



**STRATEGY
RESEARCH
PROJECT**

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**THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION:
STRATEGY SUCCESS OR FAILURE?**

BY

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Lt. Col. Peter B. Todsens II

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ABSTRACT

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The American Revolution was the first successful struggle to sever an imperial relationship in modern times. How could a small disjointed group of American colonists subservient to the most powerful nation in the world fight for and eventually gain their full independence? What were the political objectives of the countries involved prior to the start of hostilities, and how did those objectives change throughout the time period of the war? What military strategies were used by each side, and what role did the coalitions formed during the war have on the final outcome? This paper will examine these questions and consider what both sides desired or expected as a result of the war; analyze the ways each attempted to achieve their goals; examine the roles of alliances; and finally, analyze the post-war settlements and compare those results with the pre-war political aims.

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Introduction

The American Revolution was a peoples' war for political independence; for the first time in modern history citizens successfully struggled to sever an imperial relationship.¹ How could a small disjointed group of American colonists subservient to the most powerful nation in the world fight for and eventually gain their full independence? Did the American colonists actually win the war for independence, or did the British lose? What military strategies did the British and Americans use and which of those strategies were successful? What influence did other countries in the world have during this war for independence? How did the alliances with France and Spain change the nature or scope of the war? Did the Americans achieve their initial goals? This paper will examine these questions and consider what both the colonists and British desired or expected as a result of the conflict; analyze the ways each side attempted to achieve their individual goals; examine the roles alliances played in the outcome; and finally, analyze the post-war settlements and compare those results with the prewar political aims.

Background

In 1763 England was at a peak of magnificence.² Through her victories in the Seven Years War, Britain defeated her traditional Bourbon enemies -- a testament to the prowess of her soldiers and sailors.³ France and Spain lost territories in India as well as in the New World. Britannia ruled not only the waves, but also far-spread possessions, colonies and the bases on four continents.⁴ The British Isles were, at least momentarily, impregnable against assaults by European enemies, for the British navy was easily the strongest in the world.⁵ This impressive navy combined with her professional army were quite capable of defending all of the crown's possessions throughout her vast empire.

In 1763, as were the British, the American colonists were enjoying prosperity, but on a much smaller scale. Large areas of land were open for exploration. There was little famine, low disease rates, and except for the southern slaves, no sharp class differentiation. The population was dispersed: only two million people verses the eleven million living on the British Isles. Due to the lack of a developed road system, rivers were heavily utilized for travel and

trade.⁶ The primary trading partner with the New World was England, but the need for imports for the colonists was not critical. Plush farmlands, thousands of acres to support wildlife, and temperate weather made the colonies quite self sufficient.

The colonists represented a wide mix of backgrounds and religions. Society was fragmented and diverse with many cultural backgrounds including British, German, Scottish, and Irish. Cities were small. Perhaps the single most significant geographical factor was the extreme sparseness of population; a squirrel could have visited almost every square mile in the North American colonies without once touching ground.⁷ In 1763 the Americans were prosperous and confident people, capable of individual colony self-government; people who cherished their way of life. External pressure would drive them together, and eventually into the demand for nationhood.⁸

Causes/Political Goals/War Aims

Although the Seven Year's War brought glory and power to Britain, it required great sacrifice.⁹ The national debt had

risen sharply and taxes were extremely high. After the war there was an economic depression in England that led to a reduction in the size of the military budget affecting both the navy and the army. The British saw America as a source of raw materials and markets for British goods. Despite recent victories, the French to the north, the Spanish to the south, and the American Indians to the west all posed a threat to those markets and raw materials. Therefore, the British saw a need for both soldiers on land and ships patrolling the Atlantic seaboard to protect the colonies.

