would prevent tyrannical abuses of power and serve as representative bodies to serve the needs and wishes of the populace. [5] These new frameworks of government inspired remarkable confidence among the colonists, and the ambitious spirit that emerged would serve as the foundation for the energy behind the Revolutionary War. Nonetheless, the painstaking and often frustrating efforts to craft state constitutions and unite the Union would be rendered useless if independence from Britain was not attained.[6] The Declaration of Independence was the culmination of colonial resistance; however, this formal assertion was only the beginning of the struggle to defend their self-proclaimed liberty and sovereignty. The newly organized states now had to face the "most formidable military power in the world", one that controlled a navy so large that it could "deploy tens of thousands of well-provisioned and well-equipped professional troops anywhere along the Atlantic seaboard."[7] Immediately, the Continental Congress saw the vital need to establish a formal army; organizing, mobilizing, training, and provisioning this armed force proved to be an "immense practical challenge of great political and financial complexity" that would require

[4] Frank Moore, "Diary of the American Revolution" in *Major Problems in the Era of the American Revolution, 1760-1791*, ed. Richard Brown and Benjamin Carp, (Boston: Cengage Learning, 2014), 179-180.
[5] Wood, 66-67.
[6] Wood, 74-75.
[7] Richard D. Brown and Benjamin L. Carp, eds., *Major Problems in the Era of the American Revolution: 1760-1791*, 3rd ed. (Boston, MA; Cengage Learning, 2014), 172.

"Congress's best energies until 1782".[8] Additionally, Congress recognized that foreign aid would be crucial in fighting a superpower; in keeping with the adage of 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend', it sought the help of France to supply much-needed funds and supplies. France also later became particularly influential at diverting British energies by threatening its profitable colonial holdings in the Caribbean.

The summer of 1775 saw much action and legislation from the Second Continental Congress: in the span of a few months, fourteen generals were appointed and the Continental Army was organized under George Washington's leadership. At the age of forty-three, Washington was recommended for the post of commander in chief by John Adams. A native Virginian, Washington encompassed many of the qualities of a good leader; he was "tall and composed, with a dignified soldier-like air that inspired confidence." [9]Though widely respected throughout the new American states and legislatures, Washington's success as a commander did not stem from fantastic battle victories or defensive maneuvers. Rather, popular opinion of him sprung from his graceful and resolute character. His "stoicism, dignity, and perseverance in the face of seemingly impossible odds" inspired much of the Revolutionary struggle, and Washington's profound wisdom would later prove to be influential in the early beginnings of national governance.[10] Though lacking formal education in military methodology, he compensated this deficiency with remarkable resiliency and bravery.

The flurry of activity that emerged from Congress awakened British worry as Parliament became fully aware that the colonial rebellion had transformed into a military battle. Following conventional eighteenth-century war strategy, Britain began organizing and mobilizing its army

[8] Ibid.
[9] Wood, 76.
[10] Ibid, 84.

and preparing them for combat. The British forces that had been stationed in Boston were removed and transferred to New York, a key location due to its "presumably more sympathetic population, superior port, and central position." Led by Sir William Howe, thirty thousand men arrived to New York harbor in the summer of 1776. [11]

On the surface, Britain seemed to possess huge advantages in a war with the newly-formed United States. As the most powerful nation in the globe, Great Britain had significant military advantages, controlling the world's largest navy and maintaining a full-time professionally-trained army. In 1778, Britain deployed almost 50,000 troops for the American conflict alone, and hired 30,000 German mercenaries to supplement their army.[12] In comparison, the Continental Army was comprised of less than 5,000 troops, and relied on support from state militias. The soldiers within the army were generally unskilled and "amateur". For example, the army's own commander, General Washington, knew little of combat tactics and mobilization of troops and only had limited leadership experience as a regimental colonel for three years during the Seven Years' War. Continental Army officers came from a range of trades, such as innkeepers and shoemakers; the veteran British leaders mocked the often inept and untrained American army, classifying it as a "contemptible band of vagrants, deserters, and thieves and no match for His Majesty's redcoats." [13]

Despite this stark contrast, Great Britain's power and ability was diminished by several factors. Firstly, three thousand miles separated the two nations, hindering communication and slowing decisive actions. Supplying British troops posed additional problems, as resources, food, and arms took months to travel across the Atlantic. Secondly, the wild and expansive terrain

[11] Ibid., 76.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid., 76-77.

outside the main port cities complicated conventional British war strategy. Lastly, the lack of centralized authority in the United States meant that there was no "nerve center whose capture would destroy the rebellion."[14] It is evident that the British authorities did not fully understand the nature of the Americans; Great Britain severely underestimated the duration and resiliency of the revolutionary struggle and grossly overestimated the breadth and power of the Loyalist population. The sheer length of the war ultimately revealed that "independence came to mean more to the Americans than re-conquest did to the English." [15]Though some Patriots joined the revolutionary cause from an expectation that war would cancel British debts, the majority of were drawn to this group by a "sincere love of liberty and justice," according to Patriot leader Benjamin Rush.[16] This spirit and craving for independence fueled the Americans to victory.

