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The Strategies and Politics of the American War of Independence

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Abstract

Political-military strategies in the American War of Independence evolved interactively in response to a combination of diverse multifaceted factors, cultural, ideological and psychological, no less than material, tactical or geographical. On the Patriot side, fragmented and militia-oriented as it was, the ending of any hope to bring Canada into the revolutionary front, or the growth of confidence in guerrilla warfare and international support, or the persistence of a widespread fear that Britain might strike back easily, were to prove as much important as the dissemination of a new notion of nationhood and the creation of a Continental Army. On the British side, passivity in Europe and leniency towards the rebels stood as the main tenets of a "satisfied" power which longed for a restoration in America that would be of limited value, if concessions had to be made to ensure international neutrality, and should a substantial garrison be raised and left to hold an irreparably disaffected population down.

From the American perspective, the abrupt novelty of politics was that of the creation of a new state. The seminal moment and document of the new state was a declaration of independence, that issued in 1776 which was different to the novel constitutional documents dating from the crises of the seventeenth century. As a result of the quest for independence,

there was the need to conceptualize, as well as implement, a new strategy and, to employ another word also not in use in this period in a modern sense, a novel geopolitics.

Yet, although 1776 brought this major change, there was a need for the Patriots to create a strategy from the outset of the struggle, a strategy focused on changing British policy. This need was continued after the war ended in 1783 because it was widely believed that the British might attempt to strike back and reverse independence. Linked to this, the need to affect British strategy in part arose because the revolutionary war ended not in triumph, but in a compromise exemplified by the partition of British North America. This situation very different to the subsequent fate of the French, Portuguese and Spanish empires in the Americas: France and Spain retained control of Caribbean islands (and France of Cayenne), but Britain's presence was scarcely limited to Newfoundland, Prince Edward Island, Bermuda and the British Caribbean, instead extending across what Canada then amounted to. Indeed, the failure of the American invasion attempt of 1775-6 meant that this partition was in play from 1776.

These points were to be played down in the subsequent memorialisation of the war in America, a situation also seen after the War of 1812. However, the reality was not only independence, but also a continued British presence in neighbouring Canada as a result of the failure of American invasion. Moreover, this presence was linked to the well-founded belief that this presence encouraged Native American opposition to American expansion, which was very much the case up to 1815, but not thereafter.

The conspectus for the Revolution might appear clear, but choices over strategy were centrally involved, as also in the case, from 1792, of republican France, with a political struggle then also over the identity of the new state. These struggles encompassed constitutional formulation, political practice, force structure, ideology, and geopolitical alignment. For example, the powerful Patriot ideological-political preference for militia was highly significant. To abstract strategy from this context is not only unhelpful but misleading. In the case of America, the Continental Army, created in 1775 to defend what can be seen as 'American liberty,' represented a new political identity and social practice. This helped to sustain the cohesion of the army and even the continuation of the Revolutionary cause when the war went badly, as in the winter of 1777-8 when

the army camped at Valley Forge while the British benefited from the comforts of Philadelphia, which were considerably greater.

The formation of this army indeed was a political act: the army, a force that would not dissolve at the end of the year, even if individual terms of service came to an end, symbolized the united nature of the struggle by the Thirteen States, and thus limited the role of state governments in military decisions. In theory, indeed, creating the Continental Army made the planning of strategy easier, allowing generals to consider clashing demands from the individual states for action and assistance. In June 1775, the Second Continental Congress transformed the New England force outside Boston into a national army. George Washington, who combined military experience with that of politics in the Virginia House of Burgesses, was selected as commander and the relationship between Congress and general was defined: Congress was to determine policy and Washington to follow its orders. In practice, the creation of the army, although essential to the dissemination of a new notion of nationhood, did not free military operations from the view of state governments, nor from the political disputes of the Continental Congress. The role of Congress in military appointments did not ensure quality, seniority and state quotas playing a major role in hindering merit[1].

At the same time, there was to be much tension between the needs of the army and the views of the public, tension that in part focused on the place of the militia or, rather, militias. In December 1780, General Nathanael Greene, the new commander of Patriot forces in the South, wrote to a friend, General Henry Knox, who was responsible for the Patriot artillery:

> With the militia, everybody is a general and the powers of government are so feeble that it is with the utmost difficulty you can restrain them from plundering one another. The people don't want spirit and enterprise but they must go to war in their own way or not at all. Nothing can save this country but a good permanent army conducted with great prudence and caution; for the impatience of the people to drive off the enemy would precipitate an officer into a thousand misfortunes, and the mode of conducting the war which is most to the liking of the inhabitants is the least likely to effect their salvation.

Greene wrote to Governor Lee of Maryland:

[1] S.R. Taaffe, *Washington's Revolutionary War Generals*, University of Oklahoma Press, Norman 2019.

It is unfortunate for the public that the two great departments in which they are so deeply interested, Legislation and the Army, cannot be made to coincide better, but the pressing wants of the Army cannot admit of the slow deliberation of Legislation, without being subject to many inconveniences nor can a Legislature with the best intentions always keep pace with the emergencies of war: and thus the common interest suffers from the different principles which influence and govern the two great national concerns[2].

In running the army, Washington had to confront a marked particularism that revealed itself in hostility to serving in the same unit with men from another colony, as well, separately, as a strong identification between men and their officers, and, also, opposition to re-enlistment among men concerned about their farmsteads and families. All were also to be seen in the Civil War.