Britain, however, did not ask whether the colonists desired such protection.¹⁰ The British parliament thought the prosperous Americans should pay the cost for the occupation of the army; and in return, British taxes would be reduced.¹¹ In addition to the occupation by British troops, the British crown began raising taxes on many aspects of colonists' businesses and lifestyle. These increases in taxes and trade tariffs led to unrest and dissatisfaction on the part of the colonists. In the past, the Americans accepted British help, indeed, they pleaded for it; now they no longer needed it, and were unwilling to pay to assist in supporting it.¹²

The transformation from being an obedient colony of the British crown to being a group of revolutionists was slow but persistent. At the start of the rebellion, the colonists did not speak as one voice, for there was no agreement within the colonies on the exact political objectives, nor the means to achieve those objectives. Stated goals or objectives ranged the full spectrum from no desire to raise arms against the British to a minority of colonists who wanted immediate freedom and complete independence from all association with England. Another motive for independence was the desire for land expansion by the colonists. The areas to the west and south in the New World were appealing to many colonists, and the constraints put on by the British crown were restricting their expansionist desires.

As time passed and the laws restricting personal freedom increased, the demand for freedom and independence eventually became the majority view. That desire for independence evolved into the primary political objective of the colonists. In the minds of most colonists, fighting for their independence was worth the price of war. Initially the disagreement with British rule was about taxes and tariffs; however, expansion restrictions, enforced quartering of

British soldiers, and elimination of trial by jury were examples where the livelihood and lifestyle of the colonists were being threatened. From verbal disagreement to demonstrations and protests, the unrest eventually developed into armed conflict. Fighting for one's freedom meant total commitment. If that commitment resulted in a protracted war, so be it; anything less than complete freedom was not acceptable.

The British view of the "unrest" in the American colonies was quite different. Perception of the effects of taxes, tariffs, and laws on the colonists, coupled with a three thousand mile separation between the law makers and subjects, made the interpretation of the colonists' reaction difficult. The British Parliament felt that the unrest in their New World territory was initially just a small rebellion that they easily could suppress.

The British wanted to force a settlement to restore the colonies to their previous status as a subservient member of the British Empire.¹³ This was a limited war aim because the British were not looking to completely defeat or destroy the colonists. To the British, it was simply a police action to restore order and maintain British rule. The British

believed the nature of the conflict and subsequent war was limited, and thought they could accomplish their objectives using limited assets. Additionally, Parliament assumed they could accomplish it in a relatively short period of time.

It is important to contrast the two opposing sides. The British had a limited objective: restore the rebellious colonies to their former status as subservient members of the British Empire.¹⁴ They planned on using limited military assets to achieve those limited goals. On the other hand, the colonists wanted complete independence from British rule and were willing to fight for that freedom. It was slow to develop, but the colonists ultimately were willing to use all assets available to achieve their goals: a United States unencumbered by European control and preeminent on the North American continent.¹⁵

American Military Strategy

Historians generally recognize the period of American colonial and revolutionary history as coinciding with the "Age of Limited Warfare" in Europe.¹⁶ The European view of the military's role was one of isolation from society.¹⁷

Such wars were not pervasive; the populace often seemed scarcely aware of hostilities.¹⁸ There were specific rules governing the way they conducted war. They fought battles in linear formations and normally fought in open fields during the day. But in the New World this linear view of warfare was changing. Tactics by American Indians in earlier battles against soldiers in America included ambush, hit-and-run, and night attacks. The Revolution was not wholly, or even principally, a backwoods war; but the influence of the backwoods was keenly felt.¹⁹

Another difference between the European way of war and the American way was the makeup of the army itself. In Europe the armies were small, well-trained professionals who did all the fighting with the majority of the society shielded or protected from the ravages of war. In America, the colonists were hesitant to train a large standing army. The "Cromwell effect" was the term used to describe the mistrust and apprehension the colonists had toward a large army.²⁰ A standing army was an open invitation for a man and his army to overthrow constituted government.²¹ Instead, the individual colonies used the local militia as a primary source for protection. These individuals were temporary

soldiers who had other jobs and only came together to fight when necessary.

