

The Struggle for Loyalty in the American Revolution

The American Revolution was a struggle for the allegiance of the American people. Despite both American and British leadership understanding that to be the underlying issue of the war, the British fundamentally misjudged the nature of the war and subsequently attempted to apply a military strategy that could not succeed.

Americans valued liberty and self-rule. The British valued loyalty to the Crown. Before 1770, both sets of values could have co-existed. After 1770, and certainly after 1775, they were incompatible. The British based their strategy on an assumption that most Americans were Loyalists. (Shy, p. 130, 198, 230) The Americans, on the other hand, did not base their strategy on an assumption that most Americans were Patriots, but rather that most Americans were not Loyalists. The subtlety of the difference was the margin of victory for the Americans.

The British and American military strategies mirrored the assumptions. The British had to win militarily. The Americans merely had to avoid losing. Both George Washington, in the northern campaign, and Nathaniel Greene, in the southern campaign, executed similar strategies. While different at first glance, both leaders actively avoided direct battle with the British Army except when strategically useful. They looked for opportunities to attack isolated outposts and detachments, and used the militia and supportive populace to gather intelligence about British movements and intentions.

Thus, the American strategy found a way to maintain the support of the Patriots while not alienating those who were neutral to the independence movement. The British should have looked for ways that both maintained the support of the Loyalists and gained, or at a minimum, not cause the neutrals to become anti-British. The Americans succeeded and the British failed.

An analysis of the nature of the American Revolution using Clausewitz's trinity reveals the American trinity to be balanced, while that of the British was unbalanced. Missing from the British side was passion and rational subordination. The British Army was quite capable of effectively operating in the field. Without the rational subordination of the British government and the passion of the British people to support the effort, though, there was little chance of ultimate victory over the Americans.

The Americans felt their cause to have great justice, but had low confidence in their ability to carry it out. The British had great confidence in their abilities to fight a war against the weak American Army, but were not supported by a strong sense of justice in what they were doing. (Walling, NWC lecture, 1 Dec 2000) The British never had strong public support for fighting the Americans. Sympathy for the American cause was prevalent, including within Parliament. Senior military officers of the Army and Navy refused to serve against America and some resigned commissions citing "the duties of a soldier and a citizen [were] inconsistent." (Morison, p. 311-312) After the American victory at Saratoga, the Whigs actually cheered in Parliament. (Walling, NWC lecture, 1 Dec 2000)

The Americans benefited from a passionate populace, a rational subordination by the leadership (both state legislatures and the Continental Congress), and the creativity of military leaders who were able to properly use against the British the armed forces they had available. The Continental Congress maintained a consistent oversight of the conduct of the war. George Washington, while certainly frustrated by lack of material support, took active steps to remain publicly deferential to Congress, engendering support for the civilian government. Even at the low point of the American struggle, in 1780-81, American passion for independence remained high. (Lee, NWC lecture, 04 Dec 2000)

Rational leadership was possible for the British, as Lord North, the Prime Minister, was never a strong advocate of fighting the Americans. (Morison, p. 349) He was prepared on several occasions to offer the Americans terms favorable to the Patriot cause. Despite his leanings, King George III directly intervened, effectively neutralizing North. In June 1774, after the passing of the Coercive (or Intolerable) Acts, George III wrote to the Prime Minister, “The dye is now cast. The Colonies must either submit or triumph.” (Morison, p. 274) On 23 August 1775, George III made it clear that his intention was to take “utmost endeavours...to suppress such rebellion, and to bring the traitors to justice.” (Morison, p. 291) Such statements left Lord North no room for negotiation. A war that the British could not win was inevitable.

Before 1775, American aims in the conflict with Great Britain were limited, i.e., maintain the American colonies under the auspices of British law. Many of the leaders sought to resolve the differences between the colonies and the Crown, remaining essentially Englishmen. In late 1774, hope was existent that “a just and honourable settlement” with the British was still possible. (Shy, p.104) Even after the fight at Lexington and Concord (April 1775), influential Americans had not given up on the thought of reconciliation with the Crown. The Continental Congress, in its *Declaration on the Causes of Taking Up Arms*, published after Lexington and Concord, stated, “We mean not to dissolve that union which has so long and so happily subsisted between us....” (Morison, p. 288)

The publishing of Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense* in January 1776 sparked a seminal change in American war aims. George Washington, who had been toasting the King nightly in his officers’ mess, stopped the practice after reading Paine’s pamphlet. (Morison, p. 292) The connection between independence and the cause of liberty for all humanity, pitting the freedom of America against “the royal brute of Great Britain,” became clear. (Palmer/Colton, p. 336) In

a letter to Joseph Read of Pennsylvania, dated 31 January 1776, George Washington decided that “...the sound doctrine and unanswerable reasoning contained in the pamphlet *Common Sense*, will not leave numbers at a loss to decide upon the propriety of a separation.”

Thus by early 1776, American aims in the war became unlimited and included a fundamental change in the nature of the relationship between the North American colonies and the British Crown. The American cause “crossed the Rubicon” and men who previously would not utter the word “independence” admitted that it was the only available answer.

The British never had more than limited aims for the war. In the early stages, they had trouble divining the nature of the war believing that the rebellion was a riot similar to others they had put down. Lord Germaine, British Secretary of State for Colonial Affairs for America, stated that “a couple of swats on the neck” would put a quick stop to the troubles. (English, NWC lecture, 1 Dec 2000) The requirement to divide resources to fight not only the Americans, but the French and Spanish, kept British war aims in America limited.