Appointed Major-General by Congress in June 1775, Charles Lee, a British-born veteran of the Seven Years' War, in which he had served as a British officer in North America (1754-60) and Portugal (1762), where he served under Burgoyne, and as a former Major-General in the Polish army when it resisted Russian invasion, unlike Washington, advocated radical solutions, and was to be a controversial character both at the time and subsequently, a reminder of different paths that could have been taken to that of Washington[3]. These amounted to a militarization of society and the creation of a national army under central control:

1st. A solemn league and covenant defensive and offensive to be taken by every man in America, particularly by those in or near the seaport towns; all those who refuse, to have their estates confiscated for the public use, and their persons removed to the interior part of the country with a small pension reserved for their subsistence.
2dly. New York to be well fortified and garrisoned or totally destroyed.
3dly. No regiments to be raised for any particular local purposes, but one general great Continental Army adequate to every purpose. South Carolina may be excepted from its distance [...].
4thly. The regiments to be exchanged. Those who are raised in one province to serve in another rather than in their own, viz. the New Englanders in New York, the New Yorkers in New England, and so on. This system will undoubtedly make them better soldiers.
5thly. A general militia to be established and the regular regiments to be formed by drafts from the militia or their substitutes.

[2] The Library of Congress, Washington, Department of Manuscripts, Greene Letterbook, Greene to Knox, 7 December 1780, Greene to Lee, 31 December 1780.
[3] P. Papas, *Renegade Revolutionary: the Life of General Charles Lee*, New York University Press, New York 2014.

6thly. A certain portion of lands to be assigned to every soldier who serves one campaign, a double portion who serves two, and so on[4].

Such notions obviously conflicted with the profoundly local nature of American political culture, a product of the separate and different governmental, political, social, religious and demographic development of the colonies. Lee's ideas also clashed with the respect for the law and for individuals and property rights that, with the obvious exceptions of Native Americans and Loyalists and, even more, enslaved Blacks, was central to this culture and that compromised any idea of a total mobilization of national resources. Such a mobilization was not to be achieved by legislation through the developing new political system. In effect, the individual colonies were to achieve independence first, and then to cooperate on their own terms through a federal structure. Each colony or state had military and economic resources of its own, so that a British victory in one part of America had only a limited effect elsewhere. Compared to the Jacobites, the Patriots benefited from having more space and resources, a diffuse leadership and more military and political autonomy, although the last was also seen in a willingness by many to fight for local goals and security[5], but not further afield.

Aside from the nature of the military organisation, there was also the different, but fundamental, strategic dimension posed by goals. Most particularly this related to the relationship with George III and Britain. Whereas fighting began in April 1775, there was no declaration of independence until July 1776. There was also the question of whether there would be a positive response to negotiations with Britain and, if so, with what consequences. This political dimension underlined the number of possible strategic "players". In the event, there was to be no civil war in the Thirteen Colonies over peace terms, as there was to be in the Irish Free State in 1922-3 after British rule ended in 1922.

The social dimension also involved many "players", a situation accentuated by the novelty of the political situation, in goals and methods. The overthrow of royal authority in 1775 saw large-scale activity by those not yet in the politico-military system, and this was a key element of the

[4] *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, Yale University Press, New Haven 1959-2023, 44 vols. [henceforth *Franklin Papers*], XXII (1982): *March 23, 1775 through October 27, 1776*, pp. 292-293.

[5] G.T. Knouff, *The Soldiers' Revolution: Pennsylvanians in Arms and the Forging of Early American Identity*, Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park 2004.

strategic context, both in so far as those who fought were concerned and more generally[6]. In New York in 1775:

> the news of the attack at Boston, reached us on Sunday the 23rd and that very day the populace seized the City arms and unloaded two vessels bound with provisions to the troops of Boston. In the course of the week they formed themselves into companies under officers of their own choosing, distributed the arms, called a provincial Congress, demanded the keys of the Custom House and shut up the port, trained their men publicly, convened the citizens by beat of drum, drew the cannon into the interior country and formed an association of defence in perfect league with the rest of the continent.

By 7 June, over 2,000 men were reported to be training daily in New York and, on 10 June, it was claimed that «if a stranger was to land here, he would be at a loss whether to pronounce this a city immersed in commerce, or a great garrisoned town»[7].

The equestrian statue of George III in New York, erected at Bowling Green in 1770 in accordance with a commission from the New York Assembly, approved in 1768, to the London workshop of Joseph Wilton, was pulled down by the «Sons of Freedom» on 9 July, and the melted-down lead used to cast bullets. This followed the reading aloud that day of the Declaration of Independence to the Continental Army troops mustered nearby[8]. In contrast, the statue of Pitt, erected in 1770 in Charleston, was not taken down until 1794[9].

A mixture of popular zeal, the determination of the Revolutionaries, and the weakness of their opponents decided the fate of most of the colonies in late 1775. Intimidation by mob action proved an effective strategy and gave the Patriots strategic depth in subsequent operations. The disorientating experience of the agencies of law and authority being taken over by those who were willing to connive at, or support, violence affected many who were unhappy about developments. To resist this situation, the royal governors had little to turn to.

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[6] G.B. Nash, *The Urban Crucible: Social Change, Political Consciousness, and the Origins of the American Revolution*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1979; H. Ward, *The War for Independence and the Transformation of American Society*, UCL Press, London, 1999.

[7] Sheffield City Archives, Wentworth Woodhouse Muniments [henceforth WWM], Papers, R1-1590, 1575.

[8] W. Bellion, *Iconoclasm in New York: Revolution to Reenactment*, Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park, 2019.

[9] D.E.H. Smith, *Wilton's Statue of Pitt*, «South Carolina Historical and Genealogical Magazine», 15 (1914), pp. 18-38.

In part, there was also the issue of assumptions. Foremost came the British tendency to treat the events in 1775 as a local rebellion, rather than a large-scale event that was a revolutionary civil war, an assessment that accorded with the governmental wish to restrict the resources deployed[10]. In operational terms, British generals and admirals did not like to disperse their strength, amphibious operations were hard to execute successfully, and units that were landed might have found it difficult to obtain supplies and would have risked defeat at the hands of larger Patriot forces, with the retreat from Concord being repeated up and down the eastern seaboard.

