Why the British Lost the American Revolution

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Abstract

The reasons behind the British loss of the American colonies during the American Revolution remain a subject of debate among scholars. How could the most powerful maritime empire in the world lose to an underequipped and poorly trained army? The crux of the conundrum for King George III, the Prime Minister, Lord Frederick North, and members of Parliament in London was that they failed to properly grasp the political complexities in the colonies. This drove strategic errors, operational miscalculations, and ultimately, undermined confidence in leadership. This paper reviews six factors that help explain what went wrong in London in North America. Today, the British dilemma in North America would be categorized as a "wicked problem," or one in which there is no ideal solution, only varying solutions that might create other challenges.

Keywords: British, American Revolution, North America, leadership, communication, Cornwallis, British failure, policies

Por qué los británicos perdieron la revolución estadounidense

Resumen

Las razones detrás de la pérdida británica de las colonias estadounidenses durante la Revolución Estadounidense siguen siendo un tema de debate entre los académicos. ¿Cómo podría el imperio marítimo más poderoso del mundo perder ante un ejército mal equipado y mal entrenado? El quid del enigma para el rey Jorge III, el primer ministro Lord Frederick North y los miembros del Parlamento en Londres fue que no lograron comprender adecuadamente las complejidades políticas de las colonias. Esto generó errores estratégicos, errores de cálculo operativos y, en última instancia, socavó la confianza en el liderazgo. Este artículo revisa seis factores que ayudan a explicar lo que salió mal en Londres en América del Norte. Hoy en día, el dilema británico en América del Norte se categorizaría como un "problema perverso", o uno en el que no

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hay una solución ideal, solo soluciones variables que podrían crear otros desafíos.

Palabras clave: Británico, Revolución Americana, Norteamérica, liderazgo, comunicación, Cornwallis, fracaso británico, políticas

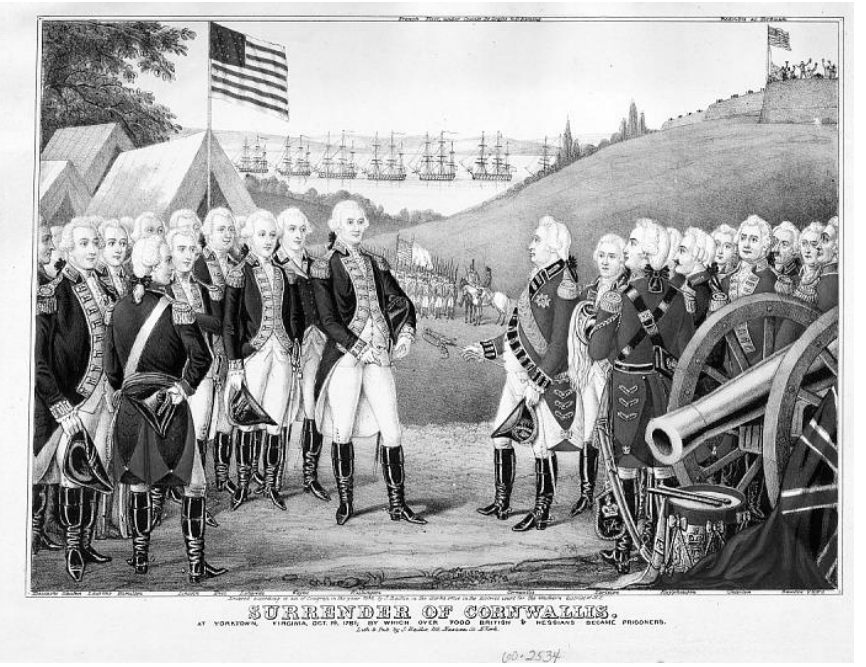
为何英国人在美国革命中战败

摘要

美国革命期间英国失去美国殖民地背后的原因仍然是学者辩论的主题。全世界最强大的海上帝国如何会败给装备不足和训练欠佳的军队？对国家乔治三世、英国首相、伯爵腓特烈·诺斯、以及伦敦议会成员而言，这个难题的关键在于，他们没有正确把握殖民地的政治复杂性。这导致了战略失误、操作计算错误、并最终削弱了对领导力的信心。本文审视了6个因素，这些因素帮助解释了伦敦方面在北美出了什么差错。如今，北美的英国困境能被归类为一个“棘手问题”，或一个不存在完美解决措施（只能产生其他挑战）的问题。

