Saratoga: The Turning Point of the American Revolution

Jim Dick

The American Revolution was more than just a civil war between the rebels in Great Britain's North American colonies along the Atlantic seaboard and Great Britain. The conflict eventually escalated into a vast worldwide war between Great Britain and her traditional adversaries, France, Spain, and the Netherlands who allied with the American rebels. While no country aided the American rebel colonists at first, their victory in the Saratoga campaign resulted in a shift to recognition by Britain's continental foes who saw an opportunity to capture territory of their own and humble the arrogance of Great Britain. The loss of a British army in the Saratoga campaign was the decisive factor which caused France to enter the American Revolution, thus transforming the conflict from a civil war to an international war, which was the only way the colonies were able to gain their independence.

As armed rebellion began between Great Britain and the American rebels in 1775, it was apparent that the British vastly outgunned the Americans. Fortunately, the French did surreptitiously send arms to the Americans early in 1777, replacing much of the losses incurred during the 1776 campaign season.[1] Still, the Americans were chronically short of artillery power as they would be throughout the war. The campaign season of 1776 had resulted in the capture of New York City and the entire colony of New Jersey. The British had driven General George Washington, commander of the Continental Army, completely across the Delaware River by the end of 1776. Only a daring raid launched on Christmas evening that resulted in the capture of the British garrisons of Princeton and Trenton in late December salvaged any hope of victory for the Americans.

As the campaign season of 1777 dawned, General Washington had two problems. He knew the British were sending a force from Canada under General John Burgoyne whose mission was to drive south, take Fort Ticonderoga, and meet General William Howe's force in Albany. Washington's army could not move north unless Howe's army moved from New York City; otherwise, Pennsylvania would be vulnerable to an invading British force under Howe. The

state of Washington's army was such that he had to avoid a decisive battle with the British as it would favor the British Army overwhelmingly.

This left an army under the command of General Horatio Gates to defend the northern area against General Burgoyne's southward driving British force. Everyone on both sides expected Howe to drive north along the Hudson River to link up with Burgoyne's army which would effectively cut New England off from the rest of the colonies. Instead, Howe led his army out in an attempt to force a decisive battle with Washington's Continentals and took Philadelphia, the rebel capital. Burgoyne's force was left on its own to smash Gates' army.

General John Burgoyne, commander of the British force coming south from Canada, was an aggressive officer. At the same time, he was the typical product of the British officer corps. He liked his luxuries even on campaign. To this end, he brought his mistress and thirty carts of personal goods on the campaign despite the desperate need of the wagons to haul military supplies his army needed.[2] Burgoyne was a legendary gambler as well. His campaign would be no different. He made his plans with the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Lord George Germain, a man the British Army had cashiered in 1759 and who had won his post through political means.[3] Between these two men, they planned a campaign that failed to take into account many factors which most British commanders would continue to ignore throughout the entire war.

Burgoyne's first mistake was his failure to understand the terrain and the challenges it would present to his campaign. The sheer size of the colonies repeatedly frustrated the British in the war as military planners in London failed to comprehend the distances involved. Mistaken assumptions about the campaign distance left Burgoyne with a supply chain stretched out over miles; he was simply unable to defend it. The second flaw was overestimating the number of British Loyalists, or Tories, that would join and support Burgoyne's invasion force. During the war, Lord Germain continually imagined Loyalists everywhere in the colonies, but they often failed to materialize.[4] The third flaw in the campaign was in splitting Burgoyne's forces into two separate commands and expecting them to accomplish their objectives, and then to link up on the Hudson River.

