

The American
Revolution: “Almost a
Miracle”

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When the first shot of the American Revolution was fired at Lexington, Massachusetts in the early morning hours of April 19, 1775 there existed no standing army among the thirteen colonies. With the arrival of the crown's invasion armada at New York harbor in July of 1776, the British Army in North America totaled well over 30,000 trained officers and men. By the end of 1776, the British had taken New York, Washington's army was in full retreat across New Jersey, and the American attempt to invade Canada had completely collapsed. British General William Howe planned on crushing the rebellion before the end of the year or, at the latest, by 1777. With an additional British invasion force set to descend down the Champlain Valley from Canada in the spring of 1777, any objective observer may have concluded that the military defeat of the newly declared independent American colonies was imminent. Certainly, the British thought so. Yet, by the autumn of 1781 the British Army in North America would surrender to Washington at Yorktown, Virginia in a humiliating end to their military campaign to snuff out the new United States of America. In the words of George Washington, it had all been "a little short of a standing miracle."¹

Attack, retreat

Perhaps a foretaste of what lay in store for the British can be seen in the first two engagements of the war in the spring of 1775: Lexington and Concord and the so-called Battle of Bunker Hill. In the case of Lexington and Concord, the commander of the British garrison in Boston, General Thomas Gage, had led a reconnaissance force into the area on April 19th to seize American rebels. Although the initial skirmishes with local colonial militia were relatively inconsequential, still, by the end of the day, over one thousand armed provincials would turn out

¹ John Ferling, *Almost a Miracle: The American Victory in the War of Independence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 562.

to partake in bloody rear-guard attacks on Gage's men as they made their way along the Concord Road back to Boston.² With one third of his men killed or wounded, it should have become clear that colonial militia were not simply a mob of ragamuffins who could be easily pushed aside. But Gage would be in for an even greater surprise. Within days of the Lexington and Concord engagements, 16,000 patriots descended upon Boston to siege the British garrison in the city. By June, the Massachusetts Committee of Safety decided to build fortifications on the heights overlooking the Charlestown peninsula north of Boston. Even though Gage had become aware of the construction of the redoubts on the very the night that they were being constructed, still he chose to forgo a dawn attack giving the Americans more time to complete the fortifications. When he did attack the next day, Gage ordered a frontal assault on the Breed's Hill redoubt assuming that the inexperienced American militia would quickly fold and run in terror when faced with the specter of fighting the well-trained professional British columns. Nothing of the sort occurred. Demonstrating remarkable discipline and courage, the Americans held off the British assault for over three hours inflicting horrific casualties before finally retreating back across the peninsula. Although the Americans had "lost" the battle, British casualties were so great (almost 1500 men) that British General Clinton called it "a dear bought victory, another such would have ruined us." Clearly, there was another dimension to the American fighting spirit that had eluded the British commanders.³

With militias elsewhere launching engagements outside of their own colonies (as was the case with the taking of Fort Ticonderoga by Connecticut and Massachusetts units), the Continental Congress had no choice but to create a "Continental Army" on June 14th. Placed

² Ferling, 32-33.

³ Ferling, 59-50

under the command of George Washington, the new American army contained only a handful of senior officers who had any formal military training and experience with many others receiving commissions based more on political connections than military prowess. Due to the daring and courageous efforts of Henry Knox, the cannons and ammunition seized by the Americans at Fort Ticonderoga were, by March 1776, overlooking Boston from Dorchester Heights. Faced with an impossible situation Gates was forced to abandon the city as the British regrouped while awaiting reinforcements from England. Washington took the main body of his army back to New York to await the coming British invasion.