As the war progressed, the small Continental Army did not provide the bulk of the fighting force. The Continental Army was so small and the theater was so large that it required a heavy reliance on the individual colony militias.²² Because this reliance on the militias brought the war closer to the general population, more Americans became involved and the war affected their daily lives. These affects of the militias contributed to the description of this war as being a total war effort for the colonists. This was significantly different than the effects the war had on the British population. From the point of view of the British living in England, a professional military in a far-off location fighting the Revolutionary War had little effect on their day-to-day living.

Initial American military strategy was to react to the British, but it always had an underlying theme of strategic defense.²³ General Washington wanted to evict the British forces from the colonies, but he had neither the army nor the navy to accomplish that goal. Washington knew his limitations and the limitations of his inexperienced, over-

matched army. He knew the American center of gravity was the Continental Army. Destruction of the army would greatly diminish, if not end, the hope for independence. Because of this strategic analysis, Washington picked his battles carefully and attempted to never put his smaller army against the strength of the British forces. He combined this defensive posture with guerrilla tactics, prevented the British from accomplishing their goals, and required the British to continuously be on the defensive from his surprise skirmishes. The British tried different strategies but Washington countered them well. The colonial army did have military setbacks, but the British never were able to have that conventional, decisive battle for which the British generals trained. There were times when Washington and the colonists were vulnerable and close to complete defeat; however, his ability to coordinate the Continental Army with the different state militias and prevent a decisive battlefield loss prevented total defeat.

Washington hoped the political opposition in Great Britain might, in time, force the British Ministry to abandon the conflict.²⁴ By fighting defensively Washington maintained his army and at the same time protracted the war

in the hope the people of England would tire of the war and demand a peace settlement.

British Military Strategy

When the fighting began, British commanders in America appeared to possess an overwhelming military superiority.²⁵ The British parliament and military did not have a high respect for the colonists. "If veteran French troops were bested in America by European methods, certainly, a colonial uprising could be handled with relative ease."²⁶

The British could depend on a professional army - a well-equipped, experienced, and disciplined force; a navy that outnumbered American ships of war by one hundred to one; financial resources which would permit the hiring of foreign troops to supplement the regular army; the initial cooperation of a significant portion of the American populace; and a bureaucracy in Britain to provide a system of command.²⁷

The British military strategy began with just a show of force. Rather than subdue the rebellion, however, this action further agitated and united the colonists. Next, the British viewed the unrest as no more than a police action. The British thought the army could quickly and easily squelch

the "disturbance". The British military concentrated on Boston and the northeast. After a year's worth of struggle, and because General Washington was uncooperative and refused to decisively engage, British strategy evolved to one of attempting to isolate the northern colonies. The British generals recognized the importance of Washington and his army, but they were unable to destroy him or the army. During this time period, the American people's resentment toward the British continued to grow. Occupation by British soldiers was becoming unbearable, and the demand of the American populace for complete independence was steadily increasing.

The next British military strategy for the war was an attempt to control the southern colonies. The British generals were hoping to capture the continental army as well as pacify the local populace. They achieved neither objective. The local populace became hostile toward British occupation; the American army evaded the British and, therefore, prevented the decisive battle the British so desperately wanted.

The British military strategy included the use of the navy. The Royal navy was able to overpower any American war

ship, but the reduction in size of the British navy after the Seven Year's War made isolating American seaports very difficult. There were too many ports to patrol, and the New World Atlantic coastline was too long to blockade. Even before the French and Spanish navies became major factors, the colonists were able to trade and resupply themselves by trading with other countries. After the entry of the French and Spanish navies, the struggle for British naval supremacy along the eastern coast of America was next to impossible.

Coalitions

From the point of view of the British, the war was divided into two periods: pre-French and post-French entry into the war. During the pre-French involvement era, the problems faced by Britain were suppressing the rebellion in the New World while assuring the populace back home a quick end to the disturbance in America. The scope of the war significantly changed with the direct support of America by France and Spain.

