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Strategy During the American Revolutionary War

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Abstract

After years of worsening relations after the French and Indian War (1754-1763), the thirteen American colonies sought to gain independence from Britain through the long and bloody Revolutionary War (1775-1783). This paper will examine some of the strategies and tactics used by both sides over the course of this struggle for American independence.

Keywords：American Revolution, United States history, American colonies, military strategy, military tactics

Introduction:

On April 19, 1775, the Battles of Lexington and Concord heralded the start of the American War for Independence. Termed 'the shot heard round the world' by Ralph Waldo Emerson in his 1837 poem, *Concord Hymn,* Lexington and Concord represented the culmination of years of increasingly antagonistic relations between Britain and her American colonies. As the conflict dragged on, both sides employed an array of strategic initiatives, with varying degrees of success.

Background:

British rule in the American colonies throughout much of the 17th and 18th centuries is often considered a period of 'salutary neglect,' a time when the British monarchy gave the colonies a relatively free rein to enact laws and appropriate taxes. However, the end of the French and Indian War (1754-1763) initiated a shift in British policy. The cost of the war had doubled Britain's national debt, and Parliament sought to recoup some of this money by raising colonial taxes. The colonies, who had grown accustomed to managing their own affairs, balked at England's attempt to increase its control. Massachusetts, and especially its main port of Boston, became an epicenter for colonial discontent.

Although Boston had a population of only sixteen thousand, Britain sent a huge force of four thousand troops to maintain order, which only served to fan the flames of unrest. When citizens protesting taxes dumped over three hundred chests of tea into Boston Harbor during the Tea Party of 1773, the British government was furious. Seeking to make an example of Massachusetts and send a warning to the other colonies, it passed what the Americans termed the 'Intolerable Acts.' Among other restrictions, these laws closed the Port of Boston and placed Massachusetts under strict British control.

However, rather than cowing the other colonies into quiet submission, the Intolerable Acts only served to unite them in common cause against the English. The colonies realized that if Massachusetts could be punished in such a draconian manner, any of them could face a similar fate in the future. The situation finally boiled over in 1775 outside of Boston when the British tried to capture a cache of colonial weapons at Lexington and Concord. When they were fired on by the Americans, the colonies' war of independence began.

The American Revolution:

At the outset of the conflict, British strategy was to contain and extinguish the rebellion in the New England region, specifically in Massachusetts and Boston. After being surprised by the hostilities at Lexington and Concord, the British retreated and regrouped in Boston, keeping control of the city with its substantial military presence. Although the Americans tried to surround the city by land, the Port of Boston and the powerful English Navy allowed the British to resupply themselves at will by sea.

Hoping to gain command of the high ground and the hills around the city, the British attacked American-held positions at Breed's Hill and Bunker Hill on June 17, 1775. The British won a hard-fought, though costly victory, with nineteen officers killed and over one thousand casualties (to the Americans' four hundred fifty).

In July, George Washington arrived to lead the American forces, and for the rest of 1775, the two sides were locked in a stalemate. In an attempt to break the deadlock, Henry Knox suggested that additional cannon be brought from recently captured Fort Ticonderoga in the Colony of New York. Washington agreed, and Knox led a detachment towards Ticonderoga in November. Knox and his men retrieved fifty cannons weighing over sixty tons, and in an amazing feat, pulled them through four hundred eighty kilometers of wilderness, in the dead of winter, back to Boston.

The cannons were placed on Dorchester Heights, overlooking the city, during

the night of March 4, 1776. The next morning, when British General William Howe saw what the American forces had accomplished, he remarked, "The rebels have done more in one night than my whole army would have done in a month." The artillery made both the British troops in Boston and its fleet in the harbor vulnerable to bombardment. Howe, realizing his position was untenable, evacuated the city, sailing with his troops and over one thousand British Loyalists to Halifax in Canada. The Americans would hold Boston for the remainder of the war.

