

The British strategy in the American Revolutionary War during the command of General William Howe

Introduction

The American Revolutionary War, also known as the American War of Independence, which lasted from 1775 to 1783 and ended with the official recognition of the United States of America, is a historically defining and in many ways unique conflict, which serves as a foundational narrative for the United States.

The war between the thirteen North American colonies and Great Britain is especially interesting due to the imbalance of military power between the belligerents and the ultimate failure of the British intervention. The intervention and the subsequent debate about the reasons for its failure have concerned not only the contemporary public and the British government, leading to an official investigation of General William Howe's conduct during his command and his response "The narrative of Lieut. Gen. Sir William Howe", but also historians, who are in disagreement about both the chances of success of the British intervention and the reasons for the failure.

This essay investigates the reasons for the overall British military failure in the early stage of the war, focusing at large on the British strategy under the command of General Howe until his resignation in 1777. In order to obtain a basis for further analysis, the **strategic realities in North America, the assessment of the opponent by the British** and the **role of the British government** will be described, followed by an examination of the overall **British strategy** in the early years of the rebellion.

Strategic realities in North America

In order to understand the British strategy, it is necessary to understand the conditions, influences and challenges of the American theatre of war.

It is therefore important to consider the distinct characteristics of the North American continent, which are the dimensions of the country with large distances, the terrain and

the weather conditions¹, factors which always have significant impact on military operations of any kind². The British advantage of having a well-established system of logistics and communications was negated by the far distance to Great Britain, which hampered reinforcements, supplies and communications.³ This situation became even worse as the war increasingly strained the British economy and Britain's ability to replace troops due to losses.⁴

Strategically, the defensive nature of the war enabled the American forces to adopt a resource-efficient defensive stance, with the key objective being survival rather than victory⁵. This strategy allowed the Americans to "save themselves from being conquered" by "evacuating and retreating"⁶. Tactically, the American forces developed an approach that utilized the terrain⁷ and emphasized boldness and opportunism as well as speed, mobility and concentration of force against inferior targets⁸. At the same time, they were keen to reduce own casualties⁹, which partially compensated their lack of proper training and an established military hierarchy and support systems¹⁰.

Assessment of the opponent

In addition to the unique challenges of the American theatre of war, the British cause was jeopardised by a lack of situational awareness, misunderstanding and misjudgement of the current situation in the colonies.

¹ William Seymour, Seymour, Price of Folly. British Blunders in the War of American Independence (London, Brassey's, 1995), p. 15; David Ramsay, The History of the American Revolution, Vol. I (New York, Russell & Russell, 1968), p. 189.

² William Howe, The narrative of Lieut. Gen. Sir William Howe, in a committee of the House of Commons, on the 29th of April, 1779, relative to his conduct, during his late command of the King's troops in North America: To which are added, some observations upon a pamphlet, entitled, Letters to a Nobleman, 3rd edition (London, H. Baldwin, 1781), pp. 4, 6, 103.

³ Paul D. Nelson, "British Conduct of the American Revolutionary War. A Review of Interpretations", The Journal of American History, Vol. 65, No. 3 (1978), pp. 623-653, p. 634; Seymour, Price of Folly, pp. 15, 34, 87-88; David H. Fischer, Washington's Crossing (New York, Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 116.

⁴ Seymour, Price of Folly, pp. 85-86; Fischer, Washington's Crossing, pp. 359-360.

⁵ Fischer, Washington's Crossing, p. 367.

⁶ Ramsay, History of the American Revolution, p. 189.

⁷ Howard H. Peckham, The War for Independence. A Military History (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1958), pp. 26-27.

⁸ Fischer, Washington's Crossing, pp. 370-375.

⁹ Fischer, Washington's Crossing, pp. 371, 374.

¹⁰ Fischer, Washington's Crossing, p. 111.

The British government underestimated the scale and severity of the conflict in the Americas, considering the rebellion initially to be local and therefore containable¹¹. Accordingly, the initial British strategy was a show of force by reinforcing the garrison of Boston and restricting the economic access of the colonies¹². However, apparently this underestimation was soon overcome, as the British government quickly allocated significant resources to the war, fielding 45,500 troops in North America¹³, comprising more than half of the armed forces of the British Empire¹⁴, as well as 45 percent of the British Navy¹⁵.