This second force, led by Lieutenant Colonel Barry St. Leger, was too small and depended too heavily upon expected Tories and Mohawk Indians to achieve its goals. While Burgoyne went south along the Lake Champlain route, St. Leger was supposed to sail across Lake Ontario and then strike east, take the

dilapidated ruin of old Fort Stanwix, and drive along the Mohawk River valley to the Hudson River. Instead, St. Leger and his force suffered a loss in a fierce battle at Oriskany which discouraged his fickle Mohawk allies who had expected an easy fight.[5] St. Leger's force would fail to achieve any of its goals and never recovered from the almost complete defection of the Mohawks once they were fed disinformation by a trick of the American General Benedict Arnold. Arnold sent a condemned crazy man into the British camp with a wild story about numerous Americans preparing to attack the British.

This trick played upon the Mohawk's respect for insane people who they thought were touched by the gods. They never doubted the babbling man, Han Yost, or his story of 3,000 Americans led by Arnold that were about to attack them.[6] The Mohawks panicked and fled, ransacking the camp as they left. The British and Tories followed them as well. Arnold was able to capture St. Leger's supplies and cannon ending the threat from the west.

Burgoyne and Howe were unaware of this development. As it was, Burgoyne won a major victory at Fort Ticonderoga without a fight. The French had constructed this fort prior to the Seven Years' War. Its original purpose was to guard against an invasion force going into Canada. The British had allowed the fort to fall into disrepair, and Benedict Arnold and Ethan Allen's Green Mountain Boys seized the fort early in the war. It was supposed that with the repairs to the fort, it would guard against an invasion force coming from Canada. Instead, the fort's commander realized that the fort was wide open to a bombardment from a nearby hill. Unable to defend the fort and the hill with the troops he had, the American commander abandoned the fort when Burgoyne's army arrived.[7]

Fortunately for the Americans, the terrain between Fort Ticonderoga and the Hudson River was a wilderness with few roads. What roads and bridges there were, General Gates had woodsmen destroy. General Horatio Gates was a former British officer who had two advantages over Burgoyne that he used to great effect. One was that he knew Burgoyne's character as a gambler and anticipated that Burgoyne would continually gamble on victory despite any setbacks.[8] The second advantage lay in the elongated supply lines of the British. Burgoyne would not be able to reestablish them if they were cut. In this case, the battle suited Gates who assumed a defensive nature and waited for Burgoyne's army to arrive.

One of the biggest blunders of the British during the war helped the American effort. Instead of sending his army, or at least a significant force up the

Hudson River to link up with Burgoyne, General Howe decided to attack and capture Philadelphia. Once Howe boarded his troops and ships in July of 1777 and sailed to the Delaware River to attack Pennsylvania and Philadelphia, Washington was free to deploy the American forces accordingly.[9] This allowed American militia troops from New England to support Gates and the Northern Command since Howe's forces were committed in Pennsylvania. Burgoyne and his invasion force would be unsupported, although Burgoyne still thought Howe would send a force to Albany when Burgoyne's army approached the town.

After Burgoyne reached the Hudson, the real fighting began. Baron Friedrich von Riedesel led the Hessians, who composed part of the British force. His wife, Baroness Frederika von Riedesel, accompanied the invasion force as it made its way south. Her journal gave an excellent account of the day-to-day life in the British camp as well as an observation of General Burgoyne himself. According to the Baroness, the general spent a great deal of his time with his mistress and their champagne.[10] Burgoyne's delays kept consuming his supplies and once the fighting started, he ran through them quickly.

Burgoyne's army fought its first major battle at Bennington. They sent a foraging party of Hessians to capture much needed horses and a rumored Continental powder magazine there. Instead, this foraging party ran into General John Stark and his New Hampshire militia who delivered a crushing defeat to the Hessians. Another Hessian force they sent in relief met the same fate. Only darkness enabled some of the Hessian force to escape. That battle cost Burgoyne over one thousand men dead or captured by the Americans, and gave the American militia a much needed victory. The Saratoga campaign was one of the few times when the American militia fought extremely well during the Revolution. In this instance, they were fighting on their own ground with their own leader; often not the case.