A Fabian strategy

The 1776 campaign began inauspiciously for the Americans. The attempted seizure of Quebec by Generals Benedict Arnold and Richard Montgomery fizzled out as enlistments expired and supplies became hard to come by, problems that would plague the Americans for the remainder of the war. By June, Montgomery had been killed and Arnold forced to retreat back to New York. As the newly appointed commander of the North American Army, William Howe, disembarked his 30,000-plus strong troops at Staten Island that July, the Continental Congress issued the United States Declaration of Independence making it clear that the conflict was an unconditional struggle of an independent nation against a foreign intruder. More than just a moral and political statement, the declaration also meant that the new nation could now expect clandestine military aid from France. But Washington's green army proved to be no match in open combat with the well-trained British force, especially one with superior numbers. After the disastrous Battle of Long Island at the end of August, only Washington's bold nighttime retreat from Brooklyn saved the army from capture. The Continental Army again barely escaped complete annihilation when Washington hesitated in ordering a full retreat from New York over

the Hudson River into New Jersey. Further, Washington made the costly error of not fully abandoning the Hudson Forts Washington and Lee resulting in the loss of 3,000 men as well as huge stores of food, supplies and ammunition.

By now, it had become clear to George Washington that only a Fabian strategy (named after the Roman general) could succeed in defeating the British forces.⁴ This meant a predominantly *defensive* war in which the Continental Army would attempt to avoid all open engagements with the British while carefully choosing when to strike as opportunities arose. Augmented by militia units when appropriate, the Continental Army would thus fight a war of attrition in hopes of wearing down the British forces who were now embroiled in a war on foreign soil 3,000 miles from home inhabited by a predominantly hostile populace. In essence, it would be a grand version of the rear-guard harassment of British troops marching on the Concord Road back to Boston in April 1775, or the devastating casualties inflicted on the British with the “retreat” of American militia units at Breed’s Hill.

1777: The turning point at Saratoga

By the end of 1776, Washington’s strategy began to pay off. With the remnants of his army having retreated over the Delaware River into Pennsylvania, Washington sensed that Howe’s listless army bedded down for the winter in New Jersey presented an opportunity. Beginning on Christmas evening 1776, Washington engineered two daring back and forth crossings of the Delaware dealing a series of unexpected blows to the British by first capturing the British garrison at Trenton, and then inflicting heavy casualties on British troops at Assunpink Creek and Princeton. The surprise attacks were so devastating that one Hessian

⁴ Ferling, 137.

soldier remarked that the British looked “like an army that is thoroughly beaten.”⁵ The numerically superior British army, outwitted and outflanked by Washington and his men, retreated north back to their supply base at New Brunswick. Washington’s victories not only greatly bolstered American morale but also served to inspire new recruitment to the Continental Army.

For their 1777 campaign, the crown chose General John Burgoyne to launch an invasion of the colonies from Canada through the Lake Champlain valley down to Albany. By securing the Hudson-Champlain corridor from Canada to New York City, the British believed that they could cut the New England colonies from the rest and crush the rebellion. At the same time, Howe’s army was to take Philadelphia and then somehow return to New York to “effect a junction” with Burgoyne’s Army from Canada.⁶ Remarkably, neither British commander thought it was very important to coordinate their actions. With the taking of Fort Ticonderoga and subsequent capture of the retreating American supply ships at Skenesboro, Burgoyne was confident that he would be in Albany by August. But again, like Gage in Boston and Howe in New Jersey, British pretentiousness would underestimate the resilience and dauntless spirit of the Americans. Burgoyne’s advance was continuously hampered by American rearguard actions as well as the materialization of unexpected American militia units, like those of New Hampshire Militia General John Stark at the Battle of Bennington in mid-August. In a devastating defeat, Burgoyne lost 15 percent of his invading army in one day at Bennington. Meanwhile, Howe had taken his time to reach Philadelphia and had no plans for either he or General Clinton in New York City to join forces with Burgoyne. Burgoyne never made it to Albany. After the Battle of

⁵ Ferling, 183-86.

⁶ Kevin J. Weddle, *The Complete Victory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 59.

Freeman's Farm, arriving militia units flooded the American ranks and by the time of the Second Battle of Saratoga on October 7th, American forces had swelled to over 15,000 men opposing 5,000 hungry and demoralized British and German troops. On October 17, 1777, Burgoyne was forced to surrender his entire army to American General Horatio Gates.