Unlike the erroneous assessment of the scale of conflict, the British command never rectified its false assessment of the level of loyalist support in the colonies, on which parts of the British strategy were relying¹⁶. Due to inaccurate and misleading intelligence reports¹⁷ and the lack of proper military intelligence¹⁸ it was thought that “the friends of government were both strong and numerous, and only waited for proper support, and favourable circumstances to declare themselves”.¹⁹ Howe noted that he “found the Americans not so well disposed to join us, and to serve us as I had been taught to expect”.²⁰

In addition to these misjudgements, the British leadership also underestimated their opponents²¹ due to the stark differences in training, equipment, experience and morale between British and American forces²². Germain was “contemptuous of the colonial militia”²³, General Gage “fell into the dangerous error of underestimating his opponent”²⁴ and the conviction of the inferiority of colonial troops “would influence the British officer corps until the end of the Revolution”²⁵. Again, the British did not improve

¹¹ Nelson, *British Conduct*, p. 638.

¹² Ramsay, *The History of the American Revolution*, pp. 158-159.

¹³ Nelson, *British Conduct*, p. 623.

¹⁴ Fischer, *Washington’s Crossing*, p. 116.

¹⁵ Nelson, *British Conduct*, p. 624.

¹⁶ Nelson, *British Conduct*, p. 637.

¹⁷ Ramsay, *The History of the American Revolution*, p. 148.

¹⁸ Seymour, *Price of Folly*, p. 46.

¹⁹ Ramsay, *The History of the American Revolution*, p. 157.

²⁰ Howe, *Narrative*, p. 6.

²¹ Nelson, *British Conduct*, p. 627.

²² Ramsay, *The History of the American Revolution*, pp. 195-196.

²³ *War for Independence*, p. 33.

²⁴ Charles F. Adams, “The Battle of Bunker Hill”, *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (1896), pp. 401-413, p. 407.

²⁵ Richard M. Ketchum, *Decisive Day. The Battle for Bunker Hill* (New York, Henry Holt and Co., 1999), p. 121.

on this misjudgement, as it took “many politicians in London and senior officers in America a very long time to appreciate the remarkably high qualities of their foe”²⁶.

Role and influence of the British government

In order to comprehend the British military strategy, it is also necessary to understand the role and influence of the British government in light of the domestic political situation in Britain.

One hindrance to the British campaign was the lack of coordination and cooperation between both the British government and the military²⁷, leaving the military and diplomatic powers at Howe’s discretion unclear. However, other sources come to the conclusion that Howe had been given “full discretionary powers to crush the rebellion” and was enabled to make decisions without approval from London²⁸, while Howe himself attested that he “never complained of being confined by peremptory instructions”, but his efforts were only weakened “by a want of sufficient force”²⁹.

In addition, the British efforts were hampered by an incapable political leadership³⁰ and a government lacking understanding of the situation and the military capabilities³¹, as well as the inefficiency of the army³² and its political appointees³³. Both the army and the government are thought to have suffered from unclear authorities and decentralization³⁴, with British operations impeded by “disputations, indecisions, procrastinations and deficiencies of planning”³⁵ and the interference in operations by government ministers³⁶.

²⁶ Seymour, *Price of Folly*, p. 46.

²⁷ Seymour, *Price of Folly*, p. 35.

²⁸ Maldwyn A. Jones, *Sir William Howe: Conventional Strategist*, in: George A. Billias (editor), *George Washington’s Opponents. British Generals and Admirals in the American Revolution* (New York, William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1969), pp. 39-72, p. 51.

²⁹ Howe, *Narrative*, pp. 46-47.

³⁰ George O. Trevelyan, *The American Revolution. Part I. 1766-1776* (New York, Longmans, Green, and Co., 1899), pp. 410-411.

³¹ Nelson, *British Conduct*, p. 631.

³² Nelson, *British Conduct*, p. 631.

³³ Nelson, *British Conduct*, p. 636; Seymour, *Price of Folly*, p. 111.

³⁴ Nelson, *British Conduct*, p. 634.