Following Bennington, Burgoyne's main body continued onward trying to close with the American army and force battle. Gates refused to fight until he could gain an edge over the British. Instead, he sent out the sharpshooting riflemen of General Daniel Morgan's Virginia Regiment to harass the British. Daily, the British continued to lose men to these unorthodox tactics. Finally, they fought Battle of Freeman's Farm on September 19. Morgan's riflemen took a deadly toll of British officers and artillerymen. The battle seesawed back and forth across the

field throughout the day. By nightfall the Americans fell back, but the British had clearly lost the battle. They lost over six hundred irreplaceable men while the Americans had only sixty-five known dead.[11]

The balance of forces had drastically swung in the Americans' favor. Militiamen poured into the American camp while Burgoyne's unreliable Indian allies deserted him. The situation had grown grim for the British. The British troops in New York City, over seven thousand of them, made one raid up the Hudson River, but their timid commander, General Sir Henry Clinton, was too fearful of a possible flank attack by American troops and refused to drive further north, thus leaving Burgoyne's army to their fate.[12]

On October 7, Burgoyne moved to attack. Outnumbered, the British fought valiantly under one of their best generals, Simon Fraser, until Arnold and Morgan ordered him deliberately shot. Once Fraser fell, the British line began to crumble. Arnold, who Gates had been relieved of command earlier in the day, disobeyed orders and dashed about furiously on the battlefield committing and exhorting the American regiments to victory. Wounded in the leg, Arnold's bravery carried the day for the Americans who completely routed the British.[13] With this loss, the British had lost over half of their invasion force.

Burgoyne also had supply difficulties which had been ignored in his erstwhile gamble on victory. He simply did not have enough cartage to carry a large amount of critical supplies. That left him dependent on a consistent supply route which the Americans cut off following the second Saratoga battle; the Battle of Bemis Heights. His army was still capable of fighting its way back to Fort Ticonderoga, and General Riedesel and the other British generals prepared to do so. Instead, Burgoyne inexplicably halted the retreat to entertain himself at the mansion of the former American commander, General Philip Schuyler.[15]

Figure 1 *Surrender of General Burgoyne.* Oil on canvas by John Trumbull, 1821. Rotunda, US Capital.

While he delayed, the American militia continued to pour into the area until the British were outnumbered three to one.

Following a British council of war, Burgoyne vacillated hoping that some relief from the south would come, but none materialized. Finally he agreed to surrender his army to the Americans on October 17, 1777. Even with this victory, the Continental Army faced major problems. General Gates refused to send regiments loaned to his command by General Washington back to Pennsylvania where they were desperately needed.[16] Instead, he did not even bother to notify his commander, but instead directly reported to Congress on his victory.[17]

The Conway Cabal against Washington would later implicate Gates. Washington and the Continental Army, who Howe's force had brushed aside as it took Philadelphia at the Battle of Brandywine, counterattacked and fought a dynamic battle against the British at Germantown, actually driving the British from the battlefield before a series of mistakes and communication breakdowns caused the Americans to retreat.[18] One German officer present at the battle exclaimed that he had just seen, "something I have never seen before, namely the English in full flight."[19]

This battle, significant to many European military observers as displaying great promise for the Continental Army, was coupled with the amazing American victory at Saratoga by the American ambassador to the French court in Versailles, Benjamin Franklin. Even before the Declaration of Independence, the Continental Congress had secretly created a Committee of Correspondence. Its mission was to seek out foreign aid and support.[20] To that end, they dispatched Silas Deane, the first American representative to France. Humiliated by the losses of the Seven Year's War, France, had a foreign minister, the Comte de Vergennes, who wanted to strike back at the British. The French aided the Americans quietly, even allowing American privateers to use French ports, which stretched the Royal Navy into an Atlantic wide sea war it was not prepared to fight.[21]

Once the news of Saratoga reached Benjamin Franklin, he used it as evidence, along with the daring attack by Washington at Germantown, that the United States could win the Revolution. He also dangled the Carlisle Commission, a British attempt at a negotiated settlement with the Americans, as more proof that the British could lose the war.[22] The French fears of an Anglo-American reconciliation led the French into signing a treaty of alliance with the United States in February, 1778. The American Revolution, which had started out as a civil war between the Thirteen Colonies in North America versus their overlord,

Great Britain, had become a worldwide war which then threatened Great Britain and its colonies across the globe. When Spain and the Netherlands entered the conflict the following year, British forces were stretched too thin.

