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Anne Midgley  
*American Public University System*

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First Empire Unraveled: Why the British Lost the  
War of American Independence

Anne Midgley

*Oh God! It is all over.*

Frederick, Lord North's reaction to news of General Charles Lord Cornwallis' defeat at Yorktown<sup>1</sup>

Frequently accused of incompetence, as noted by British historian Eric Robson, the British government and its military leaders faced an almost insurmountable challenge in their battle to restore the American mainland colonists to loyalty. The American War for Independence can be divided into three periods, each with its distinct opportunities and challenges for the British. The first stage began with Britain's decision to address its dire financial circumstances following the Seven Years' War by seeking increased revenue through colonial taxation and enforced trade restrictions. This period of the conflict lasted through the outbreak of armed hostilities at Lexington and Concord, Massachusetts on April 19, 1775. It was followed by the Northern Campaign, lasting through the staggering British loss at Saratoga on October 17, 1777 and the subsequent entry of France into the war as an American ally. Seeking an end to the stalemate in the North, the British launched the Southern Campaign as they sought to bring the war to a successful conclusion by basing strategies on the perceived strength of the Loyalist population in the Southern colonies. In each stage of the war, Britain's ministers, men, and martial might were challenged beyond the capabilities of eighteenth century warfare to gain a military victory. Her admirals and generals faced nearly impossible odds as they struggled to end what started as a colonial revolt but became a global affair.

Maintaining nearly sixty thousand troops across the Atlantic and supplying them and their animal-powered transportation in hostile country across the vast ocean was an almost unthinkable feat. However, lack of strategic coherence and unity of command, personality conflicts, and lack of appreciation for the political, social and cultural differences that had developed between the colonies and Britain frustrated attempts to mend the breach between Britain and her mainland American colonists.<sup>2</sup>

Following the Seven Years' War, Britain stood at the pinnacle of power, but was close to drowning in the debt that had financed its triumph over Britain's traditional enemy, France, and its allied nations, Russia and Austria. Having created a highly effective fiscal-military machine during the period following the Glorious Revolution of 1688-1689, Britain had the mechanisms in place to finance the Seven Years' War. Those same mechanisms had been strained to the limit by the time the war ended in 1763. Britain's ministers gazed across their newly expanded empire for new sources of income to augment the empire's existing internal revenue as the burden of debt had grown to £130,000,000 by 1763.<sup>3</sup> Challenged on the economic front, Britain had also entered a period of political instability which surfaced during the Seven Years' War. The political stability which had accompanied the rise of the British Hanoverian monarchy began to fracture and fragment by the mid-1750s and by the end of the Seven Years' War, both the political and economic foundations of Britain's power were facing severe tests.<sup>4</sup>

As Britain sought to consolidate gains and seek greater financial advantage from the empire's far-flung holdings, initial attempts to wring greater return from British colonies faced unanticipated hurdles, for American colonists sought to preserve and protect the political and financial freedoms that had evolved during Britain's period of relative neglect earlier in the century.<sup>5</sup> Critical decisions were

made by George III and his ministers which ignored the economic, social, and political realities of the American colonists. The Quartering Act of 1765 and the Stamp Act of the same year touched off colonial fury. In passing an act that allowed for the quartering of British troops in America, British ministers had ignored the long-standing British antipathy towards standing armies which was stubbornly shared by most American colonists. American colonists were proud supporters of Britain's constitutional government; "the best model of Government that can be framed by Mortals."<sup>6</sup> Their British political heritage led many colonists to adopt the English "country Whig" political philosophy with its definition of personal liberty opposed to monarchical power ideally managed through a balanced government design which pitted legislative against executive authority. Nevertheless, neither the American colonists nor the British monarchy and its ministry appreciated the extremist nature of the colonists' political leanings. The Whig philosophy adhered to in the colonies was not mainstream political thought in Britain, but rather that espoused by the more radical British element. Therefore, as colonists devoured British and American political tracts they formed what became an aberrant view of the ideal form of Britain's constitutional balance.<sup>7</sup>

