

NAVAL WAR COLLEGE  
Newport, RI



## **DIME and the French Impact on the War for American Independence**

A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College on an assigned essay topic for the Naval War College Essay Competition for AY 2019-2020.

The contents of this paper reflect my, own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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## Abstract

At its outset, the American War for Independence appeared completely mismatched. The American colonies- limited in many respects with relation to their capabilities to wage or sustain an armed conflict- seemed to have very meager means to challenge Great Britain. This essay explores and answers a question that remains extremely contentious in the application of historical analysis to the American War of Independence. The impact of French intervention into the American War of Independence from Great Britain is subject to debate. Several scenarios envision the outcome of the American Revolution as the Patriots winning greater degrees of autonomy, dominion status, or concession if they continued the conflict unaided. The complete sovereignty and independence for the United States won and negotiated (1783) resulted from both the direct and indirect intervention of France in the Revolutionary War. Exploring course themes, this essay will examine the American Revolution through both side's application of *The Instruments of War*, and will analyze the conflict through a lens of *The Rational Calculus of War*. It will attempt to answer the question of if the Patriots, through means available to them throughout the various stages of the conflict, could have achieved their goal of recognized and sovereign independence from Great Britain (*Ends*) without the aid of France. It will furthermore analyze their limited aims in the goal of independence from the perspective of a theme of *War Termination*. It will incorporate the strategy and methods of Joint and Combined warfare applied by French and Colonial operations (*Ways*) in what eventually became the multinational arena and will additionally analyze the instruments of national power available to the Patriots in support of their objective (*Means*).

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## **DIME and the French Impact on the War for American Independence**

### **Introduction**

The colonies that rose to challenge their parent nation in the American War for Independence did not resemble the union that they are today. A collection of territories, which had come into roles as commercial and agricultural trading hubs, were quickly growing in population, but had no unified standard of social interaction, homogenous population, or economic system. They had meager means to challenge a power which had emerged as the preeminent force of the Old World. The colonies and their Patriots, who appeared as the faces and voices of leadership during their struggle toward a sovereign state, had scant means available to wage a war on the scale required to compel a force such as Great Britain into complete recognition of self-governance and independence in a quick and decisive timeframe. The Patriots understood that their independence was a prize they would need to win over an extended period of time by means other than sheer military force. The astute founders and authors of the American War for Independence knew that they would need to pursue alliances to help fund and fight for their freedom. Additionally, they knew that their military strategy must support a war of limited resources in pursuit of their political objective. The Patriots supported a Fabian strategy under the direction and command of General Washington with the limited objective of gradually eroding British political support and gaining their independence. (Weigley, p.5) As this strategy proved to be effective, the Patriots, through other means of their national power, were able to secure an alliance that fundamentally changed the scope of the war. The Franco-American alliance (1778) created a turning point which arguably, resulted from the initial effectiveness of the Colonial strategy. The decisive victories it facilitated; however, were the events which solidified American achievement of their political ends of sovereign independence.

Calculated and enduring demonstrations of effective compensation in their instruments of national power directly facilitated the valuable strategic alliance with France, eventually enabling an unequivocal recognition of American sovereignty (1783).

### **DIME in the American War for Independence**

Instruments of national power available to the Patriots and the military leaders of the Colonial War for Independence were insufficient in their scope and size to compel a decisive, clear, and binding British recognition of American sovereignty. The Patriots wisely opted to achieve their objectives ends by means of eroding political popular support in Great Britain. Colonial America possessed and utilized instruments of national power to the effect of sustaining a conventional military campaign which at times employed elements of an insurgency.

The Patriots, in the pre- and post-Declaration periods of the American Revolution made extremely effective use of *Information*, beginning with their cultivation of popular support for resistance to British efforts to tax its citizens living in the North American Colonies. Through effective oration and printed word, the Patriots and their predecessors skillfully decried British taxation. They did this while conveying and promulgating a narrative of illegitimate government and taxation without the consent of the governed due to a lack of representation. Colonial attorney James Otis effectively delivered friendly narratives equating treatment of colonists and loyal subjects of the crown as slaves. Additionally, they portrayed the Declaratory Acts as taxation without the consent of the governed. Colonial presses later fueled these narratives, which paved the way for hostilities in the coming years of the Revolution. (Allison, pp.7-8). The timely delivery of incendiary friendly narratives via print, such as the initially anonymous publication of Thomas Payne's *Common Sense*, illustrates the early effectiveness of information operations and warfare during the months leading to the American Declaration of Independence.

For *military, government, and economic* instruments of power, the colonies faced a paradoxical challenge in their need of a centralized government to organize and fund a revolution and standing military force to challenge the British. This was especially difficult due to the funding constraints of conflict that had its roots in colonial resistance to a perceived illegitimate taxation by Great Britain. Inherent Colonial mistrust of taxation and strong central government gave the British a strong initial advantage in the ability to field, maintain, and equip a military force with which to wage war for as long as popular executive and political support would allow.