For years France had been seeking revenge for the humiliating drubbing England had administered in the Seven

Years War.²⁸ The fruits of American commerce did not warrant pursuing a bold foreign policy, but stripping Britain of her colonial trade, on which so much of her advantage seemed to rest, was a matter of highest importance.²⁹ The introduction of France into the war added international legitimacy to the revolutionary cause, but more important was the introduction of the French navy into the fray.³⁰

France had been rebuilding her navy since the end of the Seven Years War. France had strong desires for revenge and acquisition, especially in the Caribbean Islands. Up until this point in the war with the colonists, British ships had freedom of the seas and American naval vessels presented no threat. The French entry meant England faced what she had always dreaded and avoided: a coalition of maritime enemies not distracted by war in Europe.³¹ England quickly realized the focus of the war had changed. When France entered the war, both the French and British rulers felt the sugar-rich Caribbean islands had a higher value than the American colonies. This would prove to be important because Great Britain would have to realign her priorities.³²

France had limited aims in this war. She wanted to weaken England's stronghold in the colonial possessions and

bring the countries to an equal balance of power. She never had any intentions of invading England with an army, but that did not mean Britain could ignore the possibility of such an invasion. From the naval perspective, Britain was facing a dilemma France had faced earlier in the Seven Year's War: an insufficient naval resource to defend a vast and scattered colonial empire.³³

Along with the vital role the French navy played, France also provided some professional foot soldiers in the land campaign within the colonies. Because of the combination of a maritime threat against England and the added land support, General Washington began a limited offensive campaign to bring the war to an end.

Revenge and the desire to obtain some lost territories motivated Spain's entry into the war. One year after France had declared support for America, Spain also joined the fight. In return for Spain's entry into the war, France agreed to continue to fight until Spain regained Gibraltar, which Spain lost to Britain in 1713. In the same year, Holland also joined in alliance with France in the war against England. The British Ministry was unable to match the size of the naval forces France and Spain sent into the

English Channel, or to counter all the enemy fleets that appeared in the Caribbean and Mediterranean.³⁴

As a result of these new alliances, British concentration and main effort of the war changed. Because of the naval threat to her colonies worldwide, not just the American colonies, and the threat of an invasion to the British homeland, England was in a strategic dilemma. England did not have the assets to fight a global war. The alliances between America, France, Spain and Holland required the British to reevaluate her war aims and political objectives. From this formation of alliances, until the end of the war, the primary concern and objective of England was to protect its position of both economic and military power in the world. The defeat of the rebellion in America was no longer the number one priority.³⁵

Pre-war plans and postwar results

The pre-war and post-war objectives for the colonists evolved into one primary objective: full independence. Initial goals and desires of the colonists were disjointed and not in complete agreement. The actions by the British

crown encouraged the colonists to speak with a united voice. As the conflict expanded into a major war, independence became the primary and majority-opinion political war aim. This established complete commitment by the colonists; anything less than freedom was not acceptable. The colonists accepted the commitment that was necessary to accomplish this. Since the war aims were unlimited, the means to fight also were considered unlimited.

The military strategy to achieve the desired freedom also was evolving. General Washington correctly analyzed the colonists' center of gravity and avoided a major army battlefield defeat throughout the conflict. Washington was able to fight a strategic defense until the time was appropriate and to his advantage to attack, and only then would he attack.

Initially, Washington expected to fight with a professionally-trained, regular army for which his British military background had trained him. However, the colonists were hesitant to allow the formation of a large army, and Washington had to amend his plans. His ability to intermix the individual, state militias with his small, continental, regular army, allowed him to have sufficient combat power to

achieve the ultimate goal of victory. The colonists had the will to fight, and the combined colonists and coalition combat power allowed ultimate victory. The goal was political freedom from the British crown, and the colonist achieved that goal.