At the same time, their new King, George III, was asserting a stronger monarchy than had existed under his Hanoverian predecessors. George III was bent on upholding the supremacy of Parliament against the claims of the colonists for the power of their colonial assemblies. These assemblies had grown in clout through the neglect of Britain during the eighteenth century and had become the core of colonial demand for self-government. Each side believed fervently in their constitutional position and unknowingly widened the rift between the monarch and his American subjects.<sup>8</sup>

The initial period of the American Revolution, therefore, took

place largely in the political rather than the military realm, where British decisions to raise revenue and post a standing army clearly went against the colonists' understanding of their rights as "free-born" Englishmen to representation in the key political decisions that affected their lives. The colonists' militia tradition, another element of their British heritage, their political grasp of their rights, the broad, forested expanse of their geography and the distance between Britain and the mainland colonies were all to play a part in the American Revolution and pose problems to Britain's army and Royal Navy which became insurmountable during the war.<sup>9</sup>

Colonial unrest raged in Boston, Massachusetts. Following the Boston "Tea Party" of December 16, 1773 the British were determined to suppress the uprising, which appeared centered in that tumultuous port city. The situation facing Britain at this juncture appeared to be the need to defuse civil unrest while not upsetting and alienating the presumably vast Loyalist population. Confronted by unanticipated broad-based colonial resistance, the circumstances faced by the British continued to evolve as riots, mob actions and unrest turned into armed rebellion. The Coercive Acts of 1774; the latest in a series of political measures aimed at restoring allegiance, had the opposite effect and hardened colonial opposition. Boston's distress rallied the efforts of other mainland colonies to her aid. General Thomas Gage, Commander in Chief of the British forces and his redcoats faced a firestorm of rebellion in early 1775 as they sought to subdue Boston's agitators through intimidation.<sup>10</sup>

Gage, more so than other British generals, recognized that unless sufficient force was applied in the colonies "[it] will in the end cost more blood and treasure."<sup>11</sup> His persistent calls for significant strength to put down the uprising were not answered by the ministry, which could not accept the level of colonial resistance in effect at this stage of the conflict. The nature of the game changed dra-

matically on April 19, 1775. Gage noted the growing unrest in Massachusetts and meant to send troops to confiscate a cache of military weapons and powder stored in Concord, Massachusetts while at the same time he intended to arrest and silence two of the most outspoken rebel leaders, John Hancock and Samuel Adams, who were then in Lexington, Massachusetts. Alerted to the danger, the rebel militia was called out. The bloodbath on Lexington Green occurred as British soldiers faced armed militia. British troops fired, killing eight and wounding ten. At Concord, the Americans had concealed or carried off most of the military supplies targeted by the British. Upon the arrival of British troops, militia units fired on the soldiers. There began an unimaginable nightmare for the redcoats, as for miles they were targeted by rebel militia who fired on them from behind cover while the British struggled to return to Boston. Exhausted, the troops were saved by General Hugh, Lord Percy, who had been dispatched by Gage with reinforcements to rescue them.<sup>12</sup> As Percy reported to Gage, the redcoats retreated for fifteen miles “under incessant fire all round us...His Majesty's troops during [the] whole of the affair behaved with their usual intrepidity and spirit” but all were horrified by the behavior of the rebels, who scalped some of the wounded British.<sup>13</sup> British strategic thinking needed to evolve quickly to adjust to the changed nature of the conflict in America. The American rebel militia did not behave in the set and accepted tradition of European combatants. The British army may have been the best in the world at the time, but its commanders and men were not accustomed to fighting insurgents who did not follow accepted norms.<sup>14</sup>

Between the outbreak of hostilities at Lexington and Concord until General John Burgoyne's surrender at Saratoga, the British endeavored to find a balanced approach that would defeat the rebels militarily, yet return them to their former position as loyal subjects.