From 1775 on, British objectives for the war were not clearly defined. Re-conquest of the colonies would not restore pre-1763 conditions and it certainly would not erase colonial resentment toward English policies. British authority disagreed on how to engage in the war; though Kind George III, the majority of Parliament and most of British officials agreed on the use of indiscriminate force and intimidation to subdue colonial rebellion, the British commanders had a different plan. Sir William Howe and Lord Howe—brothers appointed to direct the English army and navy—sought a "peacemaking" approach, one that pursued diplomatic and political resolutions with the use of *necessary* force. The Howe commanders resisted "plundering and ravaging the American countryside and ports" to avoid further inciting colonial resentment and "destroying hope for reconciliation." This "sentimental manner of waging war"—a strategy that included sending peace efforts to George Washington and the Continental Army between

[14] Ibid., 77.
[15] Ibid., 78.
[16] Benjamin Rush, "The Autobiography of Benjamin Rush," in *Major Problems in the Era of the American Revolution, 1760-1791*, ed. Richard Brown and Benjamin Carp, (Boston: Cengage Learning, 2014), 178.

military battles—deteriorated the morale of British troops and dampened the hope of the Loyalists.[17] Initially, the Howe's brothers' strategy was met with success, after nearly 5,000 Americans accepted the royal pardon and pledged Crown loyalty following a bitter defeat on Long Island in August 1776. However, the tide quickly changed during the winter of 1776, as George Washington's military successes in Trenton and Princeton forced the withdrawal of British troops from the Delaware River. The Loyalists, having lost their largest source of defense and protection, retreated and even declined in numbers, while American spirits and enthusiasm rose.[18]

In October 1777, the Continental Army experienced another victory at Saratoga. Sometimes considered the "turning point" of the war, this battle succeeded in deepening Britain's worry of losing the war, publicly bringing France into the struggle, and led to a radical shift in British command of the armed forces and a "fundamental alteration in strategy."[19] After its defeat, Great Britain transferred its troops to the South, where British officials believed lived significant Loyalist populations. This shift exacerbated American military struggles, as revolutionary governments in the South now had to defend itself against Native Indians, Tories, slaves, and British soldiers. This public declaration of an alliance between France and the United States had remarkable effects in the war effort. Since the start of the colonial resistance effort, France had been covertly supplying money, arms, and servicemen to the colonists. Now, French army officers proudly joined Washington and helped establish military tactics and maneuver plans. Spain's alliance with France in 1779 added to American strength, as two of the three major world powers of the eighteenth century were now aiding in the resistance struggle against

[17] Wood, 78-79.
[18] Wood, 79-80.
[19] Wood, 81.

Great Britain. The conflict now became a "war of attrition—a test of British, American, and French willpower as well as material resources." [20]

The inclusion of these two superpowers strained Britain's war effort, and maintaining global supremacy became more pertinent than quelling American resistance. After 1778, British efforts focused on protecting its colonies in the West Indies. However, some significant changes were enacted during this time; of particular importance was the establishment of Sir Henry Clinton's more "ruthless" strategy to replace General Howe's, which now called for raids and bombardments in port cities and rural towns, as well as attempts to bribe resistance leaders (a tactic which Benedict Arnold fell prey to). [21] With the help of French military assistance on land and sea, Lord Cornwallis' defeat at Yorktown and his surrender of eight thousand British troops in October 1781 signaled the informal end of the war; though the war did not formally end until September 1783, "everyone knew that Yorktown meant American independence,"—except, for a while apparently, King George III.[22]

Just as literary rhetoric had been influential in inciting the early beginnings of the rebellion, Whig and Loyalist writings also had tremendous influence during the battle. Whigs gave a rosier picture of the war, while Tories painted a much darker image; not surprisingly, neither were very accurate in depicting the war efforts, state of the army, and colonial status. The Whig rhetoric—which often failed to include the struggles of the Continental army—served to continuously inspire the Americans in their revolutionary struggle with stories of Washington's bold and decisive victories and his dedicated troops. This Loyalists, however, often viewed the conflict through their own lenses, remarking that American defeat was just around the corner. In

[20] Brown and Carp, 173.
[21] Wood, 82.
[22] Ibid., 86.