It is, and was, not difficult, however, to feel that the opportunities the British had were missed and that the British failed to make adequate use of their sea power and available troops. An anonymous British pamphlet of 1776 complained, with reason, that the Patriots had been given «the advantage of gaining time to form a union of counsels, to adjust plans of action, to turn their resources into the most convenient channels, to train their men in regular discipline, and to draw to their camp ammunition and stores, and all the necessary implements of war»[11]. All of these took time and were best achieved when not under immediate pressure.

Arguably, the same problems that were to face the British in the South in 1780-1 would have affected earlier operations there: to make a sufficiently widespread impact, it would have been necessary for Britain to dispatch substantial forces, but they would not necessarily have been able to dominate the situation and some units could have been defeated. In the event, the widespread activity of the Patriots in 1775-6 helped direct the strategic context, even though they failed to do so in Canada where, crucially, the Patriots lacked the popular support they could otherwise rely on. Prefiguring the impact of the later alliance with France in 1778, the invasion of Canada was seen in Britain as changing the very strategy of the struggle by

> the commencing of an offensive war with the sovereign [...]. Opposition to government had hitherto been conducted on the apparent design, and avowed principle only, of supporting and defending certain rights and immunities of the people, which were supposed, or pretended, to be unjustly invaded. Opposition, or even re-

[10] S. Carpenter, K. Delamer, J. McIntyre, A. Zwilling, *The War of American Independence, 1763-1783: Falling Dominoes*, Routledge, Abingdon and New York 2023).
[11] An., *Reflections on the Present State of the American War,* London 1776, p. 5.

sistance, in such a case [...] is thought by many to be entirely consistent with the principles of the British constitution[12].

The invasion of Canada was inconsistent with these principles, however they were understood, for example the «Glorious Revolution» of 1688-9 that had overthrown James II. Yet, conversely, putting aside principles, this invasion could be related to the determination after William III's seizure of power in England to extend control to Scotland and, even more, Ireland.

In 1776, the Declaration of Independence reflected the stiffening of Patriot resolve, prefiguring, in a different context, the change in Union strategy during the Civil War in 1863 toward a harsher conduct of the war and the new goal of slave emancipation. At the same time, this process was highly divisive. In 1776, Loyalists were harried, as with the disarming of Maryland Loyalists in the spring and also the end of the *modus vivendi* that had enabled British warships off New York to continue to receive provisions while, in turn, not attacking the city. Earlier, British warships had to leave Norfolk.

The new Patriot government slowly became better-prepared to wage war, a Board of Ordnance being instituted on 12 June 1776. However, in the event, this was to prove a considerable hindrance to Washington: such bodies affected his ability to deal directly with individual states.

A sense of reaction was important to the politics of Patriot strategic preparation. Thus, on 30 December 1776, John Hancock, the President of Congress, announced in a circular that

the strength and progress of the enemy [...] have rendered it not only necessary that the American force should be augmented beyond what Congress had heretofore designed, but that it should be brought into the field with all possible expedition[13].

Yet, what such rhetoric could and might mean in practice was less clear. Political determination and military preparedness proved difficult to synchronize, with the latter not provided by the rhetoric of the former. Although also with non-revolutionary states, this was a repeated problem with revolutions, as in the case of the unsuccessful Dutch Patriots in 1787. The latter provided an instance of the fragility of revolution and,

[12] «The Annual Register, or a View of the History, Politics, and Literature for the Year 1776», London 1776, p. 2.

[13] *Journals of the Continental Congress 1774-1789*, Washington, Government Printing Office, 1905-37, 34 vol., VI: *1776, October 9-Dcember 31* (1906), p. 1053.

consequently, the need to be cautious in assuming some supposed inevitability about the success of a revolutionary cause, a point soon after demonstrated with the suppression of such movements in the Austrian Netherlands (Belgium) and in the Prince-Bishopric of Liège. A key element for the Dutch in 1787 was the stronger nature of the hostile international intervention: the Prussians acting whereas, unlike in 1778, the French ally of the Patriots did not do so. It is instructive to consider whether a similar move by France in 1787 would have led to success for the Patriots in the United Provinces (Dutch Republic).

Moreover, the military context was scarcely consistent in the case of preparedness, both between cases but also within them. In the first case, in the 1700s, the Hungarians rebelling against the Habsburgs/Austria and the Afghans rebelling more successfully against the Safavids/Persia both required different levels of military adaptation to that seen in the case of the Patriots.

Yet there was no uniform nature of preparedness in the case of the Patriots, for whom preparedness was often very limited, but also varied. The context, most clearly, was very different in Canada to the position in the Thirteen Colonies. An account from the Patriot headquarters outside Quebec on 28 March 1776 listed

> a catalogue of complaints. Indifferent physicians and surgeons [...] a few cannon without any quantity of powder or ball will never take a fortress if by a cannonade it is to be done [...]. Suppose you had a good train of ordinance with plenty of ammunition, we have not an artillery man to serve them [...] a well-furnished military chest [money] is the soul of an army [...]. Without it nothing can be done. For want of it, inevitable ruin must attend us [...]. The slowness of our operations is one means of a great backwardness in the Canadians engaging [...] we were promised that cash should be sent after us. None is yet arrived. Without it, recruiting goes on badly all over the world and particularly in Canada [...]. Bricks without straw we cannot make[14].

The Patriots were relatively easily driven from Canada in 1776, in that, although effort was required by Britain, the campaign was comparatively short and low in casualties. Looked at differently, the need to drive the Patriots from Canada distracted resources from the British offensive in the Thirteen Colonies.

Fresh Patriot attempts on Canada were to be suggested and concern was to be expressed by British generals[15]. However, invasion plans drawn

[14] British Library, London, Add. Ms. 21687, f. 245.
[15] Ivi, Add. Ms. 34416, f. 273.

up in 1778, 1780 and 1781 were not followed through for a variety of reasons, including a lack of French support reflecting strategic priorities in the West Indies, far more pressing opportunities and problems for the Patriots in the Thirteen Colonies, and the logistical difficulties of operating in this largely barren region. Canadian *émigrés*, such as Moses Hazen, pressed unsuccessfully for action, but the military task was formidable. An invasion would have entailed sieges of strong positions by forces enjoying scant local support and dependant on distant sources of supply. Having failed once at Quebec, there was no reason to assume success on a subsequent attempt.