It was this complex strategic goal; in essence, as historian Eric Robson describes it “two incompatible aims” which frustrated much of their efforts.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, while George III and his ministry faced vocal opposition at home for their hardline stance against the colonists, their aims were complicated by the sympathy that several senior British military leaders held for the American cause. General William Howe’s failure to pursue and destroy the American forces following the Battle of Brooklyn Heights was attributed to Howe’s desire not to “shed the blood of a people so nearly allied.”<sup>16</sup> His brother, Admiral Richard Lord Howe, was so sympathetic to the colonists that his instructions to Commodore William Hotham for a blockade of the Southern colonies instructed Hotham and his captains to “cultivate all amicable correspondence... and to grant them every other indulgence,” scarcely the terms that would allow a successful blockade.<sup>17</sup> General Charles Lord Cornwallis, like the Howe brothers, was politically sympathetic to the Americans, having voted in the House of Lords against both the Stamp Act and the Declaratory Act. Compared to a situation with well-defined political and military strategic objectives, the circumstances faced by the British in America did not lend themselves to a clear, unwavering strategic direction.<sup>18</sup>

While some portion of the blame for the British loss at Saratoga, New York on October 16, 1777 can be placed upon the lack of strategic cooperation between Burgoyne and Howe, it was also the logistical challenges faced by Burgoyne that defeated him. Far removed from any support that could be provided by the Royal Navy, Burgoyne, his men and his baggage train struggled through the harsh terrain and exhausted their capabilities. His campaign clearly illustrates some of the most critical challenges facing the British throughout the war. America’s harsh and forbidding terrain posed significant challenges; the rebel militia rose in great numbers, the

British were unable to “move light” as they must supply all their own needs - quite unlike their ability to rely on local support as during the French and Indian War. Their tenuous communication network and inability to coordinate efforts clearly played a large role, but the very nature of the American landscape was a key contributor to the British defeat. All the while, any sizeable loss of British troops was devastating, for while the Americans were able to continually replace troops, each highly trained British soldier was practically irreplaceable.<sup>19</sup> Burgoyne’s campaign also produced a public relations nightmare for the British; one which jeopardized any chance they might have of winning the hearts and minds of the colonists in the North. For Burgoyne’s army included five hundred Indians and their “savagery made effective propaganda to rally the enemy’s militia.”<sup>20</sup> The murder of Jane McCrea at the hands of Native Americans warriors fanned the flames of the rebel cause and drove an outpouring of militia to meet Burgoyne’s threat.<sup>21</sup>

Following the devastating defeat suffered at Saratoga, France entered the war as an American ally; adding to its already crucial support for the American cause out of vengeful determination to humiliate Britain. The British Loyalist strategy and Southern Campaign became the central focus of Britain’s plan to win the war. The strategy was in part based on the belief held by the King, the North Ministry, and particularly Lord George Germain, Secretary of State for America that the Southern Colonies contained a significant population of Loyalists, together with the strategic assumption that numerous Loyalists would flock to support the British cause, providing men, material, and logistical support.<sup>22</sup>

The British believed that numerous Loyalists would flock to the British standard and would overwhelm the rebel movement, dissuading neutrals from actively supporting the rebels. As the rebels lost the battle for the hearts and minds of the overall population,

their network of support, material, and field intelligence would wither, shifting the advantage to the Crown forces and their Loyalist allies. The substantial neutral element of the population would then perceive that their own best interest lay in returning to firm allegiance to the Crown, which in turn would emphasize to the rebels that their own ill-conceived cause could not be successful. This would return the South to the British fold, alienating them from the Northern colonies, and putting the entire rebellion at risk. However, as the Loyalist strategy was based on inflated claims from Loyalist refugees and ousted Royal governors of Loyalist numbers and strength, combined with ministerial wishful thinking, it proved infuriatingly elusive and never effective for long. The actual allegiance of Southern colonists was largely driven by self-interest, tempered by ideological inclinations. Some were indeed staunchly devoted to the Crown, while others shifted their allegiance with the vagaries of war. Many were better termed as neutrals and wished simply to be left alone.<sup>23</sup>