a letter to King George and his Parliament, the Loyalists write, "it cannot be doubted that there are more loyalists in America than there are rebels" and our "zeal is greater [than theirs]". [23] In fact, the opposite of this was true. The population of the newly formed United States could be roughly divided into three groups: Tories, Whigs, and neutrals. The Whigs and neutrals, those whose loyalties were not deep to either side, made up the largest class, while Tories constituted less than one-third of the population.[24] The Loyalists were starkly outnumbered, yet convinced the British that they had widespread and overwhelming support. King George III strongly believed that the majority of Americans were loyal to the Crown but were being pressured into submission by a few radical groups of people. The Tories urged the British officers to continue fighting despite terrible losses; ironically, in this way, Loyalists proved to be more of a hindrance to Great Britain than an asset, as it portrayed an inaccurate reality of America nearing collapse that skewed British perceptions and efforts. Because of Loyalist mistruths, British officials severely underestimated the strength of the rebels and correspondingly drafted its military tactic to this notion. It cannot be known how England's strategy would have been different without the 'aid' of the Loyalists, but it is inferred that they would have had a stronger and more forceful manner of waging war if they had been in full knowledge of the scope and power of the American spirit, and could have possibly won the war.

The state of the Continental army was absolutely pitiful; untrained, starving, almost naked, and tired, the Continental troops were far from the inspired and enthusiastic soldiers Washington needed. In attempts to plead with Congress to provide adequate supplies, Washington warns of an impending "dissolution of our Army" if "speedy and effectual

[23] Hezekiah Niles, ed.,, "Principles and Acts of the Revolution in America," in *Major Problems in the Era of the American Revolution, 1760-1791*, ed. Richard Brown and Benjamin Carp, (Boston: Cengage Learning, 2014), 185.
[24] Rush, 178.

measures" are not taken. He defends the soldiers, noting that "every member of the community is benefited by his Labours" and thusly should be compensated accordingly (Brown and Carp, p. 175). [25]Washington recommends the offering of a "good Bounty" that provides at least a "Suit of Cloaths and Blankt"; if such provisions are delivered to the troops, Washington believes the army will be "able to cope with any that can be opposed to it." Washington acknowledges the dismal nature of his army; "dragged from the tender Scenes of domestick life", the majority of the soldiers had little formal military training of knowledge. Most were farmers and landowners who abandoned the army during planting seasons and who were grossly "unaccustomed" to life in the armed forces. [26] Washington pleads to Congress for the provision of needed supplies, stressing that no situation is "more distressing" than one in which an army commander in chief is unable to perform his job due to a lack of necessities. [27]

In another desperate letter, Washington criticizes Congress' inability (or unwillingness) to comply with requisitions; though he commends the "unparalleled patience" of the Continental troops in dealing with shortages, he cautions that the army "cannot possibly remain much longer together" under such trying conditions. [28] Between pitiful army conditions and often tragic results on the battlefield, twenty five thousand Americans—approximately one percent of the entire population—perished during eight-year war. [29] Most troops came from the lower-classes of society and had few prospects at home; because of this, soldiers continued to fight and endure through trying times, as they did not have much to lose. Despite these terrible conditions and

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[25] George Washington to John Hancock, September 2[5], 1776, "The Papers of Goerge Washington: Revolutionary War Series," in *Major Problems in the Era of the American Revolution, 1760-1791*, ed. Richard Brown and Benjamin Carp, (Boston: Cengage Learning, 2014), 178.
[26] Ibid., 176.
[27] Ibid., 177.
[28] "Gen. George Washington's Circular to the States", "Letters of Members of the Continental Congress," in *Major Problems in the Era of the American Revolution, 1760-1791*, ed. Richard Brown and Benjamin Carp, (Boston: Cengage Learning, 2014), 183.
[29] Wood, 86-87.

several disheartening failures, the states managed to maintain and even reconstitute armies after great losses and the British could not muster sufficient force to break their will. The resiliency of the troops in spite of abysmal odds reflects the larger spirit of the new nation; though young and scared, the United States – and its strong troops—endured until victory was won.

As explained above, the Revolutionary War was influenced by inspirational rhetoric, George Washington's leadership, false British assumptions of the army and supporters, the France and Spain alliances with the United States, and the perseverance of the Continental Army. Though militarily superior, Great Britain was not able to win the war due to its inability to crush the American desire for sovereignty. The self-proclaimed United States succeeded in gaining their independence from a power that refused to relinquish its hold without a fight. Fortunately, it was a fight that the Americans were willing to pledge their "lives, fortunes, and their sacred honor" for in order to establish a representative, fair, and democratic government for generations to come.

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