³⁵ Seymour, *Price of Folly*, p. 94.

³⁶ Seymour, *Price of Folly*, p. 125.

Evolution and success of the British military strategy

Two possible strategic courses of action

In addition to the aforementioned issues related to command and control as well as political and military effectiveness, both the British parliament and the military leadership were seemingly divided over the solution to the American rebellion³⁷, with the government of Lord Frederick North assuming a “vacillating” stance between firmness and appeasement³⁸. Effectively, the common ground between parliament, military and government was reduced to the recognition of the necessity to resolve the conflict before France and Spain might intervene and exploit the situation³⁹.

The two courses of action in dispute were either “to break the Revolution by brute force”⁴⁰ or “to ‘conciliate His Majesty’s rebellious subjects’ by firmness and moderation”⁴¹, if necessary, by a show of force in order to force negotiations⁴². While King George III. and Germain favoured the application of force, the Whigs⁴³ within the parliament preferred negotiation.⁴⁴ North’s government was in a “fatal indecision between suppression and conciliation”.⁴⁵

This indecision between these two possible strategic courses of action is to be considered “a major weakness in the British cause”⁴⁶, as it effectively hampered the formulation of a British strategy, with General Howe being caught between the conflicting options⁴⁷ of being “both warrior and peacemaker”⁴⁸. He repeatedly tried to negotiate with the Americans, but he had not been bestowed with the necessary powers to effectively do so, as he only had the right to pardon.⁴⁹

³⁷ Nelson, *British Conduct*, p. 631; Ramsay, *The History of the American Revolution*, pp. 151-158.

³⁸ Seymour, *Price of Folly*, p. 100.

³⁹ Peckham, *War for Independence*, p. 39.

⁴⁰ Fischer, *Washington’s Crossing*, p. 364.

⁴¹ Fischer, *Washington’s Crossing*, p. 364.

⁴² Fischer, *Washington’s Crossing*, p. 71.

⁴³ The Whigs were a faction in the British parliament favouring a negotiatory approach to the colonial unrest in opposition to the Tories.

⁴⁴ Nelson, *British Conduct*, p. 629.

⁴⁵ Seymour, *Price of Folly*, p. 46; Nelson, *British Conduct*, p. 626.

⁴⁶ Fischer, *Washington’s Crossing*, p. 364.

⁴⁷ Fischer, *Washington’s Crossing*, pp. 73-78.

⁴⁸ Nelson, *British Conduct*, p. 645.

⁴⁹ Nelson, *British Conduct*, p. 631; Ramsay, *The History of the American Revolution*, pp. 296, 302-304; Peckham, *War for Independence*, pp. 43-44.

As the British campaigns in general and in particular the seemingly contradictory coordination and execution of the 1777 campaign have illustrated, both the British political and military leadership adopted a highly ambiguous strategic response to the American rebellion.

Evolution from 1775 until 1777

Until the battle of Bunker Hill and the evacuation of Boston, no effective strategic concept was in place⁵⁰, as Britain was merely reacting to the failure of its attempt to enforce the civil authority in Boston.

Afterward, the aforementioned two strategic options came into conflict, with the supporters of the aggressive stance favouring the destruction of the American army and the supporters of the negotiatory stance calling for the occupation of territory.

Both approaches had their merits: With its army destroyed, “the American Revolution could become yet another failed rebellion”⁵¹, however, the idea to “divide the colonies”⁵², recover them successively in order to pacify them⁵³ and “offer an armistice [...] at some favourable moment”⁵⁴ initially appeared equally sound, especially as it might allow success without a general engagement or the destruction of the American army.

The British strategy therefore initially followed the latter concept: A plan was proposed to conduct a blockade of the coastline⁵⁵ and to occupy major corridors and rivers, especially the Hudson River, to cut off the perceived centre of the rebellion in New England⁵⁶. This was considered to allow for the best use of the available manpower and for the concentration of the British forces against a divided enemy.⁵⁷ The concept of territorial occupation was also based on the idea that the loyalists, who were

⁵⁰ Cf. Peckham, *War for Independence*, p. 36.

⁵¹ Fischer, *Washington's Crossing*, p. 243.