The initial results of the British campaign in the South were spectacular. Savannah, Georgia quickly fell to the British on December 29, 1778. Charleston, South Carolina, the largest city in the South, fell in May 1780 to the British after a lengthy siege, which devastated Major General Benjamin Lincoln's Continental Army and militia forces. Virtually Lincoln's entire command was trapped in the city and gave up thousands of men and enormous amounts of weapons and supplies. Complications almost immediately ensued. General Sir Henry Clinton left Lieutenant General Charles Lord Cornwallis a powder keg when he issued an amnesty proclamation, almost immediately complicated by his second proclamation which mandated that all those on parole were required to take an oath to support the British, including, if called upon, to take up arms against their former comrades, in effect, leaving no room for neutrality.<sup>24</sup>

Meanwhile, the British lost momentum as they fanned out into the backcountry to establish strongholds and rally the Loyalists. Major Patrick Ferguson, the “inspector of militia” and his Loyalist troops made a costly mistake when Ferguson threatened to lay waste to the homes of the “Over-mountain” men and inflamed the backcountry. The Battle of King’s Mountain on October 7, 1780 resulted in the death of Ferguson and the destruction of his Loyalists troops. King’s Mountain was a turning point, and afterward, fewer Loyalists came forth to join the British troops. The once grand plan to rally the Loyalists, retake the Southern colonies, and cripple the rebel cause ended at King’s Mountain. The British faced mounting obstacles, as fewer and fewer Loyalists actively supported or aided them, while the neutrals moved into the rebel camp. The Loyalist Strategy, built on misinformation and wishful thinking, quickly began to unravel.<sup>25</sup>

The British efforts in South Carolina were further hampered by small bands of guerilla fighters. These insurgents continually harassed the British communications and supply lines as well as their troop movements, particularly as Cornwallis and his men moved inland away from their coastal stronghold and naval-based supply chain. Their far greater impact, however, occurred in other roles they played, including providing intelligence and support to Major General Nathanael Greene’s Continentals, keeping their Loyalist neighbors from gaining the upper hand by discouraging their desires and efforts to join the British forces while simultaneously encouraging the dispirited rebels, and eliminating the threat of Britain’s Native American allies.<sup>26</sup>

At this stage in the conflict, the hostilities had broadened far beyond the thirteen mainland colonies. With the entrance of France into the war, its nature became extraordinarily complex. No longer were the British simply stymied by the lack of a “military or political

center of gravity” at which to strike in America, they now had to stretch their military and naval resources to the breaking point to defend their possessions in the valuable West Indies, as well as India, Gibraltar, and the home waters surrounding the British Isles.<sup>27</sup> In September 1779, fear for the safety of Jamaica caused Clinton to order Cornwallis “to go with another five thousand troops... [from New York] to the defence (*sic*) of Jamaica.”<sup>28</sup> It is estimated that had the threat to Jamaica not passed, the British would have lost over twenty five percent of their troop strength in the mainland colonies for the defense of a single island colony.<sup>9</sup>

Personalities played a large role in the ability of the British to effectively pursue their military ends, particularly during the Southern Campaign. Clinton, a neurotic, complex, and tortured character, had flashes of brilliance but his failure to exert overarching strategic initiative and his propensity to allow the aggressive Cornwallis too much operational leeway, doomed the British by failing to “ensure unity of command and unity of effort.”<sup>30</sup> Cornwallis took a broad interpretation of his orders from Clinton and did not communicate with his commander-in-chief for months following the British defeat at Cowpens. Clinton, for his part, issued frequent and conflicting instructions to Cornwallis, particularly during the summer of 1781, leading to Cornwallis’s occupation of Yorktown. Though the inability of the Royal Navy to attain control of the Chesapeake Bay paved the way for the American and French victory, it was also the lack of a unified vision and strategy between Clinton and Cornwallis that led to the British disaster at Yorktown in October 1781.<sup>31</sup>