Ironically, and underlining the problems of judging strategic capability and achievement, the Patriots in the long-run probably profited from being driven out of Canada. Such extended lines of communication and supply, and the commitment of manpower required, would have bled the Continental Army dry and might even have led to mutinies. It would have been very difficult to relocate troops in Canada, not least in the event of British operations in Virginia southward.

Washington, however, reflected on the failure to take Canada: «Hence I shall know the events of war are exceedingly doubtful, and that capricious fortune often blasts over most flattering hopes»[16]. This, indeed was a major blow to what had at times been a dangerous over-confidence in political circles about the military challenge posed by Britain.

More generally, the situation deteriorated for the Patriots when a British amphibious force took New York in 1776. In addition, acute supply problems then were exacerbated by widespread demoralization. The Patriots followed a reactive strategy in 1776, and low morale and desertion were major problems.

One of the most insistent themes, however, in the correspondence of the generals on both sides was the weakness of their forces, a theme that was to grow stronger as the war progressed, and a weakness that interacted with the contingent nature of local support, one in which compromise rather than conviction was to the fore. A sense of weakness could be crippling, discouraging generals from acting, even when their opponents were in no real position to obstruct them. This situation benefited the Patriots rather than the British, both as the latter had to reverse the situation established by the Patriots in 1775-6 and because the British could not fall back on a militia/volunteer support comparable to that

[16] *Franklin Papers*, XXII, p. 438.

enjoyed by the Patriots. General Sir William Howe, the British commander in North America from 1776 to 1778, reflected:

> I do not apprehend a successful termination to the war from the advantages His Majesty's troops can gain while the enemy is able to avoid, or unwilling to hazard a decisive action, which might reduce the leaders in rebellion to make an overture for peace; or, that this is to be expected, unless a respectable addition to the army is sent from Europe to act early in the ensuing year [...]. If this measure is judged to be inexpedient, or cannot be carried into execution, the event of the war will be very doubtful. Were any one of the three principal objects, vis New York, Rhode Island or Philadelphia given up to strengthen the defence of the other two, one corps to act offensively might be found, in the meantime such a cession would operate on the minds of the people strongly against His Majesty's interests [...] in the apparent temper of the Americans a considerable addition to the present force will be requisite for effecting any essential change in their disposition and the re-establishment of the King's authority[17].

This letter captured the impact of popular determination as a factor in the war. This determination had been seen earlier in 1777 in the successful resistance to the British army under General Burgoyne advancing south from Canada: militia played a major role in the failure of this British force, notably at the battle of Bennington, although units sent from the Continental Army were also important. Burgoyne's surrender at Saratoga enhanced the significance of the popular determination by raising the morale of the Revolutionaries, offsetting the effect of Howe's capture of Philadelphia. So also with the impact on the opinion of the French government. Indeed, in March 1777, Hans Stanley, an astute pro-government British MP, had pointed out that «success had always depended much upon opinion»[18].

The role of public opinion gave the Patriots a key advantage, one that was not countered by the deficiencies of their military, even though the latter had clear operational consequences and helped force a reactive character on Patriot strategy. Washington, for example, was not able to prevent Howe from consolidating his position in Philadelphia in late 1777. The Patriot army was still faced with many of the problems of expiring enlistments and inadequate supplies that had dogged it from the outset[19]. There were also serious command problems and major rivalries.

[17] Howe to Lord George Germain, Secretary of State for America, 30 November 1777, National Archives [henceforth NA], Domestic Records of the Public Record Office, 30/55/7/52.

[18] *Report on the Manuscripts of the Marquess of Lothian*, HMSO, London 1905, p. 300.

[19] J. Huston, *Logistics of Liberty. American Services of Supply in the Revolutionary War and After*, University of Delaware Press, Newark 1991.

Washington's correspondence was replete with reference to insufficient manpower and supplies. There was also a lack of coherence. For example, Major-General Dickinson ignored Washington's request to bring his militia force from northern New Jersey because he feared that the state would be invaded by the British from Staten Island. This was a commonplace tension.

Washington had to meet criticism that he was not more active and enterprising as a commander, but his army was in a terrible situation at the end of 1777 and the British situation very different to when confined to Boston in late 1775. At the same time, cautious command combined with the fighting spirit of the troops had helped deny the British the decisive victory that might convince opinion, in America, Britain and the Continent, that Britain was winning and would triumph.

This situation did not preclude operational choices that can be seen as strategic in their implications. For example, Valley Forge was selected as the Patriot wintering position for 1777-8 in order to be able to mount an attack on nearby British-held Philadelphia as well as to shadow any British moves from there. It compared with the positions outside Boston in the winter of 1775-6.

Moreover, Washington hoped that the rich Pennsylvania countryside would provide his men at Valley Forge with food and forage, since what passed as Continental army logistics were weak at best, and New Jersey was bare. In 1863, the wealth of this countryside also encouraged Robert E. Lee when he moved north.

The decisions taken by the Council of War of the Continental Army provide opportunities for seeing how strategy was discussed. For example, in April 1778, Washington asked his leading officers whether they advised an attack on Philadelphia, an attack on New York, or remaining in camp while the army was prepared for a later confrontation. The response was divided. Anthony Wayne argued that any attack was better than remaining on the defensive and allowing the British to implement their plans, but Washington decided to remain at Valley Forge and to await developments[20].