关键词：英国人，美国革命，北美，领导力，传播，康沃利斯（Cornwallis），英国战败，政策

The reasons behind the British loss of its American colonies during the American Revolution is still the subject of debate among scholars. How could the most powerful maritime empires in the world lose to an underequipped and poorly trained army? The criticisms began even before the war concluded, focusing on the actions of both military and civilian leadership. As historian Dan Morrill pointed out, the nascent American army had no professional military organization, no manufacturing to speak of, challenging the “greatest military power in the world. Great Britain had an army of 50,000 strong, and the greatest navy afloat.”[1] However, this is a misplaced criticism. King George III, the Prime Minister, Lord Frederick North, and members of Parliament sent some of the best military leaders to North America, though a few Admirals were too far along in their careers, and entrenched in antiquated tactics, to provide any meaningful support.



Surrender of Cornwallis. Print of Cornwallis handing his sword to Washington. The American troops stand on the left, the British on the right. The French fleet and the wall of the fort at Yorktown are in the background. In the right foreground are a cannon and a drum. Harry T. Peters "America on Stone" Lithography Collection, National Museum of American History.[2]

The problem in North America was complex, and British disadvantages plentiful, with London's errors only exacerbating the situation. Acclaimed historian Robert Middlekauff captured the British dilemma well. He writes, "The British faced problems in the war unlike any they had ever faced, and as rich as their past was, it furnished only limited guidance . . . The war was a civil war against a people in thirteen colonies who gained determination as they fought and sacrificed."[3] Lord North and the American Secretary of State for America, Lord George Germain, attempted to fight a traditional eighteenth-century war as they did in previous wars in Europe, though they discovered that North America was very different. It is true that several British officers fought on the continent earlier during the Seven Years' War (1754-1763), though most retained their European conventions of warfare. General George Washington, along with most Continental generals, sought to engage the British conventionally, though the real struggle was in rural areas and backcountry, where irregular partisan militia harassed and wore down the British army. This type of engagement, *petite guerre,* or literally "small war," was elusive and transient, as small guerrilla units appeared and disappeared quickly and unpredictably concentrating on small guerrilla units that would appear, and then disappear

quickly. The British were unprepared for this type of warfare. This generated significant problems for British commanders, dictating tactical changes in the British army. The adjustments were gradual, though the transition from "old world" to "new world" warfare took place in the British ranks during the first few years of the war.[4] However, the partisan militia was a conundrum that the British never fully had an answer for, other than dispatching cavalry officers such as the infamous Lieutenant Colonel Banastre Tarleton.

Today, the British dilemma in North America would be categorized as a "wicked problem," or one in which there is no ideal solution, only varying solutions that might create other challenges. The crux of the conundrum for leaders in London was that they failed to properly grasp the political complexities in the colonies. This drove strategic errors, operational miscalculations, and ultimately, undermined confidence in leadership.[5] Six broad areas must be addressed to frame a discussion of what went wrong for the British in the American colonies. They are:

1. The complexity of fighting and sustaining an army at a distance
2. Communication across the Atlantic
3. Assumptions about the scale and nature of the insurrection
4. Policies framed to shape colonies behavior
5. Structure of the British government, or command and control
6. Financial challenges for England