At the same time as the siege of Boston, the Americans were also invading Canada. The Americans were convinced that they could easily dislodge the British from the relatively lightly garrisoned Colony of Quebec and they hoped that the French-speaking Canadians would join their cause. As early as 1774, overtures had been made by the Continental Congress to gain the support of French Canadians. The 1775 invasion was a two-pronged thrust. General Richard Montgomery took his forces north through New York and captured Montreal with little difficulty on November 13. Colonel Benedict Arnold led his men on an arduous trek through what is today Maine, and the two commanders joined forces outside the regional capital of Quebec City in December.

But while Montreal had fallen to the Americans easily, Quebec City would be a different story. The Governor of Quebec, Guy Carleton, had entrenched himself in the city and shored up its defenses. Montgomery, knowing that the enlistments of many of his militiamen were due to expire at the end of the year, attacked the city's defenses during a blizzard on December 31. The assault was a disaster. Montgomery was killed, Arnold injured, and over five hundred Americans were left dead, wounded, or captured. In comparison, the British suffered only nineteen killed or wounded in the melee. The Americans would remain in Canada until the spring of 1776, when disease and British reinforcements would compel them to retreat back into New York.

Although the Americans had hoped that significant numbers of French Canadians would join them in their fight, they were largely disappointed. While the French Canadians greatly outnumbered the British in Quebec and had no love for them, they were also leery of the Americans. One reason for this was that many Americans were overtly anti-Catholic. Another reason the French Canadians remained loyal to the British Crown was that many of the grievances they had harbored since the end of the French and Indian War had been addressed in the Quebec Act of 1774. This act of Parliament had guaranteed the French settlers' rights to practice Catholicism and hold government office. The

act also greatly expanded the borders of the Quebec Colony, tripling its size and extending it both southward to encompass the present-day Ohio Valley, and westward to present-day Minnesota. These lands had also been claimed by the Americans, so the French Canadians were concerned that an American victory could lead to a future reduction or partition of their colony. For many French Canadians, it made more sense to stay with the British and 'the devil they knew.'

Although he was embarrassed by the withdrawal from Boston, British General Howe would soon return to the American colonies. British strategy shifted to the goal of capturing New York City. New York was a key port and strategic base of operations due to its location between Boston and the American Congress' capital at Philadelphia. The British felt that by controlling New York City and the adjoining Hudson River, they could effectively 'cut the rebellion in half' by separating New England from the rest of the colonies. George Washington had surmised that New York would be the British's next target, so he went there immediately after Howe departed Boston. The American general did his best to shore up the area's defenses, but by July 1776, Howe and the British had arrived in one hundred thirty ships, landing a formidable invasion force on Staten Island. The first clash between the armies, known as the Battle of Long Island (or the Battle of Brooklyn Heights), was fought on August 27 and was the largest engagement of the entire war. In it, the British fielded twenty thousand soldiers, about twice as many as the Americans.

Knowing that he had numerical superiority, Howe's strategy was to attack the American front lines with half his forces and send the other half to outflank them. The plan worked perfectly, and the result was a calamity for the Americans. While the British suffered only four hundred killed, wounded, or missing, the Americans had three hundred killed, eight hundred wounded, and over one thousand taken captive. A large number of those captured were then sent to prison ships in New York Harbor, and due to the appalling conditions on them, many would never return.

But, fortunately for the remaining American soldiers, fog and bad weather allowed Washington and his men to slip across the East River to Manhattan before Howe could deliver what could have been a death blow to the revolution. Even after the weather cleared, Howe was slow to follow up his advantage. Hoping the horrendous defeat would make the Americans think twice about the rebellion, Howe met with American representatives John Adams and Benjamin Franklin on September 11 to negotiate a possible peace. However, nothing came of the talks.

So, springing back into action, Howe became determined to take Manhattan Island from the Americans. Washington was in an almost impossible situation. Manhattan was not only a large area to defend, but since the British Navy controlled the waters around the island, they could land wherever they chose. General Nathanael Greene, one of Washington's most trusted officers, suggested that the Americans burn New York rather than allowing it to fall into British hands. The Continental Congress, however, rejected this idea.

In a series of battles over the next two months, the British were able to easily capture the city and force the American Army completely out of Manhattan. Over three thousand more soldiers were taken captive by the British, joining their comrades on the prison ships floating off the coast.