As a result, when a combined French and American army and naval blockade forced the surrender of General Charles Earl Cornwallis's army at Yorktown in 1781, the British realized they had lost the conflict. Peace was negotiated in 1783. Before Saratoga, the American rebels were barely hanging onto their newly declared freedom, suffering two years of almost complete defeats and the losses of both New York City and Philadelphia. After Saratoga, the Americans were able to secure foreign allies and expand the conflict beyond North America. The Saratoga campaign, ill planned and ill executed by the primary British commanders involved, turned out to be the strategic victory that ultimately secured the independence of the United States of America in the American Revolution.

Notes

1. John S. Pancake, *1777: The Year of the Hangman* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1977), 79.

2. Fred J. Cook, *Dawn Over Saratoga* (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, 1973), 5.

3. John R. Elting, *The Battles of Saratoga* (Monmouth Beach: Philip Freneau Press, 1977), 14.

4. Ibid., 21.

5. Ibid., 38.

6. Cook, *Dawn Over Saratoga,* 87.

7. John Ferling, *Almost a Miracle: The American Victory in the War of Independence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 220.

8. Cook, *Dawn Over Saratoga,* 6.

9. General George Washington, "Washington's General Orders, September 5, 1777," *The American Revolution, 1763-1783,* http://www.loc.gov (accessed July 17, 2010).

10. Baroness Frederika von Riedesel, *Baroness von Riedesel and the American Revolution: Journal and Correspondence of a Tour of Duty, 1776-1783,* trans. Marvin L. Brown (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1965).

11. Cook, *Dawn Over Saratoga,* 132.

12. Cook, *Dawn Over Saratoga,* 152.

13. Elting, *Battles of Saratoga,* 62.

14. Pancake, *The Year of the Hangman,* 189.

15. Cook, Dawn Over Saratoga, 175.

16. General George Washington, "George Washington to Horatio Gates, October 30, 1777," *The American Revolution, 1763-1783*, http://www.loc.gov (accessed July 19, 2010).

17. James Flexner, *Washington: The Indispensable Man* (New York: Back Bay Books, 1969), 109.

18. Ibid., 106.

19. Robert K. Wright, Jr., *The Continental Army* (Washington D.C.: Center of Military History, 1983), 118.

20. Pancake, *Year of the Hangman,* 214.

21. Ibid., *215.*

22. Gordon S. Wood, *The American Revolution* (New York: Modern Library, 2002), 82.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Cook, Fred J. *Dawn over Saratoga: The Turning Point of the Revolutionary War.* Garden City: Doubleday & Company, 1973.

Elting, John R. *The Battles of Saratoga.* Monmouth Beach: Philip Freneau Press, 1977.

Ferling, John. *Almost a Miracle: The American Victory in the War of Independence.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Flexner, James Thomas. *Washington: The Indispensable Man.* New York: Back Bay Books, 1969.

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

Riedesel, Baroness Frederika von. *Baroness von Riedesel and the American Revolution: Journal and Correspondence of a Tour of Duty, 1776-1783.* Translated by Marvin L. Brown. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1965.

Washington, General George. "George Washington to Horatio Gates, October 30, 1777." *The American Revolution, 1763-1783,* http://www.loc.gov (accessed July 19, 2010).

_____. "Washington's General Orders, September 5, 1777." *The American Revolution, 1763-1783.* http://www.loc.gov (accessed July 17, 2010).

Wood, Gordon S. *The American Revolution.* New York: Modern Library, 2002.

Wright, Jr., Robert K. *The Continental Army.* Washington D.C.: Center of Military History, United States Army, 1983.