These materialized in the shape of British withdrawal from Philadelphia in June 1778, a withdrawal that led to a confused engagement near Monmouth Court House on the 28th. The battle did not work out as Washington had intended, but the ability to provide an attractive gloss

[20] P. Nelson, *Anthony Wayne*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1985, pp. 75-76.

reflected the role of war as the source of news to sustain morale: Patriot regulars could be presented as seeing off British regulars and not as retreating in disorder as in previous engagements. The battle also led to a serious dispute between Washington and Charles Lee. Interesting and instructive in itself, this dispute also reflected, as it continues to reflect, the difficulties faced in trying to offer an agreed narrative of battles and, linked to that, an agreed analysis. This is important in helping to explain why it is possible to assess relative capabilities and effectiveness very differently.

More generally, much of the Patriot strategy was affected by their repeatedly proven inability to defend their own fortified positions, for example Fort Washington in 1776 and Charleston in 1780, and by their changing ability, in turn, to confront the British in defended, fortified positions held by the latter, which culminated in success at Yorktown in 1781 but not against New York in 1782.

As a separate axis of capability and success, it proved hard for Washington to extend his relative success in the Middle Colonies at least in containing the British to the South where the political context was one in which Loyalism was more prominent. There was to be no recovery of Savannah, lost in 1778, comparable to that of Philadelphia, lost in 1777 but regained in 1778.

The extension of the war to the South, after a British expeditionary force captured Savannah in December 1778, revealed serious problems in the Patriot army there. As with Canada, although very differently, the Patriots found offensive operations difficult to sustain. In November 1778, Congress instructed Benjamin Lincoln, the commander in the south, to invade East Florida in order to destroy the threat posed by the British garrison in St Augustine. Nevertheless, support for this expedition from the states was inadequate and no advance was launched, which was just as well given the problems faced earlier by colonial militia attacking St Augustine when it was in Spanish hands. Aside from resistance, both logistics and disease were key factors.

Yet again, however, the key element was opinion. Despite the problems faced, there was a growing confidence on the Patriot side in 1778 about the likely military outcome of the war, a confidence which can be

seen in the letters of Delegates to Congress. This confidence owed much to international recognition[21].

As a reminder, however, that the war was fought at different levels and in a variety of spheres, opinion in the shape of local support became the key element in the war in the South after Patriot defeats in 1779-80 left Nathanael Greene, the commander there from late 1780, able to carry on only partisan warfare. Daniel Morgan was given command of a section of the army and was sent to «spirit up the people» in upper South Carolina, to hinder the collection of supplies by the British and to attack their flank or rear if they advanced into North Carolina[22]. In addition, Greene found himself obliged to rely heavily on the activities of partisan bands under such leaders as Thomas Sumter and Francis Marion. The use of partisans was an obvious response to the Patriot defeats at Charleston and Camden, the uncontrollable vastness of the South, and the need to counter Loyalist activity and British moves. From the British perspective, forces had to traverse vast distances often through wild, inhospitable terrain, making forces vulnerable to enemy tactics of *petite guerre*, by which small, highly mobile detachments carried out fleeting attacks and ambushes on the flanks of their larger adversary. This encouraged reconnaissance mapping[23]. The consequence in the South in 1781 was a vicious local war which paralleled that in Westchester County New York in the same period.

This conflict could later be presented as guerrilla warfare, and with the implication that such an innovation was a product of a different political culture and one that represented a counter to, and, in some way, development on, *ancien régime* professionalism. However, such conflict had already been seen in Europe, for example being used in Hungary. Rather than being learned from conflict with the Turks, or in North America as a response to Native Americans or the local environment, guerrilla warfare, in practice, was a sort of instinctive tactics focused on ambushes and based on the weakness of one side and its own knowledge of the ground.

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[21] P.H. Smith (ed.), *Letters of Delegate to Congress, 1774-1789*, Library of Congress, Washington 1976-2000, 26 vols., X: *June 1, 1778-September 30, 1778* (1983); XI: *October 1, 1778-January 31, 1779* (1984).

[22] Greene to Morgan, 16 December 1778, in *Cowpens Papers. Being Correspondence of General Morgan and the Prominent Actors. From the Collection of Theodorus Bailey Myers*, Charleston 1881, pp. 9-10.

[23] J.B. Harley, *Contemporary Mapping of the American Revolutionary War*, in J.B. Harley, B. Petchenik, L. Towner (eds.), *Mapping the American Revolutionary War*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1978, pp. 1-44.

Thus, the Piedmontese employed Waldensian militia in small units with remarkable results against the French, especially in the War of the Austrian Succession on the Alpine front in the 1740s, and guerrilla attacks affected French operations by cutting supply lines. The same tactics were applied in the County of Nice by the local population against the occupying French from 1792 to 1796.

As a related point, far from "small war" techniques being colonial warfare tactics and spreading from North America to Europe, as sometimes argued, these techniques were important throughout, and not only in the Western world[24]. Indeed, Washington and other Patriot commanders were familiar with the European manuals on partisan war. To a degree, this was an example of a rising power learning from the older powers, America learning from European practice and experience. Thus, there was a combination of forced experience, a knowledge of past practice, and adaptation to one's particular circumstances, all being important in the American context. A similar process was to be seen in the use of artillery.

The war in the South was to play a major role in the subsequent Patriot understanding and presentation of their success in terms of irregular warfare. However, in 1780 and 1781, Washington, a conventional general, was far more hopeful of using French forces, land and sea. His initial target was New York. Its fall would be a fateful blow to the British military position in North America and might well lead to the effective end of the war, a step the Patriots desperately required. This would be much more significant than the recapture of Philadelphia. The loss of New York would leave the British without a secure anchorage for their fleet south of Halifax, Nova Scotia, and the Patriots could then turn south to besiege Charleston and Savannah, thus reconquering America from north to south. Nevertheless, Washington was sufficiently flexible to appreciate that co-operation with the French came first and that it would be possible to focus on a different target, which turned out to be Cornwallis' army on the Chesapeake.