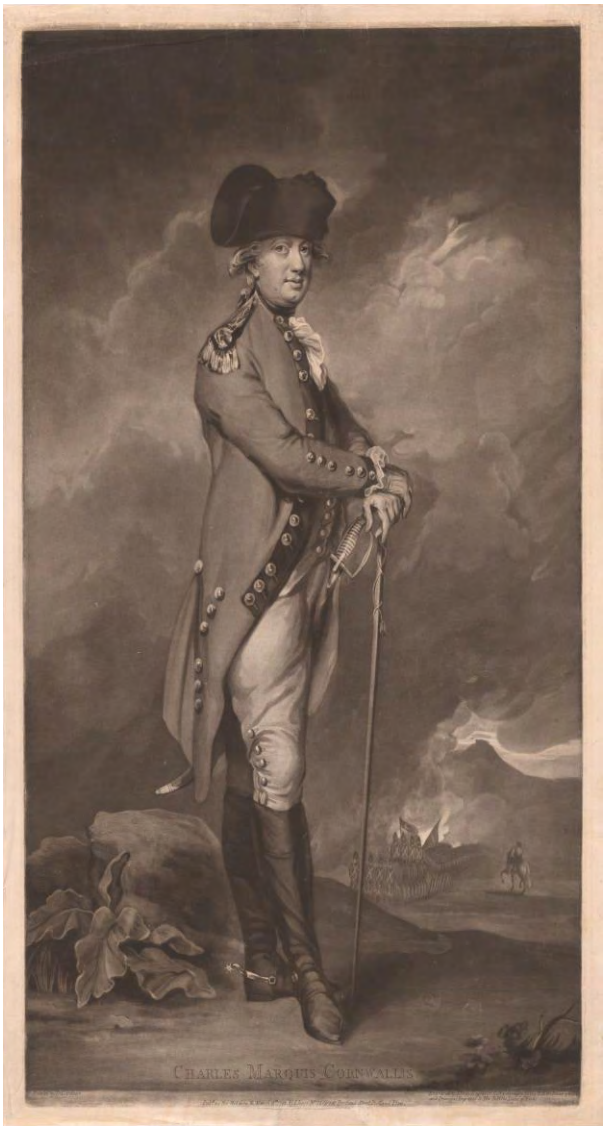
This essay will elaborate on each of these points to illustrate the complexity and multifaceted challenges behind the British failure in the American colonies. A conclusion will capture the British dilemma and argue that they cut their losses, expanding their empire while eliminating the unsolvable "American problem."

The distance between Boston and England is roughly 3,200 nautical miles, requiring a minimum of six weeks of travel by ship, perhaps longer due to inclement weather and currents. Most of the military supplies for the British army were shipped from various ports in England and Ireland. They did not come from the colonies. However, there were some supplies procured from the colonies such as hay, though this was largely to supplement shipments from the mother country. In 1775, London established contracts for seven companies to supply a thousand tons of food a month to provision the garrisons in North America.[6] They typically fell short, delivering supplies in poor condition, improperly sealed and packaged, leading to spoilage. It was common for supply ships to arrive at American ports filled with rodents that had devoured and ruined the shipments. It was also typical for ships to arrive with moldy or weevil-infested bread, rotten potatoes and vegetables, and dead livestock. For example, in 1775, supply ships arrived in Boston from Ireland and England with significant damage; there were 5,200 barrels of unusable flour among other spoilage.[7] British contractors in America were charged with maintaining a six-month stockpile of reserve in

Boston, though they rarely met the requirement. It was typical for the British army to have no more than thirty days supply consistently throughout the war.[8] Sustaining the army was one challenge; moving it was even more of a logistics nightmare. Transportation of supplies, equipment, and troops was always difficult. To cite one example, General William Howe calculated that to move his thirty-two regiments outside of Boston, he would need 3,662 horses, with 50 tons of hay and oats *daily*, which was significantly more than the British had on hand.[9] This was an annoyance for British officers throughout the war in North America, generating complaints from many, while providing validation for requests to delay campaigns. For example, General Sir Henry Clinton wrote about the challenges of his campaigns after the war. He often mentioned provision shortages as the cause of delaying operations.[10]

The distance across the Atlantic also compounded communication problems. Instructions would arrive months too late, requests for troops for upcoming campaigns would arrive, while troops were dispatched only to miss the narrow campaign window in the north. Due to the changing nature of war in the colonies, timely communication was crucial to coordination across the Atlantic. As Michael Pearson notes, "[T]he appalling communications problem was the one aspect that helped whittle down the advantages of the superior British strength and resources."[11] The British maintained the most powerful navy in the world, though they did not have the largest army. They had to use their limited supply of men sparingly and wisely, which was difficult, considering the vast coastline of North America. The net result was that orders and reports were always months after the fact and could scarcely keep up with the rapidly evolving requirements on the battlefield.