The Colonial Army, which comprised a friendly center of gravity for colonial and American forces, was at times extremely difficult to preserve. This was often to the detriment of its operational and tactical effectiveness prior to receiving funding, equipage, training, and leadership from French allies. In the most extreme and dire example, historian Russell Weigley describes a force numbering 2,400, devoid of Naval power, that had suffered successive defeats and was employed in desperation at Trenton (Weigley, p.4). The Colonial Army may have eventually been able to alter the outcome of individual engagements or campaigns at this level of strength, but the possibility of securing a victory decisive enough to force unequivocal British recognition of American independence was remote absent a formal alliance and the total involvement of France in the war.

To offset the relative weakness of other vital instruments of national power, the Patriots, and later the Continental Congress, sought allies using the soft-power of diplomacy. Early efforts by the political leaders Benjamin Franklin and Silas Deane ensured increasing levels of support for the revolution beginning with covert aid in the form of monetary funds, weapons, and advisors. (Allison, p.44) French entrance into the Franco-American Treaty of Alliance (1778) and subsequent Declaration of War on Great Britain demonstrated the

effectiveness of American successes of soft power for the Patriots. It furthermore demonstrated a critical American strength in strategic alliances. This critical strength was the key to obtaining the Patriots' political and strategic objectives of American Independence.

While effective compensation for relative weakness in the instruments of national power and astute leverage of strategic alliances offer excellent demonstrations the of fledgling American state's path to independence with the aid of France; several intrinsic strengths in the Patriots' military strategy, proved in operational successes, point to their ability to achieve their limited political objectives alone.

### **American Self-Reliance**

For the many arguments that exist asserting colonial strengths and instruments of national power were insufficient to secure British recognition of American independence, several compelling arguments exist to assert that the instruments available to the Patriots and the international environment were permissive for American independence absent French intervention, and that the Patriots understood and used them effectively. American continental strength was adequate to sustain a protracted war against the British in North America. French intervention, while timely, effective, and transformative to the nature of American Revolution, was not the determining factor in winning American independence.

The colonists, and their leadership, enjoyed several advantages against an enemy that was operating forward, on long lines of communication. Great Britain brought tremendous resources to bear against the Colonials. The sheer tonnage and scope of the logistical efforts in support of the initial British entry into the war was not only unprecedented, but successful. Even so, the Americans maintained their force in sufficient strength to achieve strategic goals, even with repeated failures at the operational and tactical level (Mackesy, p.543).

The Continental Army was sufficiently resilient in strength to wage protracted and effective campaigns against numerically superior British forces. Despite repeated tactical defeats in early engagements, the Continental Army was amply resilient to pursue a Fabian strategy of limited political objectives. Historian Piers Mackesy asserts in his description of the American successes in the war for independence "... there can have been few in which ultimate victory was gained to the accompaniment of so consistent a record of defeat in the field." (Mackesy, p.539). The resilience of the Continental Army under the command of General Washington, and its ability to rally in victory at Germantown after its defeat at Philadelphia and loss of the American capital was testament to outside observers of the international security environment that American forces were capable of sustaining and winning a protracted conflict against the seemingly superior British.

Perhaps the most decisive, and strategically important example of American resilience was the defeat and capture of Lord Burgoyne's British force at Saratoga. This victory represented both a strategic and operational success, in that it halted a British effort to isolate the lower colonies from their northern neighbors as well as showed interested parties in the international environment that the Americans could achieve decisive victory- even after repeated defeat.

French offered their overt support in the Franco-American Treaty of Alliance (February, 1778) only after it became apparent that the American forces could sufficiently secure meaningful victory for the colonies largely by their own means. Simply stated, "France was more likely to help rebels who could help themselves." (Allison, p. 44). The French commitment of overt support in the Franco-American treaty demonstrated that the Patriots as well as the colonial forces led and employed sufficient resources and instruments of national

power to secure their independence.

As further evidence of sufficient American strength, after the decisive victory at Saratoga and Capture of General Burgoyne, British leadership dispatched representatives to negotiate concessions toward greater colonial autonomy. While not the decisive independence and sovereign autonomy envisioned by the Patriots, (1783), the shift in political ends Great Britain sought is proof that the Colonials forced a British re-assessment of costs in relation to the value of their political objectives, altering the *Rational Calculus of War*. The value of the objective of maintaining the status-quo on the North American continent had become less clear against a changing probability of victory and estimation of British strength relative to the Colonial forces. (Handel, p.78). Protracted conflict in support of a Fabian strategy represented a sustainable and operationally supportable strategy in given the instruments of national power available to the Patriots and Colonial forces. This strategy certainly supported eventual negotiation for lesser degrees of autonomy or dominion status such as those the Patriots sought prior to overt rebellion. Definitive independence and sovereignty of an autonomous state negotiated and won (1783) would require decisive victory and an alliance capable of compelling a shift in the cost Britain's political objectives that exceeded the instruments of national power available to the Patriots.