By the end of 1776, many thought the colonial rebellion would soon be over. Washington's forces had fled into Pennsylvania and American morale was dangerously low. Large numbers of colonial soldiers were deserting daily, and many were planning to not renew their enlistments for the following year. Needing something to bolster the flagging spirits of his troops, Washington decided to go on the offensive. Across the Delaware River in New Jersey was the town of Trenton, garrisoned by fifteen hundred Hessians (German mercenaries employed by the British). Washington's plan was to attack early in the morning on December 26, hoping to catch the Hessians off guard after the Christmas holiday.

During the night, Washington and his army crossed the Delaware River in a scene later made iconic by painter Emanuel Leutze in 1851. Strong winds and a driving snowstorm caused delays and made the crossing arduous. But the wintry weather also concealed the Americans' subsequent march to Trenton and helped guarantee that few Hessians would be out patrolling. When they reached the town around 8 a.m., the Hessians were indeed caught by surprise. In fighting that lasted only about an hour, the Germans were routed, and the Americans achieved their greatest victory in the war to that point. While the Americans suffered only four killed and eight wounded (one of whom was future President James Monroe), the Hessians had forty killed, sixty-six wounded, and over nine hundred captured. The victory was an immense boost to American morale and convinced many of Washington's soldiers to re-enlist for 1777. Washington would follow up this victory a week later by winning another engagement at the Battle of Princeton.

As 1777 dawned, the next phase of Britain's strategy was to launch a multi-

directional attack through the Colony of New York. The main thrust of the invasion would come from General John Burgoyne, who would move south from Canada, while General Howe, still stationed in New York City, would proceed north up the Hudson River. The two armies were to rendezvous at Albany, with the goal of gaining control of the length of the Hudson. Doing this would accomplish Britain's objective of cutting New England off from the rest of the colonies. The British could then focus on crushing the isolated New Englanders and hopefully force an end to the rebellion.

Burgoyne left Canada with over nine thousand soldiers on June 20. He was initially successful, moving south along Lake Champlain and retaking Fort Ticonderoga in early July. However, as he continued south, the expedition bogged down and his supply lines became stretched thin. But Burgoyne stubbornly pressed on, determined to reach Albany. Little did he know, however, that Howe had changed his plans. Rather than marching north from Manhattan, Howe had decided to lead his forces south to capture the seat of the American Continental Congress at Philadelphia.

As Howe approached Philadelphia, the American government fled, and the British occupied the city on September 26. Howe had hoped that taking the American capital would end the revolution, but he was sorely mistaken. In addition, he had left Burgoyne with no support. By September, Burgoyne had marched as far as Saratoga, about sixty kilometers north of Albany.

During Burgoyne's campaign, the Americans employed strategies the British were neither expecting nor prepared for. For one, as Burgoyne advanced south, the Americans used Native American-style tactics, engaging in hit-and-run assaults and utilizing the cover of the surrounding wilderness. The British, who were used to European-style combat with armies lining up across from one another in open battlefields, were not ready for this style of warfare.

Also, American sharpshooters under leaders like Daniel Morgan targeted British officers, who were easy to identify because they were mounted and wore conspicuously decorated uniforms. The most prominent officer to fall was General Simon Fraser, picked off by one of Morgan's snipers. This incensed the British high command. Targeting officers was a breach of European military etiquette, and high-ranking British officers became rightly concerned that their own probability of injury or death had now greatly increased.

The Americans engaged Burgoyne's troops twice around Saratoga: at the Battle of Freeman's Farm on September 19, and the Battle of Bemis Heights on October 7. During the first battle, the British suffered about six hundred casualties, twice as many as the Americans. Still hopeful that a force from New

York City would arrive to support and rescue him, Burgoyne imprudently stayed in the area. As he waited, more Americans from the surrounding regions moved in, smelling blood in the water. On October 7, the British were defeated again, and realizing help was not coming, Burgoyne tried to flee north with his remaining forces. However, he was surrounded by the Americans under General Horatio Gates, and Burgoyne was forced to surrender his entire army on October 17, 1777. The victory at Saratoga was monumental and often viewed as the turning point in America's struggle for independence. Not only had the rebels won a convincing victory over the vaunted British regulars, but critically, the triumph persuaded the French to ally with the Americans, providing supplies, troops, and vital financial support.