⁵² Peckham, *War for Independence*, p. 39.

⁵³ Cf. Fischer, *Washington's Crossing*, p. 160.

⁵⁴ Peckham, *War for Independence*, p. 39.

⁵⁵ Peckham, *War for Independence*, p. 40.

⁵⁶ Ramsay, *The History of the American Revolution*, p. 292; Fischer, *Washington's Crossing*, p. 77.

⁵⁷ Fischer, *Washington's Crossing*, p. 77.

assumed to be more numerous than it was actually the case, should be enabled to retake control over the presumably few rebellious agitators.⁵⁸

While a naval blockade was soon determined to be impossible⁵⁹, the occupation of New York as a strategically located base of operation was highly successful. The ensuing capture of New Jersey and Rhode Island expanded the British area of control, seemingly proving the British strategy to be effective. At this point, General Howe thought the American army to be almost shattered and the fighting in the Jerseys to be over, therefore he spread his troops out to the Delaware to maintain order and protect the loyalists⁶⁰, as well as to use the countryside for provisions and quartering.⁶¹

Additionally, an amnesty and tied to it, guarantees for life and property, were offered as a step towards reconciliation. While Germain and many officers considered the amnesty to be ineffective and the loyalists were outraged by it⁶², the program showed some success⁶³, further supporting the British strategy.

With New York, New Jersey and Rhode Island under control, the rebellion was thought to almost have been ended: "In early December [1776], British commanders believed that they were very close to ending the rebellion"⁶⁴. The plan for 1777 called for an attack along the Hudson and from Canada in order to further divide the colonies.⁶⁵

However, while Howe's attempt to control New Jersey initially went well⁶⁶, the "brutal acts of occupying troops were at odds with the intentions of their commanders"⁶⁷, as the necessary foraging often turned into plundering and rape⁶⁸, even though Howe tried to prevent it, being well aware of its effect on pacification⁶⁹. Due to these developments, the British virtually lost control of the countryside.⁷⁰ The preoccupation with the unrest and partisan attacks in the rear hampered an effective defence against

⁵⁸ Fischer, *Washington's Crossing*, p. 77; cf. Fischer, *Washington's Crossing*, p. 160.

⁵⁹ Fischer, *Washington's Crossing*, p. 75.

⁶⁰ Howe, *Narrative*, p. 7; Fischer, *Washington's Crossing*, pp. 160-161, 185.

⁶¹ Fischer, *Washington's Crossing*, pp. 116-117.

⁶² Fischer, *Washington's Crossing*, p. 161.

⁶³ Fischer, *Washington's Crossing*, p. 162.

⁶⁴ Fischer, *Washington's Crossing*, p. 363.

⁶⁵ Seymour, *Price of Folly*, p. 83; Peckham, *War for Independence*, pp. 39-40.

⁶⁶ Fischer, *Washington's Crossing*, p. 365.

⁶⁷ Fischer, *Washington's Crossing*, p. 365.

⁶⁸ Peckham, *War for Independence*, pp. 46-47.

⁶⁹ Ramsay, *The History of the American Revolution*, p. 325; Fischer, *Washington's Crossing*, pp. 173-181.

⁷⁰ Fischer, *Washington's Crossing*, pp. 193, 288.

American regular forces from Pennsylvania. The victory at Trenton had a major psychological effect for the American side.⁷¹

The effect of Trenton, Princeton and the partisan warfare in the Winter of 1776/1777 were not only symbolic, but severely damaged the British forces both in their ability to fight and with regard to their credibility.⁷² The “officers in the field understood what was happening and tried to recover the initiative”⁷³ by forcing open battles instead of being forced into ambushes⁷⁴, but “the British commanders were outgeneraled in the field”⁷⁵ Therefore, “by the spring of 1777, many British officers had concluded that they could never win the war”⁷⁶.

The winter campaign not only “wrecked the strategy of the Howe brothers for ending the Revolution by moderation and conciliation”⁷⁷ and broke the British momentum⁷⁸, but also gave Washington the initiative and threw the British off balance. For the first time, “the thoughts of British commanders were no longer about attacking but being attacked”⁷⁹, as General Howe was forced to start moving defensively⁸⁰.