Misplaced assumptions regarding the number of Loyalists who supported King George III was a consistent problem throughout the war. After years of frustration in the northern and middle colonies, reports poured into London about a large number of Loyalists in the south. This led Lord George Germain, British Secretary of State for America, to direct what ultimately became a disastrous attempt to conquer the southern colonies. His "Americanization" of the war meant that loyal Americans would maintain security and policing duties, while the British regulars would clear towns of rebels. The soldiers would eliminate or remove the rebels from an area to ensure that the local authorities could maintain control. Then, they would move to another region. The British finally realized that the large number of Loyalists who were in the southern colonies failed to materialize. This prompted General Lord Charles Cornwallis to abandon the Carolinas for Virginia (after losing a large part of his army during the Battle of Guilford Courthouse). As O'Shaughnessy observes, "Indeed, loyalties were never static and they continued to change, but to the disadvantage of the British."[12] The British failed to grasp that that actions conducted "in the name of the King" continually eroded and shifted supporters away from the Crown.



General Charles Cornwallis, 1st Marquis and 2nd Earl Cornwallis, 1738–1805. Artist: John Jones, 1745–1797. The National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution. Gift of Monroe H. Fabian, 1793.[13]

Cornwallis learned too late that the militia, although not as dependable as many Continental officers would have liked, were effective in their way because they were adept at moving in remote regions in ways a conventional army did not. He would conclude that militia were "the most troublesome and predictable elements in a confusing war."[14] The militia and partisan leaders eroded the confidence of Tory citizens and challenged the British to protect their loyal subjects. Even worse, many Loyalists were determined to exact revenge against their Patriot neighbors. This violence produced vicious retal-

iation on both sides.[15] This factor ultimately undermined all British efforts for stability in America. This drove uncommitted locals to the Patriot cause.

The structure of the British government also greatly hindered the flow of information. In London, the British Secretary of War was responsible for the army, yet he was not invited to key cabinet meetings during discussions of policy in North America.[16] This created a "fog of war" that was disastrous for planning strategy in America. There were other issues with complex and opaque reporting and sharing information. Intelligence was not shared among cabinet members. Some leaders were not rigorous in capturing the intelligence of potential enemy fleets. For example, Lord Sandwich, the First Lord of the Admiralty, was not aggressive when it came to intelligence regarding the movement of the French Navy. This information was vital to operations for London, given that the few ships they had were stretched around the globe, requiring close and exacting stewardship. This was a consistent problem, undermining the overall British efforts in all colonies. For example, Sandwich allowed French warships to leave without receiving alerts when they went to sea for the West Indies.[17] At best, coordination among the various departments of the eighteenth-century British government was fractured and grossly ineffective.[18] There were divergent opinions and a lack of communication among these departments, which created a fog of strategic priorities that might vary by the campaign season. Under the most ideal conditions, these challenges would have hampered the best military leaders.

The overall policy of taxing Americans centered around generating revenue in the colonies, though what was collected in the colonies was insignificant. The real value of the American colonies was a lucrative trade business. Parliament and King George III overlooked this to force the colonies to submit to their authority. Edmund Burke, one of the most eloquent speakers in Parliament, argued against the folly of taxes when the real profit was in trade. He highlighted the growth of exports from Great Britain to North American and the West Indies, which rose from £500,000 in 1704 to nearly £5,000,000 in 1772.[19] His argument fell on deaf ears. Merchants in London also began to complain in 1775, when exports to North America dropped to £220,000, because they had been as high as £3 million the previous year.[20] The politicians did not listen and were intent on making the rebel Americans follow their policies.

Policies designed to discourage rebellion isolated those who were uncommitted and pushed colonists to the rebel cause. Furthermore, the British abandoned areas and could not protect Loyalists in the country or once they left key cities. As just one of many examples where British policy worked against them, we can look at England's efforts in the Carolinas. For example, Lieutenant Colonel Lord Francis Rawdon led the Royal Volunteers in the Carolinas and began experiencing issues of desertion. His energetic response was to issue a proclamation that any civilian

assisting his soldiers would be flogged and sent to the West Indies.[21] Rawdon's harsh proclamation, naturally, worked against him, turning more people who had been neutral against the British, and also further accelerated the desertion of his men. This was true in all the colonies, reflecting misguided assumptions from Loyalist leaders as well as the British. Policy undermined their cause, driving more of the population into the arms of the rebels.