France's entry into the war would cause many problems for the British. Up until that point, the British Navy had controlled the North American sea lanes, allowing the English to come and go as they pleased along the Atlantic coast. But now, French ships would engage the British not only in the Western Hemisphere, but also in the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean. These confrontations diverted soldiers and valuable resources that the British could have used against the Americans. Indeed, it was the threat of a French naval attack on New York City that forced the British to abandon Philadelphia in June 1778 to reinforce their defenses around New York's strategically important harbor. Following the debacle at Saratoga and his failure to support Burgoyne, General Howe resigned and was replaced by General Henry Clinton. When Clinton vacated Philadelphia on June 18, the American Continental Congress reclaimed the city a week later.

Meanwhile, American soldiers under George Washington had suffered through the punishing winter of 1777-78 in Pennsylvania. Unable to stop Howe from capturing Philadelphia, Washington made camp at Valley Forge, which was about thirty kilometers from the American capital. Lacking proper food and clothing, about two thousand out of Washington's twelve thousand-man force would die there due to disease and inclement weather.

However, it was also at Valley Forge that Washington's army would be truly molded into a cohesive fighting force. Prussian military commander Friedrich Wilhelm Baron von Steuben had been recruited by the Americans to join the revolutionary cause. He arrived at Valley Forge in February 1778 and was entrusted to train and drill the Continental troops. Von Steuben brought a new level of efficiency to the army and taught the soldiers how to more effectively fight in formation. By the summer of 1778, Washington's army had

become a force able to competently stand up to the British regulars.

Once Clinton settled into New York City, the conflict reached another deadlock in the north. As the fighting dragged on and public sentiment in England began to turn against the war and its spiraling costs, the British modified their strategy. The high command decided to put its focus on the southern colonies; specifically, Georgia and North and South Carolina. These were the most lucrative colonies because of their tobacco and rice exports. The British also became convinced that these areas harbored substantial numbers of Loyalists, although this turned out to be largely untrue.

Forays into Georgia led to the capture of the port city of Savannah on December 29, 1778, and of Augusta in June 1779. The British then set their sights on Charleston, South Carolina, the largest city in the South and the fourth largest city in the American Colonies. Clinton left New York with an armada of one hundred ships and over ten thousand soldiers, landing at Savannah. He then marched north with his army to Charleston and besieged the city. Clinton announced that any slaves that managed to escape and join the British would be freed after the war. Since over fifty percent of the population of South Carolina was enslaved, as word of Clinton's proclamation spread, many slaves seeking freedom flocked to his banner.

Charleston was defended by American General Benjamin Lincoln. Surrounded by the British and with no hope of escape, Lincoln was forced to surrender on May 12, 1780. With the victory, the English captured over five thousand soldiers and dealt a huge blow to the American Army in the South. The next month, Clinton returned to New York, leaving General Charles Cornwallis in charge of mopping up in the countryside. But although the British had captured the leading city of the South, the outpouring of Loyalist support they anticipated never really materialized. Much like with New York and Philadelphia, while the British were often able to maintain control in cities with their military presence, the population of the countryside was often hostile.

General Gates, who had received a lot of the credit for the American victory at Saratoga, was sent south to rally the remaining American forces in the region. However, on August 16, Gates' army was crushed in South Carolina by Cornwallis at the Battle of Camden. Although Gates' force of four thousand was almost twice as large as Cornwallis', many of the Americans were militiamen with little experience. Many had also been struck with dysentery just prior to the battle. When the British regulars charged with their bayonets, many in the militia broke and ran, leading to a rout. The Americans suffered nine hundred

killed and wounded, three times as many as the British. One thousand more Americans were captured. Gates fled the battlefield in disgrace and was replaced by General Greene.