It has been rightfully argued that the American victory at Saratoga was the "tipping point" of the war. For the first time, the Continental Army had defeated and captured an entire British army. The most important result of this victory was that it cemented an official alliance with France which would now join the American War of Independence against Britain. This not only meant increased supplies, naval, and troop contributions from France, but it also created an additional strain on British forces which would now be required to protect her colonial interests in the Caribbean, Mediterranean, and Africa.⁷ After Saratoga, so great was the pressure inside Great Britain to end the war, that the king's minister Lord North sued for an armistice offering all colonial demands *except* independence, which of course the Americans refused.

The Southern Strategy and American victory

As the war lingered through 1779 and the Continental Army remained in the field expecting French reinforcements, the British were forced to shift their military strategy for the 1780 campaign. Instead of hopelessly chasing Washington's Army throughout the interior in the northeast, the bulk of the British Army in North America would now focus its campaign in the southern colonies which had always had closer commercial and political relations with the crown. Since the majority of the population and commerce of the southern colonies were located on or near the Atlantic coast, the British could also ensure reliable supply lines via the Royal

⁷ Ferling, 564.

Navy. Even if they couldn't completely crush the rebellion, the crown believed that at least it could regain its southern colonies if forced into a negotiated peace settlement which seemed very likely to many at the time.⁸

The British strategy was to secure Georgia and South Carolina as their base and then move north to take North Carolina and Virginia. Although the Americans suffered a devastating blow with the loss of Charleston in May 1780 surrendering over 6,000 men to the British, further engagements in the interior of South Carolina again proved that the American fighting spirit was unrelenting especially in the face of British Colonel Banastre Tarleton's brutal atrocities against American soldiers and civilians alike. Again, the British commanders made serious errors in judgment regarding the disposition of the populace and the fighting capability of "irregular" partisan units deployed by the likes of the famed "Swamp Fox" Francis Marion.⁹ Similarly, Saratoga hero Daniel Morgan's victory at Cowpens demonstrated how militia units could be effectively integrated into regular army combat operations.¹⁰ These factors combined with the continued employment Washington's Fabian strategy by American General Nathaniel Greene served to further wear down Cornwallis's army in the Carolinas. Having failed to "pacify" Georgia or the Carolina's, the haughty Cornwallis insisted on moving north into Virginia where he walked into the "perfect storm." As Washington feigned an attack on New York, British General Henry Clinton chose to leave Cornwallis's army isolated in Virginia on the Williamsburg peninsula. As fortune would have it, French Admiral de Grasse's fleet had also arrived from the Caribbean and were able to drive off the Royal Navy at the mouth of the Chesapeake. Upon the arrival of the allied Armies of Washington and Rochambeau, the

⁸ Ferling, 567.

⁹ Ferling, 454-55.

¹⁰ Ferling, 481-83.

Americans now outnumbered Cornwallis's army two to one.¹¹ Trapped on the peninsula with no means of escape, Cornwallis was forced to surrender his army on October 19, 1781.

The Miracle

It might appear that the “standing miracle” of the final victory of the Continental Army had been the combination of a series of British errors and sheer coincidence—a sort of miracle. But as in all military engagements, the moral, subjective factor had been key. In the American War for Independence, George Washington was not simply a military commander, per se, but rather chose to personally embody the cause of the American Revolution and those that followed him knew it. Washington's vigilance and humility can rightly be contrasted with the often foolhardy arrogance of his British counterparts. Whether on the Concord Road, at Breed's Hill, Trenton, or Saratoga, British commanders continued to vastly underestimate the capabilities of Americans fighting for their independence, perhaps because they themselves were incapable of even considering such a “miraculous” way of thinking. In the end, a just and honorable cause passionately embraced by a handful of leaders, would thus triumph over the most powerful empire in the world.

¹¹ Ferling, 531.