The greatest challenge with British policies in the colonies was rooted in the fact that for almost a century, the British maintained a "hands-off" approach to affairs in North America. The colonies became more independent and less interested in centralized authority. This was clear long before the American Revolution, as all colonies voted against the Albany Plan of 1754. This almost foreshadowed their rebellion against the authority of Parliament. The type of people who came to America is important. People left Great Britain for the colonies to strike out on their own. They were more independently minded than many other groups, which stemmed from their past and how the British colonized new territory. Britain's method of colonization was very "laissez-faire," almost setting the stage by allowing colonies to act independently. The British colonies in America were formed by unique groups of people who were exposed to the violence of the wilderness, while also trapped in an "ideologically polarized period in Western history."[22] This translated to an independent spirit and Lockean notions that rulers were beholden to the ruled. This sense of self-governance lasted until 1775, when the British attempts to yoke the colonies backfired, with disastrous consequences.

While criticism of Britain's failure during the American Revolution is anachronistic, it is worthy to at least review the thoughts of the British who fought in North America to better understand their perspective. Charles Stedman, a former British officer during the war, serving most notably under General Charles Cornwallis, wrote a history of the war, *The History of the Origin, Progress, and Termination of the American War in Two Volumes*, published in 1794. In it, Stedman claims the British lost the war for a few reasons. He wrote that "the narrow views of ministers at home[,] and the misconduct of certain commanders abroad, through a serious of pusillanimity, procrastination, discord, and folly" generated the downfall of England in North America.[23] Finger-pointing was common, and he goes further to refer to the British minister, without naming him. He appears to point the finger at Lord George Germain, writing that he did not possess the genius required to solve the problem, though he does admit that Great Britain had several disadvantages.[24] As John Pancake succinctly pointed out, one cannot blame Germain for the failure of any specific campaign or even the war, without recognizing that it had to be conducted within the stringent confines of British politics.[25] Based on limited communication and incomplete records, it is not hard to see why Stedman did not have a more complete

picture of the events that he was caught up in. Some notes and correspondence would not be located and published until the nineteenth century. However, he did recognize that the problem was complex.

Great Britain did not have naval resources due to financial constraints imposed by the Seven Years' War. Consequently, they had to make cuts to their navy, which impacted English abilities to patrol the American coast. London was accustomed to conquering islands. This was well within their wheelhouse as a naval power. However, the small English army was not sufficient to occupy large territories (or land masses) that required significant troop assets. To put it differently, as historian Andrew O'Shaughnessy succinctly states, "Britain had an army of conquest, but not an army of occupation."[26] Throughout the conflict, England could capture major cities, though smaller towns and the backcountry required significantly more troops. Similarly, due to financial cuts, the British navy was reduced after the Seven Years' War, with the "rebuild" not completed until 1778; even then, the lack of vessels meant that blocks were drastically ineffective along the vast American coast.[27] To exercise the authority of Parliament, England killed the "golden goose," which was British trade with North America, while incurring significant debt in the process.

The sheer scale of the distance across the Atlantic exacerbated logistics support for the army, while greatly hampering communication between leaders in London and those in North America. Throughout much of the war in North America, the British army often did not have more than thirty-day supplies, dictating that they forage the land and take what they needed from local farmers when they elected to go on a campaign. This worked against them. The structure of the British government obfuscated clear and concise objectives, while the organization of Parliament meant that some key leaders were not involved in meetings, which would have enhanced communication. England was still recovering from the Seven Years' War, and not in a financial position to field a large army and scale up the construction of precious and expensive ships of the line.