A secondary political aim of the colonists concerned territorial expansion within the North American continent. The colonists hoped to gain the freedom to expand west as well as south into Florida and north into Canada. Occupation of Canada was part of the military strategy at the beginning of the conflict, but General Washington realized early that his army did not have enough strength or experience to contest the British in the northern territories. At the time of the peace settlement with England, the Americans did not occupy Canada, so there was little confidence that Britain would give it to the colonists.³⁶

In addition, because of the coalition, some compromise was necessary in the postwar settlement. Spain desired the return of Florida to their rule. Allowing this compromise was not as big a loss as was the northern territories to England, but the colonists did achieve their goal of expansion room to the west. Although the colonists achieved

only partially their secondary political aim of expansion, their war aims and post-war results were quite successful. They achieved their goals of freedom from British rule and the ability to expand within the continent.

Britain's pre-war plans and post-war results did not have the same success because the pre-war plan of the British crown and the final post-war outcome were not the same. Britain never fully understood the deep-rooted, unlimited goals of the colonists until it was too late. The British were disjointed in their strategy, and they misread the enemy. Their belief that a show of force or that treating the uprising as a police action would quiet the colonists was wrong. This was the beginning of the British mismanagement of the war strategy.

Throughout the Revolutionary war, Britain never committed enough military forces to win. Their misinterpretation of the motivation of the colonists and the crown's analysis of the Revolutionary War as a limited war eventually led to their losing. They did not properly analyze the political objectives of the colonists, which led the British to fight what they thought to be a limited war against an enemy who had unlimited war aims.

After the French entered the war, the British war aims changed. No longer was the conflict in America the only conflict or enemy needing attention. The conflict in the colonies became less important and led to the British succumbing to the demands of the Americans.

Conclusions

In his book, The Glorious Cause, Robert Middlekauff describes the colonists as a group of common people led by a great leader, who thought the Revolution against Britain was a glorious cause that was worth the tremendous sacrifice borne by all. This belief did not immediately take form. The British crown passed laws and enforced restrictions on the colonists that, over time, became overbearing. The colonists were living a peaceful, semi-independent lifestyle that British rule was slowly eroding. The colonists, initially, did not speak with one voice, but the demand for independence eventually became the calling of the majority.

The problem with the demand for independence was the way in which to achieve it. The colonies were thirteen individual colonies (with a very weak central government)

that were attempting to separate from a country with the largest navy and one of the most powerful armies in the world. The colonists had a small, poorly-trained centralized army and an almost nonexistent navy. However, with such overwhelming odds against them, the colonists still wanted their independence and demanded freedom from the British crown.

Once the colonists had fully developed their desire for freedom, they agreed in the overall political objective of the war. Independence was their desired outcome, and the only way to achieve it was total commitment by all. The military strategy to achieve that freedom was a defensive one, not allowing the much stronger British army to completely destroy the Continental army. Colonists also understood the importance of assistance from other countries and aggressively searched for coalitions to help in their cause. The colonists believed the British would eventually grow tired of the war in a far-off land and reluctantly grant their freedom. "This military strategy was sustained only because the larger purpose of the Revolution had been stated already and widely accepted."³⁷

The British view of the Revolution was quite different. Initially, they felt they could handle the unrest in the new world colonies with just a show of force. When that did not work, they next tried to treat the problem as a police action: minimal force hoping for quick results. That too failed. Even after the British crown realized that the colonists were serious in fighting for independence, they doubted the colonists could pull themselves together and create a government or army which would be willing to fight a protracted war.³⁸ This lack of respect for the colonists and the lack of a cohesive strategy made the British military strategy disjointed and inadequate.

The political objectives of the British and the means to achieve those objectives did not match. This mismatch became even more apparent and exaggerated with the entry of the French and Spanish into the war. What the British thought was an internal colonial problem they could easily suppress, developed into a tremendously more significant world-wide dilemma.