An argument can be made that the war was not popular with the majority of the American people and that it was brought upon them by a small group of radicals who incited the British. This would bring into question whether the Americans actually had the “passion” side of Clausewitz’s trinity in place. John Adams was convinced that only one third of Americans were supportive of the independence movement, a third were Loyalists, and a third were indifferent. Before 1775, there is little evidence of a strong separatist movement. There was no general feeling that independence was the only solution to the problems between the British and the colonies. (Morison, p. 278) Americans were, in fact, generally proud of being part of the powerful British Empire. (Morison, p. 245)

The argument, while perhaps true prior to 1775, was almost certainly not true after the fighting began. Americans saw the British as tyrants, an opinion reinforced by punitive actions such as that which brought on the fight at Lexington and Concord. There is also evidence that Adams was wrong about the support for the independence movement and the strength of the Loyalist movement in America. John Shy believes that only about 1/6th of the population (about 3 million) were actively Loyalist. (Shy, p. 183, 249) Of the remainder, it appears that a large proportion of the adult white male population served six months or a year or more in either the Continental Army or the militia. Samuel Eliot Morison believes that only 1/10th of the population was actively Loyalist and about 40 percent were actively Patriot. (Morison, p. 312-313) Taking Morison's numbers to be correct, the Patriot cause had roughly 40 percent of the populace against about 10 percent, a 4:1 advantage as long as the uninvolved 50 percent remained neutral. The British had the opposite problem. Using military force in the American countryside tended to alienate the neutral populace making the mismatch even worse. (Shy, p. 131)

A number of British actions demonstrated that they never understood the nature of the war. The British assumed that by occupying major population and political centers, they could control the course of the war. In practice, they discovered that capturing New York, the second largest city in North America, had no real impact on winning the war. Raids, such as those by Commodore Collier in Chesapeake Bay, at Stoney Point, and the burning of various defenseless villages, increased American rage against the British. (Morison, p. 337-8) The capture of Philadelphia, seen as the colonial capital, also was inconsequential. They were surprised that the revolution did not fold, expecting that once the government was "decapitated" it could no longer function. Lord Germaine believed that the dispersal of Congress and the destruction of the

Continental Army would make the ultimate policing of the colonies a simple matter. (Makesy, 547) Germaine failed to recognize that the government of the American colonies was actually a group of thirteen legislatures and not just the Continental Congress.

In the southern campaign, British officers continually assumed that they could march through the countryside and the Loyalists would spring to British support. Assuming that reports of unrest and the unpopularity of the governments in North and South Carolina meant pro-British support, the Cornwallis found himself plunged into the middle of a civil war, neither having any use for the British. (Shy, p. 207) British officers wrote of their bewilderment at how they had been “betrayed on every side by the inhabitants.” (Shy, p. 212) The British never understood the issues that motivated Americans.

Professor Lee argues that the American victory in the Revolutionary War was not inevitability. He holds that regardless of the allegiance of the American people, the British came close to by wearing the Americans down, and only the timely intervention of the French turned the tide. The British enclave strategy of holding critical cities and ports, thus strangling the American economy, may have turned the tide in the British favor, as well. The American economy was in terrible condition by 1780 and a more effective blockade would have completely collapsed the American cause. (Lee, NWC lecture, 04 Dec 2000)

While the French intervention, as well as the Spanish, did serve to disperse the British ability to respond to the American war, it only hastened the result. (Shy, p. 131) The fundamental desire for self-rule held by most Americans, whether actively Patriot or merely neutral, was the overriding issue that military defeat or economic strangulation could not extinguish. As the war went on, the British were increasingly seen as tyrants, taking away liberties and, especially in areas where the British Army or Loyalist militias operated, plundering

the countryside. If Washington's Army been destroyed, it would have delayed independence, but not kept it from ultimately occurring. (Shy, p. 130-131)

Makesy argues that there was a rational component in the British military strategy. (Makesy, p. 553) Drawing upon experience before to the American Revolution, the British were applying solutions to problems they thought had seen before. Lord Germaine continually misconstrued reports of America unrest especially in the southern colonies as support for the Crown.

King George and Lord Germaine, blinded by their fundamental misunderstanding of the Americans, applied criteria to the American problem based only on their previous experience. Despite strong opposition from within Parliament, evidence that American desire for independence had not diminished, and reports from British officers that terror actions by Loyalist groups were actually making the British problem more difficult, they refused to reassess the situation. Dogmatically following actions that worked before is not rational subordination.

Exacerbating the lack of strategic insight on the part of British leadership, was continual misapplication of force by local British commanders. Lord Rawdon, commander of a regiment of Scotch-Irish deserters from the American army, found himself a victim of rampant desertion as he took his troops into Scotch-Irish territory in Carolina. Making matters worse, he issued a proclamation that promised exceptionally harsh punishments to British deserters. By such actions, he further entrenched American fears of British tyranny.

Once George III decided that the only solution to the problem was for the Americans to either "submit or triumph," the British were set on a path that could only lead to American independence. For the British, to not use military force was to admit defeat. To use military force was to act as a tyrant, reinforcing American fears that the British were out to take their

liberties and restrict self-rule. The Americans used a strategy that best suited the nature of the war: a strategy of avoiding a major battle, attacking isolated units and locations, and avoiding actions that would alienate the populace from the Patriot cause. The British, by using military force, turned the population, including those who were not actively Patriots, against the Crown. (Shy, p. 234) By 1783, Americans who were either pro-independence or anti-British outnumbered the Loyalists to the point that no British policy could have succeeded.