But the Americans would learn from the disaster at Camden. To better evade Cornwallis and find enough food for his troops, Greene divided his forces, giving command of the other portion to Daniel Morgan. Cornwallis sent Lieutenant Colonel Banastre Tarleton to chase Morgan down. After many days of punishing marches, Tarleton caught up with Morgan on January 17, 1781, at Cowpens, South Carolina. But before engaging the British, Morgan laid a trap for the often-aggressive Tarleton. Placing his less-experienced militia in the center of his line, Morgan baited Tarleton into attacking the militia and committing to a full-frontal assault. As Tarleton's forces advanced, the plan was for the militia to fire two volleys and then retreat in seeming disarray, similar to the Battle of Camden. Thinking they had once again routed the Americans, Tarleton's men became undisciplined and rushed forward, pursuing the militia over a low-rising hill. But just out of sight over the top of the hillcrest, Morgan had placed some of his best Continental troops. As the British came over the hill, the militia wheeled around, and along with the Continentals, fired a volley and then charged. The result was devastating for the British. Of Tarleton's 1,150-man unit, over three hundred were killed or wounded and an additional six hundred were captured. Only Tarleton and about two hundred of his men were able to flee the battleground and escape.

Meanwhile, Greene was leading Cornwallis on a chase through the wilderness of the Carolinas, employing a version of the 'Fabian strategy.' This tactic was named after the Roman general and politician Quintus Fabius Maximus Verrucosus. Fabius used this strategy against the Carthaginian general Hannibal during the Second Punic War (218-201 B.C.E.). Hannibal had crossed the Alps and invaded Italy in 218 B.C.E., quickly crushing two Roman armies sent to repel him. Realizing the danger of engaging Hannibal's forces directly, and also knowing that Hannibal could not easily reinforce or resupply his army, Fabius sought to wear Hannibal down and eventually exhaust the Carthaginians through a series of skirmishes and delaying tactics. This strategy was ultimately successful, and Greene used a similar approach by pulling the pursuing Cornwallis into the swamps and backwoods, further and further away from his supply lines. Although Cornwallis won a tactical victory over Greene at the Battle of Guilford Courthouse on March 15, 1781, Greene and his more mobile army was able, for the most part, to stay out of pitched battles, to slowly wear down the British, and make it hard for Cornwallis to replace the soldiers he lost.

In the summer of 1781, Cornwallis received orders by Clinton to go to the Chesapeake area of Virginia to find a suitable place to construct a deep-water port for British ships. He chose Yorktown at the mouth of the York River. Meanwhile, George Washington had joined forces with French General Rochambeau outside of New York City. A French fleet, under Admiral de Grasse, was planning to sail north from the Caribbean to provide further support for the joint American and French forces. Washington wanted to attack the British at New York City, but the French preferred to go to Virginia. Eventually, Washington acquiesced. But before heading south, he ordered his men to construct army camps near New York to fool Clinton and give the appearance that an attack on Manhattan was imminent. Then, in August, Washington and Rochambeau began marching towards Yorktown.

De Grasse arrived first and defeated the British Navy in the Battle of the Chesapeake on September 5. Washington and Rochambeau arrived outside Yorktown at the end of September with a combined force of around seventeen thousand men. Cornwallis, who had about ten thousand troops, was now surrounded by Washington and Rochambeau by land, and by de Grasse on the sea. Cornwallis had sent messages to Clinton pleading for aid, and Clinton promised that five thousand reinforcements would depart from New York at the beginning of October. However, these troops were delayed, leaving Cornwallis alone to deal with the noose tightening around Yorktown. As the American and French troops destroyed and captured the defensive fortifications that the British had hastily constructed, Cornwallis knew his situation was hopeless. He surrendered his entire army on October 19, 1781.

The news of the Battle of Yorktown was met with jubilation in the American colonies and with utter shock in England. Yorktown would be the last major battle of the long, bloody conflict. The British, wearied by the expensive and protracted struggle, would initiate peace talks that would lead to the Treaty of Paris in 1783. The strategies that both sides employed during the war had met with varying levels of success. Perseverance and endurance had played no small role in helping the American Colonies, against the odds, win their independence and become the United States. Now came the challenge of building and keeping the new country together, forcing the fledgling nation to devise a whole new set of strategies in order to survive and thrive.

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