The British were challenged by other unanticipated foes, particularly in the Southern theatre; yellow fever and malaria. These lethal diseases brutally assaulted the British, yet had nowhere near the same effect on the Southern rebels. Yellow fever’s mortality rate among populations with no previous immunity approached eighty

five percent and it was particularly deadly for young adult populations; precisely those represented by the typical British invasion force. Survivors receive a life-long immunity and large populations of immune people stop the transmission of the disease. Living with significant slave populations and their relative imperviousness to the disease protected the Americans colonists to a degree, while the British soldiers had no defense from the illness.<sup>32</sup> Fear of disease influenced Cornwallis's decision to not move northward along the coastline; he feared that the route was too disease-ridden for his troops and he elected to move further inland – away from his naval lifeline. At Yorktown, twenty five percent or more of Cornwallis's troops “were too sick to fight, compared to roughly [five] percent of American and French troops.”<sup>33</sup>

In the end, it was the combination of an extraordinary number of factors, many that no amount of military genius could account for, that won independence for the American colonists. British failure to achieve naval control of the Chesapeake Bay led directly to Cornwallis's defeat at Yorktown; however, the logistical cards were stacked against the British and were the true cause of their inability to hold the mainland colonies.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Don Higginbotham, *The War of American Independence: Military Attitudes, Policies, and Practice, 1763-1789* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1971), 383.

<sup>2</sup> Piers Mackesy, *The War for America: 1775-1783* (1964; repr., Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), xxiv, 31; Stanley D. M. Carpenter, “British Strategic Failure in the Southern Campaign, 1778-1781,” *Naval War College Paper*, 2008, 3; Eric Robson, *The American Revolution In its Political and Military Aspects 1763 – 1783* (1955; repr., New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1966), 93.

<sup>3</sup> Henry Horwitz, “The Political Economy of War” review of *War and Economy in the Age of William III and Marlborough* by D. W. Jones and *The Sinews of Power: War, Money and the English State, 1688-1783* by John Brewer, *Journal of British Studies* 29, no. 3 (July 1990): 276-281. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/175731> (accessed June 16, 2012); Robert Middlekauff, *The Glorious Cause: The American Revolution, 1763-1789* Rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 9, 23-24.

<sup>4</sup>John Brewer, *Party Ideology and Popular Politics at the Accession of George III* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 3-9.

<sup>5</sup>Middlekauff, *The Glorious Cause*, 28-29; Robson, *The American Revolution In its Political and Military Aspects*, 10.

<sup>6</sup>Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic 1776-1787* (1969; repr., Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 11.

<sup>7</sup>Merrill Jensen, *The Founding of a Nation: A History of the American Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 15; Philip H. Round, "The discursive origins of the American Revolution: The case of Nathaniel Rogers, merchant of Boston," *Early American Literature* 30, no. 3 (1995): 233. <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy1.apus.edu/docview/215390395?accountid=8289> (accessed June 23, 2012); Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic*, 13-15.

<sup>8</sup>Jensen, *The Founding of a Nation*, 40-41; Higginbotham, *The War of American Independence*, 52; Robson, *The American Revolution In its Political and Military Aspects*, 10-11.

<sup>9</sup>Higginbotham, *The War of American Independence*, 23.

<sup>10</sup>Higginbotham, *The War of American Independence*, 46.

<sup>11</sup>Robson, *The American Revolution In its Political and Military Aspects*, 89.

<sup>12</sup>Christopher Hibbert, *Redcoats and Rebels: The American Revolution Through British Eyes* (1990; repr., New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2002), 27-32; Higginbotham, *The War of American Independence*, 61-63.

<sup>13</sup>General Hugh, Lord Percy to General Thomas Gage, April 22, 1775. <http://www.winthrop.dk/reports.html> (accessed June 23, 2012).

<sup>14</sup>Higginbotham, *The War of American Independence*, 63-65.

<sup>15</sup>Robson, *The American Revolution In its Political and Military Aspects*, 113.

<sup>16</sup>Benson Bobrick, *Angel in the Whirlwind: The Triumph of the American Revolution* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 215; Robson, *The American Revolution In its Political and Military Aspects*, 113.