[24] S. Wilkinson, *The Defense of Piedmont, 1742-1748. A Prelude to the Study of Napoleon*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1927; P. Bianchi, *La guerra franco-piemontese e le Valli valdesi (1792-1779)*, in G.P. Romagnani (ed.), *La Bibbia, la coccarda e il tricolore. I Valdesi fra due emancipazioni, 1798-1848*, Claudiana, Torino 2001, pp. 72-117; J.R. McIntyre, *Pandours, Partisans and Freikorps: The Development of Irregular Warfare and Light Troops across the Eighteenth Century*, in A. Burns (ed.), *The Changing Face of Old Regime Warfare. Essays in Honour of Christopher Duffy, Helion,* Warwick 2022, pp. 161-180.

After the British defeat at Yorktown in October 1781, the same strategy came to the fore. Washington appreciated that his success there was largely due to French assistance, and he hoped to persuade de Grasse, the French admiral, to co-operate in a speedy attack on Charleston or, failing that, Wilmington, North Carolina. Instead, de Grasse sailed directly from American waters for the Caribbean. There was no immediate follow-up to Yorktown.

In 1782, Washington hoped to combine again with the French, either attacking New York or Charleston. In the event of French support, Washington was also interested in an invasion of Canada. A major British naval victory over the French off the Iles des Saintes in the Caribbean on 12 April 1782 ended that possibility, although anyway the French took the view that Washington was not ready for an attack on New York. In the event, the Patriots had to wait for the British to evacuate Charleston and New York as part of the peace settlement. St Augustine was also evacuated, but to the benefit of Spain. These outcomes indicated the dependence of Patriot success on international support, and the very varied consequences, a point further seen if the fate of North America from West Florida to Nova Scotia in 1783 is considered.

The earlier role of contingency in Patriot strategy prior to French entry emerges clearly both in general terms and in specifics. Following the disasters of 1776, Washington recognised that for many the Continental Army was the Revolution. Thereafter, he did not take risks unless success was all but guaranteed. Had the British been more successful, the Patriots might well have resorted to more revolutionary military methods, such as guerrilla warfare and the strategy advocated by Charles Lee. Indeed, in part as an echo, Greene succeeded in the South in combining partisan bands with the manoeuvers of a field army.

Alternatively, and pursuing a very different strategy, the Patriots might have continued to rely on field armies, as the French Revolutionaries were to do in the 1790s, but, again as the French Revolutionaries did, those who took power in America could have taken a harsher, indeed far harsher, attitude toward state's rights and private property. The consequence might have been a very different American public culture, one that stressed the national state more than the individual citizen or the individual state, and obligations more than rights.

For the British, in contrast to the Seven Years' War, the political context, both domestic and international, was very different in the War of

American Independence. This point underlines the extent to which, while any focus on war-winning involves understanding strategy, or, rather, operationalising it, in terms of military activity, in fact, the key to strategy is the political purposes that are pursued. In short, strategy is a process of understanding problems and determining goals, and not the details of the plans by which these goals are implemented by military means. There was a need on the part of Britain to respond to Patriot strategy, but the prime requirement was an attempt to impose on the situation in North America such that there was no basis for a Patriot strategy. To employ modern terms, counter-insurgency was designed to ensure that there was no prospect for insurgency, and this was true at strategic, operational and tactical levels. Resistance had to be ended. Otherwise, as Rockingham had suggested in February 1775, any victory would «require a large force to be constantly continued there to keep the Continent in subjection»[25].

British strategy in the War of Independence has to be understood in this light because this strategy was very different to that during the Seven Years' War. Indeed, the contrast, which reflected the particular types of conflict, very much established the significance of politics. In the latter case, the British focus had been on conquest in North America from France, and not on pacification there. The latter was clearly subservient to the former, although different policies were pursued for the purpose of pacification. These included an eighteenth-century equivalent of ethnic cleansing in the expulsion of the Acadians (French settlers) from Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island in 1755-64, as well as the very different post-conquest accommodation of the Catholics of Québec, which looked toward the Quebec Act of 1774. This accommodation proved highly successful, unlike the policies followed in the case of the British colonies further south. Indeed, the difficulties the government encountered in the latter made it more necessary to press for the accommodation of Québec.

In the War of Independence, pacification was the British strategy, and the question was how best to secure it. The purpose of the war was clear, the return of the Patriots to their loyalty, and the method chosen was significantly different to that taken in response to the serious Jacobite rebellions in Scotland and northern England in 1715-16 and, far more, 1745-6. In these cases, as later in the face of the Irish rebellion in 1798,

[25] Rockingham to Pemberton Milnes, 15 February 1775, WWM, Papers, R1-1553.

the remedy had been more clearly military. However, in making that argument, it is necessary to note post-war policies for stability through reorganisation, most obviously in the introduction of radically new governmental and political systems for the Scottish Highlands and Ireland.

In the case of America, although military occupation was again a factor and one that compromised British popularity[26], there was not this sequencing. Instead, there was a willingness to consider, not only pacification alongside conflict, but also new political systems as an aspect of this pacification, although the likely nature of these systems was unclear. Indeed, in one sense, pacification began at the outset in 1775, with the misconceived and mishandled British attempt to seize arms in New England. It continued with the unsuccessful attempt to overawe resistance at Bunker Hill, for the display of British forces there in preparation for their attack had an intimidating character. In contrast, the most prominent instances of a very different type of pacification were the instructions to the Howe Brothers, the commanders appointed in 1776, to negotiate as well as fight, and, even more clearly, the dispatch of the Carlisle Commission in 1778, again with instructions to negotiate, each of which were approaches rejected by the Patriots. Moreover, the restoration of colonial government in the South was a concrete step indicating, during the war, what the British were seeking to achieve and how they were trying to do so.

Alongside that, and more insistently, were the practices of British commanders. Although the Patriots were traitors, they were treated with great leniency, and suggestions of harsher treatment were generally ignored. This point underlines the extent to which conduct in the field both reflects strategy and also affects the development of strategic culture. In most cases during the century, rebels were treated far more harshly. So also, eventually, with the treatment of Confederate citizens and Southern society in the Civil War of 1861-5, as opposed to that of 1775-83 which is not generally presented as a civil war. In practice, there was no comparable move in the War of Independence toward the "hard" approach seen in Union conduct in the Civil War, and certainly not at the official level and as systemic policy. Indeed, the Southern strategy in 1778-82 very much involved an attempt on conciliation.