### **French Entrance and Strategic Shifts**

The Franco- American alliance (1778) led to an almost immediate shift in the nature of the war which all participants were waging. From the British perspective, the war against North American colonial independence became a tertiary concern. Overt entry of the French into an alliance with the self-declared independent United States opened three additional theaters for the waging the expanded conflict- The West Indies, East Indies, and Continental Europe. By mid-year, this forced Great Britain into a global conflict for which it had little strategic recourse.

Analysis of French support of the American Revolution, viewed through a lens of limited versus unlimited aims, *war termination*, and *the rational calculus of war*, was for limited French objectives. Through supporting the colonial rebellion in North America, the French sought to diminish British strategic influence and avenge their loss of the Seven Years War (1763). French objectives did not seek unlimited aims of destroying Britain or her government. The purpose of France's anti-British policy and eventual overt support of American independence was to shift the European balance of power, not to destroy Great Britain entirely. (Pritchard, p.87) The effect of the limited French strategic goals on the American effort; however, was the key to obtaining definitive American independence (1783).

The addition of French sea power and expeditionary land forces deeply altered the outlook and operational landscape in the North American colonial theater of operations. This "forced the British to alter their own strategy of suppressing the insurgents and to abandon their blockade of the American coast." (Pritchard, p.93) These additional forces made Franco-American joint and combined operations a viable operational strategy, and enabled the eventual decisive American and French victory at Yorktown.

French sea-power in the form of the fleet of Vice-Admiral Comte d'Estaing almost immediately thrust Great Britain into a strategic defensive posture. The strategic priority of conflict against the rebellion of her North American Colonies shifted to a tertiary level of importance, behind protection of the British Homeland, and protection of the West and East Indian colonies. (McIntyre, 2019). In his reappraisal of French impacts on the American Revolution, Pritchard asserts:

"French Strategy had delivered a major blow to the British war effort. The news of d'Estaing's imminent arrival in the theater in the spring of 1778 had forced the evacuation of Philadelphia. By its presence alone, the French Navy had reduced British counterinsurgency to a secondary priority..." (Pritchard, p. 93).

Importantly, French maritime strategy supporting the Franco-American Treaty and war against Great Britain also provided its naval leaders adequate flexibility in executing their orders. Appropriately broad orders from higher echelons of French government allowed their Naval commanders to offer support to colonial land operations in North America, which further compelled the consolidation of British defensive efforts. As testament to the successes of French sea power affecting British operations, French expeditionary forces were able to land uncontested in the Narraganset Bay (1780). (Prichard, p.93) Successes in the employment and application of French sea power allowed the higher echelons of the French Navy to pressurize in their operations. Admiral Comte de Grasse ordered a new strategy of aggression and expansion, operating in coordination with the land commanders in America in pursuit of more dynamic operations in support of decisive engagements. (Pritchard, p. 100). Combined coordination between American and French land commanders, as well as the joint and combined coordination between American and French land commanders and French sea commanders in the final stages of the revolutionary war complimented the resounding operational success of de' Grasse's force at the battle of the Virginia Capes, compelling a British surrender to the combined French and American forces at Yorktown. Immediate recognition of American independence; however, did not follow the culminating Franco-American victories in Hampton Roads.

### **Independence is Non-negotiable**

Decisive victory in a Joint and combined operation directly contributed to the suspension of offensive operations in North America, and provided the fledgling representatives of the American free and independent states leverage for demanding unequivocal sovereign independence from Britain. Given that Great Britain still occupied Canada, New York,

Charleston, and Savannah, and that three quarters of its Army still remained intact in North America, “the British need not have conceded such favorable terms to the United States.” (O’Shaughnessy, p. 360). Absent a viable military strategy to combat the enduring force of the Washington’s Colonial Army and the enduring Franco-American alliance; however, Great Britain’s questions were those of the *Rational Calculus of War* and *War Termination*.

Opposing continued conflict, political objectives within Great Britain’s government shifted toward pursuit of modified Dominion Status initially offered at earlier stages in the conflict. The answer as to why Britain eventually conceded to a definitive American independence lies within the framework of Clausewitz’s assertion that rational leaders should seek peace when the cost of warfare exceeds the value of the political object (Clausewitz, p.92). The cost and sacrifice of remaining in conflict with France, a fledgling United States, Spain, and the Dutch Republic exceeded the value of the political object of keeping the North American colonies in lesser states of independence. American independence was a calculated cost and concession, ceded by a foe without a viable strategy to lessen its effects.

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