<sup>17</sup>Mackesy, *The War for America: 1775-1783*, 74, 101.

<sup>18</sup>John Buchanan, *The Road to Guilford Courthouse: The American Revolution in the Carolinas* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1997), 76; Mackesy, *The War for America: 1775-1783*, 102.

<sup>19</sup>Higginbotham, *The War of American Independence*, 191; Robson, *The American Revolution In its Political and Military Aspects*, 93-100; John A. Tokar, "Logistics and the defeat of Gentleman Johnny: Army Logistician," *Sustainment* 32, no. 4 (July/August 2000): 46-50.

<sup>20</sup>Mackesy, *The War for America: 1775-1783*, 130.

<sup>21</sup>Higginbotham, *The War of American Independence*, 191.

<sup>22</sup>Carpenter, "British Strategic Failure in the Southern Campaign," 8; Higginbotham, *The War of American Independence*, 232-237; John S. Pancake, *The Destructive War: The British Campaign in the Carolinas, 1780-1782* (1985; repr., Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1992), 25-26.

<sup>23</sup>Higginbotham, *The War of American Independence*, 353; Robert Stansbury Lambert, *South Carolina Loyalists in the American Revolution*. 2nd ed. Clemson: Clemson University Digital Press, 2010. <http://www.clemson.edu/caah/cedp/cudp/pubs/lambert/lambert.pdf> (accessed December 18, 2011). Robson, *The American Revolution In its Political and Military Aspects*, 41.

<sup>24</sup> Pancake, *The Destructive War*, 66-70.

<sup>25</sup> J. B. Cheaney, "Patrick Ferguson, the loyalists, and the American Revolution," *The World & I*, 15, 5 (May 2000): 316-327. <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy1.apus.edu/docview/235874328?accountid=8289> (Accessed December 22, 2011).

<sup>26</sup> Pancake, *The Destructive War*, 53-55.

<sup>27</sup> Mackesy, *The War for America: 1775-1783*, 35, 192-197, 204.

<sup>28</sup> Andrew J. O'Shaughnessy, "The Formation of a Commercial Lobby: The West India Interest, British Colonial Policy and the American Revolution," *The Historical Journal* 40, no. 1 (March 1997): 93 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3020953> (accessed June 26, 2012).

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Carpenter, "British Strategic Failure," 3.

<sup>31</sup> Buchanan, *The Road to Guilford Courthouse*, 334; Carpenter, "British Strategic Failure," 9, 22.

<sup>32</sup> J. R. McNeill, "Yellow Jack and Geopolitics: Environment, Epidemics, and the Struggles for Empire in the American Tropics, 1650-1825," *Magazine of History* 18, no. 3 (April 2004): 11. <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy2.apus.edu/docview/213746088?accountid=8289> (accessed June 25, 2012).

<sup>33</sup> Richard M. Ketchum, *Victory at Yorktown: The Campaign that Won the Revolution* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, LLC, 2004), 96; Matthew Mulcahy, review of *Mosquito Empires: Ecology and War in the Greater Caribbean, 1620-1914*, by J. R. McNeill, *The William and Mary Quarterly* 67, no. 4 (October 2010): 790. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5309/willmaryquar.67.4.0788> (accessed July 7, 2012).ac

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*Anne Midgley is currently serving as the Editor in Chief of the Saber and Scroll Journal. She is studying with APU as a M.A. candidate in Military History – American Revolution concentration and is enrolled in HIST 691 – Thesis Proposal. Anne has edited for the APUS Saber and Scroll since its inception. She is a member of the Golden Key International Honor Society and the Pi Gamma Mu International Honor Society in the Social Sciences. She earned a B.A. in Psychology from Oakland University and has been employed in the financial services industry for over thirty years. She is a Senior Vice President/Business Support Executive with Bank of America in Charlotte, NC. Anne is happily married for almost 35 years to Bill Midgley. Anne and Bill have two children, James and Katie.*