Change in strategy

The American attack at Trenton marked a partial change in the British strategy. While earlier, Howe always had “shrugged off”⁸¹ General Clinton’s proposal that the “strategic purpose of the war should be to destroy the American army and capture the leaders of the rebellion”⁸², Howe and General Charles Cornwallis now decided to destroy the American army in the counterattack at Trenton⁸³, perhaps shifting the

⁷¹ Fischer, *Washington’s Crossing*, pp. 259-260.

⁷² Fischer, *Washington’s Crossing*, p. 359.

⁷³ Fischer, *Washington’s Crossing*, p. 356.

⁷⁴ Fischer, *Washington’s Crossing*, p. 356.

⁷⁵ Fischer, *Washington’s Crossing*, p. 356.

⁷⁶ Fischer, *Washington’s Crossing*, p. 363.

⁷⁷ Fischer, *Washington’s Crossing*, p. 366.

⁷⁸ Fischer, *Washington’s Crossing*, p. 344.

⁷⁹ Fischer, *Washington’s Crossing*, p. 343.

⁸⁰ Fischer, *Washington’s Crossing*, p. 347.

⁸¹ Nelson, *British Conduct*, p. 650.

⁸² Fischer, *Washington’s Crossing*, p. 128.

⁸³ Fischer, *Washington’s Crossing*, pp. 290, 365.

general strategy toward destroying the American army in an open battle⁸⁴ instead of hoping for a reconciliation.

As Howe planned to concentrate his resources for a campaign toward Philadelphia in 1777, he gave up parts of New Jersey, thereby betraying the trust of the local loyalists⁸⁵. However, the original strategy for 1777, focussing on cutting of New England to force negotiations, was not abandoned, as the attack of Burgoyne's Northern Army still tried to achieve that objective.

At the same time Howe's attack on Philadelphia seemingly broke with the idea of occupying territory, as Howe determined the attack from New York along the Hudson to be little promising⁸⁶. Howe asked, in case he would have reached Albany, what he would "have gained, after having expended the campaign upon that object alone, that I had not a right to expect by drawing off General Washington, with the principal American army, from any operations on that side?"⁸⁷ Apparently, at this point, Howe considered an engagement with Washington over Philadelphia to be preferable. In retrospect, he argued that his "opinion [had] always been, that the defeat of the rebel regular army is the surest road to peace"⁸⁸, a statement that is to be considered dubious, as Howe personally preferred negotiation⁸⁹.

Assessment of success

The British strategy of territorial control, limited military engagement and reconciliatory efforts has been credited with some success, however, its suitability to resolve the conflict has been questioned.

On one hand, it soon became obvious that the British forces and resources deployed were not sufficient to be able to cut off parts of the thirteen colonies or occupy large territories⁹⁰. The army was "utterly inadequate to the task of holding down New England, and ludicrously insufficient for the enterprise of conquering, and afterwards

⁸⁴ Fischer, *Washington's Crossing*, pp. 344, 360.

⁸⁵ Fischer, *Washington's Crossing*, pp. 349-350.

⁸⁶ Howe, *Narrative*, pp. 19-20.

⁸⁷ Howe, *Narrative*, p. 20.

⁸⁸ Howe, *Narrative*, p. 19.

⁸⁹ Nelson, *British Conduct*, p. 626.

⁹⁰ Fischer, *Washington's Crossing*, pp. 77-78.

controlling, America"⁹¹. While the isolation of New England and the defeat of a large American army might have forced a peace settlement⁹², the sheer size of the country would have left Howe's army without sufficient manpower to guard the Hudson and to fight at the same time⁹³. After the "war of hearts and minds" was lost in New Jersey, the approach of reconciliation could be considered as failed, even if the British undertook another effort in the later southern campaign.