[26] D.F. Johnson, *Occupied America. British Military Rule and the Experience of Revolution*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia 2020.

The focus on pacification provides an essential continuity to British strategy, but there were of course differences in emphasis. An attempt at overall evaluation faces the classic problem that history occurs forward, 1775 preceding 1776, but is analysed from posterity, with 1775 understood in the light of 1776. This approach is unhelpful, however, not least because the course of the war was affected by two key discontinuities that changed the parameters for contemporaries. The usual one given is the internationalisation of the war, notably with France's formal entry in 1778 on the Patriot side. However, prior to that, the declaration of American independence in 1776 transformed the strategic situation.

Alongside these discontinuities came military unpredictabilities, such as the initially successful, but eventually totally unsuccessful, Patriot invasion of Canada in 1775-6, and the total British operational failures at Saratoga (1777) and Yorktown (1781). These events were not secondary to the military operationalisation of strategy but, instead, helped direct it. The wider political dimension was also greatly affected by events, both military and diplomatic.

Thus, the Southern strategy, both military and political, the focus on regaining the Southern colonies, that dominated British policy from late 1778 when a British amphibious force swiftly captured Savannah, arose in large part from the impact of formal French entry into the war earlier in the year. This entry ended the unusual situation in which Britain was at war solely in North America, and therefore able to concentrate attention and resources on it. Moreover, from French entry, Britain was essentially pushed into a bifurcated struggle involving separate strategies. A struggle for pacification continued in the Thirteen Colonies (albeit being greatly complicated by the French military presence there on land and at sea and by the prospect of a larger presence), while a straightforward military struggle with France began elsewhere, especially in the West Indies, India and West Africa. Again, this apparently clear distinction can be qualified by noting that Britain had political, as well as military, options to consider in both cases, as well as offensive and defensive aspects to strategy.

The general impression is of inevitable and progressive moves toward such a bifurcated war, although, in practice, the political dimension again came first. This was made more complex by the need to consider the goals and moves of various powers, including unpredictable responses to the actions of others. Thus, aside from Britain's relations with the states

with which it eventually came to war – France in 1778, Spain in 1779 and the Dutch in 1780, there were relations with neutral powers, both friendly and unfriendly, Russia being prominent among the latter. These relations were, in part, linked to the military operationalisation of strategy, notably with the British commitment to commercial blockade as a means to employ, retain and strengthen naval strength, and with the possibility that alliances and agreements in Europe would yield troops for North America. This was a key goal as, lacking conscription, Britain was very short of troops. Moreover, subsidy treaties provided trained troops. These elements ensured that the conflict was European in part irrespective of whether European powers declared war on Britain.

As another instance of unpredictability, the European crisis of 1778, which led to the War of the Bavarian Succession of 1778-9 between Prussia and France's ally Austria, created diplomatic opportunities for Britain and, indeed, was seen in this light. There has since also been scholarly discussion on the lines that a more interventionist European policy would have distracted France from taking part in the American war, with major consequences for British options there. This point covers a fundamental aspect of British strategy in the 1770s. Britain was acting as a satisfied or status quo power, keen obviously to retain and safeguard its position, but not interested in gaining fresh territory. Representing a satisfied power, British ministers were also wary of becoming involved in Continental European power politics.

Here the American war fitted into a pattern that had begun with George III's rejection of the Prussian alliance in 1761-2. This was a rejection that proved highly contentious in British domestic politics, both ministerial and public, and one that linked to the critique of George's domestic attitudes that was to become significant in Britain and its colonies. Both were seen as aspects of novelty on the part of George. This wariness on the part of George about close Continental links had continued with a subsequent refusal in the 1760s to accept Russian requirements for an alliance, as well as with the rebuff of French approaches for joint action against, and in response to, the First Partition of Poland by Austria, Prussia and Russia in 1772.

Thus, there was to be no recurrence, during the War of Independence, of the situation in the Seven Years' War, namely war in alliance with a Continental power. However unintentional, this latter situation had proved particularly potent, both in terms of domestic politics and of

international relations, or had been shaped thus by William Pitt the Elder with his presentation of British policy in terms of conquering Canada in Europe. In the War of American Independence, there would be no alliance with Prussia (nor anyone else) to distract France, and, thus, in military terms, no commitment of the British army to the Continent, as had occurred from 1758. Even more, subsidised German troops, such as those deployed in 1757 in an unsuccessful attempt to defend the Electorate of Hanover, would not be used for "German" or European power political purposes.

Instead, some troops would be retained in Europe, Hanoverians for example being sent to serve in the Gibraltar garrison. Most, however, notably Hessians, were sent to America where, at peak strength, they comprised nearly forty per cent of the British army. Britain's fundamental strategy thus rested on a policy coherence that had military consequences: passivity in Europe combined with the preservation of status in America.

Reviewing the strategies on offer, it is reasonable to consider the "What if?" of Austrian or Prussian pressure on France, or the possibility of this pressure deterring the French from helping the Austrians from 1778, and thus justifying a British commitment to Continental power politics. Such counterfactuals were very much to the fore in contemporary public discussion of strategy, and provided a prime means by which this discussion was conducted. Counterfactuals were also crucial in the speculation by rulers and ministers about the likely international permutations of events, permutations made particularly important by the roles of coalition warfare and diversionary campaigning.

Separately, counterfactuals also provide a means to assess both the choices made in the past and the sphere for choice. The latter is significant, as understanding strategy in large part requires appreciating the parameters established by ideas, assumptions and issues, as well as those relating to capabilities, opportunities and needs. This distinction is related to that between idealist and realist concepts in modern international relations theory, but is not coterminous with it.