O'Shaughnessy rightly concluded that British leaders were mistakenly held responsible for England's defeat, being criticized for either being too bold or overly cautious. However, this is misplaced. London failed, "not as a result of incompetence and blunder, but because of insufficient resources, the unanticipated lack of Loyalist support, and the popularity of the Revolution."[28] This might be summarized as financial shortfalls, bad assumptions, and policies that drove the popularity of the revolution. Also important and crucial were three other elements. The distance and scale of waging and supporting a war on the other side of the Atlantic, compounded by communication problems, exacerbated by the structure of the British government, must be added to O'Shaughnessy's list. He also shrewdly noted that the men who lost North America also retained Canada, grew the Empire in India, and retained key

possessions around the globe.[29] France and Spain did not get much from the treaty because of British victories late in the war in the West Indies, India, and at Gibraltar.[30] The winners were America and England. The most important issue to England was ensuring its dominance over the maritime domain. All countries involved in the Treaty of Paris of 1783 reaffirmed English rights to stop and inspect neutral ships, the basis for their economic warfare, ensuring they maintained the balance of power around the globe.[31] With a hint at conducting a war against a large population, Stedman admits that no contemporary army would have been successful "in a country where the people are tolerably united."[32] At the time, even the British realized that the problem in America was wicked.

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Notes

1 Dan L. Morrill, *Southern Campaigns of the American Revolution* (Baltimore: The Nautical & Aviation Publishing, 1993), 15.

2 Source: https://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/search/object/nmah_324858.

3 Robert Middlekauff, *The Glorious Cause: The American Revolution: 1763-1789* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 595.

4 Stephen Brumwell, *Redcoats: The British Soldier and War in the Americas, 1755-1763* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 6.

5 Middlekauff, *The Glorious Cause*, 597.

6 Rick Atkinson, *The British Are Coming: The War for America, Lexington to Princeton, 1775-1777* (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 2019), Kindle, loc. 7112.

7 Ibid., loc. 2869.

8 Ibid., loc. 2849.

9 As quoted in Atkinson, *The British Are Coming*, loc. 2849.

10 William B. Willcox, ed., *The American Rebellion: Sir Henry Clinton's Narrative of His Campaigns, 1775-1782, with an Appendix of Original Documents* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954). There are many examples, specifically the 1780 Chesapeake and Carolinas Campaign; see pg. 220.

11 Michael Pearson, *Those Damned Rebels: The American Revolution as Seen Through British Eyes* (Boston: Da Capo Press, 1972), 10.

12 Andrew Jackson O'Shaughnessy, *The Men Who Lost America: British Leadership, the American Revolution, and the Fate of the Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 355.

13 Source: https://npg.si.edu/object/npg_S_NPG.85.291?destination=edan-search/default_search%3Freturn_all%3D1%26edan_q%3DGeneral%2520Charles%2520Cornwallis%252C%25201st%2520Marquis%2520and%25202nd%2520Earl%2520Cornwallis%252C%2520%26edan_fq%255B0%255D%3Dmedia_usage%253A%2522CC0%2522.

14 John Shy, *A People Numerous and Armed: Reflections on the Military Struggle for American Independence*, Rev. Ed. (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1990), 237.

15 O'Shaughnessy, *The Men Who Lost America,* 355.

16 Ibid., 23.

17 Barbara Tuchman, *The First Salute: A View of the American Revolution* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1988), 149.

18 O'Shaughnessy, *The Men Who Lost America*, 357.

19 Ibid., 56.

20 Atkinson, *The British Are Coming*, Kindle, loc. 3595.

21 Ibid., 121.

22 Shy, *A People Numerous and Armed*, 274.

23 Charles Stedman, *The History of the Origin, Progress, and Termination of the American War in Two Volumes vol.1, 1794* Gale Reprint (New York: Creative Media Partners, 2012), 447.

24 Ibid., 447-448.

25 John S. Pancake, *1777: The Year of the Hangman* (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 1977), 226.

26 O'Shaughnessy, *The Men who Lost America*, 353.

27 Ibid., 355.

28 Ibid., 253.

29 bid., 355.

30 Alan Taylor, "Global Revolutions," in the *American Revolution: A World War*, David K. Allison & Larrie D. Ferreiro, Eds. (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books, 2018), 30.

31 Ibid., 49.

32 Stedman, *The History of the Origin, Progress, and Termination of the American War vol 2*, p 449.