On the other hand, the strategy was "defective"⁹⁴ from the very beginning, as it was aimed at conquering territory, not destroying Washington's army⁹⁵, with the latter being considered to be the only way to win the war⁹⁶. A strategy based on forcing the civilian population into submission by a show of force whilst offering reconciliation might have been sound by European standards⁹⁷, as "this method was appropriate enough for the limited wars of eighteenth-century Europe"⁹⁸. However, "it was useless in the struggle for America"⁹⁹, because "the Revolutionary War was not a war about territorial boundaries or dynastic rivalries; it was a war of ideology, and could be won by Britain only by a decisive victory on the battlefield"¹⁰⁰. William Seymour suggested that Howe must have known that the destruction of Washington's army would have been more likely to force negotiations than "half-measures"¹⁰¹. The political unwillingness to defeat the American army on the battlefield resulted in a scenario where even major tactical successes became strategically worthless.

Conclusion

The British failure to end the rebellion has to be attributed to a combination of multiple factors.

Some of these factors were dictated by nature, such as adverse terrain, weather conditions and the geographic distance between the British homeland as well as the

⁹¹ Trevelyan, *The American Revolution*, pp. 284-285.

⁹² Seymour, *Price of Folly*, p. 124.

⁹³ Seymour, *Price of Folly*, p. 124.

⁹⁴ Jones, *Washington's Opponents*, p. 57.

⁹⁵ Peckham, *War for Independence*, p. 59; Jones, *Washington's Opponents*, p. 57.

⁹⁶ Peckham, *War for Independence*, p. 60.

⁹⁷ Jones, *Washington's Opponents*, pp. 66-67.

⁹⁸ Jones, *Washington's Opponents*, p. 67.

⁹⁹ Jones, *Washington's Opponents*, p. 67.

¹⁰⁰ Jones, *Washington's Opponents*, p. 67.

¹⁰¹ Seymour, *Price of Folly*, p. 80.

area of operations with its impact on reinforcement, logistics and communications. While especially the sheer size of the colonies was a key element in the British defeat, those factors were unchangeable hinderances and beyond the control of British leadership.

Other factors, such as the assessment of the scale of conflict and the Americans themselves, both with regard to the level of loyalist support and the willingness and ability of the American rebels to fight, are to be considered human and therefore could have been influenced to achieve a different outcome. If the British had been aware of the spread of the revolution and the amount of support it received among the civilian population, the choice may have fallen on the more aggressive strategic response, which might have been far better suited to oppose the rebellion.

Just like the underestimation of their foe, the lack of political and military effectiveness and the disaccord within the British government over the ideal strategic response were human and with that resolvable problems, which however remained unsolved. Soon, these shortfalls became very obvious during the planning and execution of two completely uncoordinated operations without common objectives, leading to the overall failure of the Northern Army.

However, the most important factor that led to the British failure to gain and keep control over the North American colonies was the overall British strategy of choice, resulting from insufficient intelligence and the belief among many of the leaders within the British government and army that the war to counter a case of regional civil unrest and domestic rebellion could have been won with a small-scale operation. This wrongful assessment of the situation led to the adoption of a strategy that tried to stop unrest and rebellion by inflicting the smallest amount of damage to the colonies which was considered necessary to force the Americans into negotiations.

The alternative strategy, which was at initially ignored and never fully adopted, treated the conflict as a regular war, which it undoubtedly was in the understanding of the Americans, focusing on the defeat and destruction of the American army. From a modern perspective, this offensive approach would have been the better strategy, especially since it was the only strategy which could be realistically implemented, given the British constraints, as they were unable to provide sufficient troops to control significant areas in the colonies, while fighting American partisans and countering the threat posed by Washington's regular army.

The strategic shift which obviously took place after the American attack on Trenton, with Howe trying to force an engagement over Philadelphia, was therefore a sound decision. Pointlessly, the attempt to control territory was not fully abandoned, as Burgoyne's attack from Canada illustrated.

While the challenges posed by North America and the Americans and the at least partially relatable misjudgements have to be taken into consideration, the somewhat unclear approach favouring reconciliation instead of destruction was the detrimental result of a failure in intelligence and a failure in leadership, resulting in a failure in strategy, rendering the entire British effort virtually ineffective.

Ultimately, a confrontational strategy and a bolder and more aggressive approach towards the Americans might have brought the rebellion to a timely end. Instead, the strategy of conciliation allowed the rebellion to grow in the early years of the conflict, which eventually became too powerful, both military and ideologically, for the British to suppress, ultimately resulting in the creation and recognition of the United States of America.

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