No longer fighting just a group of weak colonists, the British were fighting a coalition of America, France, Spain and Holland. Losing would bring dire consequences for

Britain. The newly formed coalition had a powerful, combined navy able to engage the Royal Navy. In addition, there was a perceived threat of having French and Spanish armies invading the homeland of the British. At the same time, the British felt other colonial properties, such as the West Indies and Gibraltar, were more important than the thirteen colonies in the New World.

This change in priorities led to a reevaluation of the political and military objectives of the American Revolution. Neither the British army nor navy were supplied with the proper amount of men or equipment to complete their assigned tasks. In addition, the limited assets were diverted to support other, more important military operations. Because of this change in priorities, the British eventually realized that the war in the New World was not worth the cost and, consequently, sued for peace.

In the final evaluation, the Americans achieved their initial goals while Great Britain only achieved their realigned limited goals. The war aims of the Americans were independence and freedom for future expansion. Initially the British war aim was to quell the disturbance in the colonies, but the goals changed with the entry of France and Spain

into the conflict. They adjusted the goals so as to sacrifice the thirteen colonies but not to lose their foothold in the Mediterranean or West Indies, while at the same time protecting their homeland. They achieved these goals.

A question raised at the beginning of this paper was, "Did the American colonists actually win the war for independence or did the British lose it?" Evaluation shows that a country willing to fight an unlimited war is willing to use everything at its disposal. The cost for that unlimited goal can be very high in human or material costs, but the majority of the colonist considered that goal worth it. British goals never were unlimited; therefore, they were unwilling to make unlimited sacrifices for those goals. The threats of the coalition against Britain made the war aims in America not worth the risk or cost. Americans took advantage of this British dilemma and won their freedom.

End notes

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² John R. Alden, A History of the American Revolution, (New York: DA Capo, 1969), 17.

³ Ibid., 3.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 18.

⁶ Dave R. Palmer, The Way of Fox, American Strategy in the War for America 1775-1783 (Westport: Greenwood, 1975), 30.

⁷ Dave R. Palmer, The Way of the Fox, American Strategy in the War for America 1775-1783, 27.

⁸ Alden, 16.

⁹ Alden, 48.

¹⁰ Alden, 52.

¹¹ Alden, 66.

¹² Richard W. Van Alstyne, Empire and Independence: The International History of the American Revolution (New York: John Wiley & Sons Inc., 1967), 25.

¹³ Dave R. Palmer, The Way of the Fox, American Strategy in the War for America 1775-1783, 38.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Dave R. Palmer, The Way of the Fox, American Strategy in the War for America 1775-1783, 77.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Higginbotham 2.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., 4.

²⁰ Dave R. Palmer, America, Its Army, and the Birth of a Nation: 1794 (Novato, Ca.: Presidio Press, 1994), 194.

²¹ Dave R. Palmer, The Way of the Fox American Strategy in the War for America 1775-1783, 51.

²² Higginbotham, 11.

²³ Russell F. Wiegley, The American Way of War, A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy (Bloomington: Indiana Press, 1973), 12.

²⁴ Ibid., 5.

²⁵ George A. Billias, George Washington's Opponents: British Generals and Admirals in the American Revolution (New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc., 1969), XIV.

²⁶ Higginbotham 22.

²⁷ Billias, XV.

²⁸ Dave R. Palmer, The Way of the Fox, American Strategy in the War for America 1775-1783, 144.

²⁹ Higginbotham, 230.

³⁰ Dave R. Palmer, The Way of the Fox, American Strategy in the War for America 1775-1783, 145.

³¹ Ibid., 147.

³² Ibid., 148.

³³ Higginbotham, 243.

³⁴ Billias, xx.

³⁵ Wiegley, 38.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Robert Middlekauff, The Glorious Cause: The American Revolution, 1763-1789 (New York: Oxford University, 1982), 578.

³⁸ Ibid., 576.

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