Returning to the 1770s, it is pertinent to ask whether an alliance with a Continental power would have led, not to benefits, but, instead, to a highly-damaging British commitment to one side or the other in the War of the Bavarian Succession. The Seven Years' War, in which Britain had allied with Prussia, was scarcely encouraging in this respect, as it was,

initially, far from clear that Britain's involvement in the conflict on the Continent then would work out as favourably as, in the event, happened. Given the use made of this example, both at the time and subsequently, notably by supporters of interventionism, that point provides a key instance of the nature of strategic thought and culture as recovered memory and in political contention.

In addition, had Britain allied with Austria or Prussia in the War of the Bavarian Succession, then Hanover would presumably have been exposed to attack by its opponent. Hanover was vulnerable, as was repeatedly demonstrated, indeed far more so than the British Isles as there was no need to gain naval dominance. Had Hanover been overrun, as had been threatened by the French in 1741, was achieved by them in 1757, and was to occur anew in 1803, then its recovery might have jeopardized the military, diplomatic and political options of the British government both in Europe and more generally. Furthermore, the War of the Bavarian Succession was restricted to two campaigning seasons, 1778 and 1779, but could have been longer, like the Seven Years' War, or have been speedily resumed, as with the two Austro-Prussian conflicts of the 1740s: 1740-2 and 1744-5. Either outcome might have posed major problems for Britain had it been involved, limiting other strategic options. Each outcome was possible as far as contemporaries were concerned.

Moreover, as another critique of the interventionist argument, and, in this case, specifically the claim that it could, indeed would, have deterred French action, and thus ensured British victory, the British had, prior to French entry into the war in 1778, already failed to translate victories in North America, such as the battle of Long Island and subsequent capture of New York in 1776, and the battle of Brandywine and subsequent capture of Philadelphia in 1777, into an acceptable political verdict. Thus, the issue of French strategy was less crucial to British success than might be suggested by a focus, understandable as it is, on the major French role in the Franco-Patriot defeat of the British at Yorktown in 1781. This underlines the need to locate speculation about diplomatic and military options in a context of understanding strategic possibilities. The latter provided a framework for strategic decision that it is overly easy to underplay.

Goals also need to be borne in mind. Britain was a "satisfied" power after 1763, and, as a consequence, it was difficult, if not dangerous, to try to strengthen the status quo by alliances with powers that wished to

overturn it. There was also no significant domestic constituency for an interventionist strategy, and notably none for any one particular interventionist course of action.

Aside from the practicalities of British power, and the nature of British politics, the Western Question, the fate of Western Europe, more particularly the Low Countries, the Rhineland and Italy, had been settled in diplomatic terms in the 1750s. More specifically, an Austrian alliance with Spain and then, far more unexpectedly, one with France resolved issues, while France's willingness in 1748, as part of a peace settlement, to return recent wartime gains from the Austrian Netherlands and the United Provinces was also highly significant. These alliances, while challenging to established British assumptions, also removed both need and opportunity for British intervention.

This shift in power politics was crucial, for, in Britain, the public support for interventionism on the Continent was fragile, if not weak, unless the Bourbons (the rulers of France and Spain) were the target, and, even so, then also if alternative targets were preferred. However, the domestic coalition of interests and ideas upon which public backing for foreign policy rested was heavily reliant on the consistency offered by the resonance of the anti-Bourbon beat. Thus, British strategy in the war cannot be separated from wider currents of political preference and engagement. A lack of interest in European interventionism was even more pronounced in the British colonies for the concern of colonists, whether or not Loyalists, focused on the New World.

What British strategy appeared to entail in North America varied greatly during the conflict. The initial British impression was of opposition largely only in Massachusetts, and this assessment suggested that a vigorous defence of imperial interests there would save the situation. This view led to British legislation in 1774 specific to this colony, and to a concentration of Britain's forces in North America there. The initial military operationalisation of strategy continued after the clashes at Concord and Lexington in 1775, both because the stress on Massachusetts appeared vindicated and because there were not enough troops for action elsewhere. This situation, specifically force profile, represented a key failure in British preparedness, but was also a product of the small size of the British army.

In the event, this policy failed, both in Massachusetts and elsewhere. In the former, the military presence was unable to prevent rebellion or to

contain it. Indeed, eventually, in March 1776, the British had to evacuate Boston when the harbour was threatened by Patriot cannon. Elsewhere in North America, the lack of troops stemming from the concentration on Boston ensured that British authority was overthrown in the other twelve colonies involved in the revolution. Moreover, in 1775, the Patriots were able to mount an invasion of Canada that achieved initial success, bottling up the British in the city of Québec.

As a result of the events of 1775-6, the second stage of the war, a stage expected and planned neither by most of the Patriots nor by the British government, led to a major British effort to regain control. This policy entailed both a formidable military effort and peacemaking proposals. Here, again, it is necessary to look at the military options in terms of the political situation. The end of the rebellion/revolution could not be achieved by reconquering all of the Thirteen Colonies (and driving the Patriots from Canada). Prefiguring in a way the Union's position during the Civil War, the task was simply too great, leaving aside the issue of maintaining any such verdict. Instead, it was necessary to secure military results that achieved the political outcome of an end to rebellion in the shape of surrender. Such an outcome was likely to require both a negotiated settlement and acquiescence in the return to loyalty, and in subsequently maintaining obedience.

What was unclear was which military results would best secure this outcome. Was the priority the defeat, indeed destruction, of the Continental Army, as it represented the Revolution, not least its unity, and was the prime defence of the Revolution; or was it the capture of key Patriot centres, notably Philadelphia in 1777? Each goal appeared possible, and, in practice, there was a mutual dependence between them. The British would not be able to defeat the Patriots unless they could land and support troops, and, for this capability to be maintained, it was necessary to secure port cities. Conversely, these port cities could best be held if Patriot forces were defeated. Otherwise, it would be necessary to maintain a large garrison as, indeed, was to be the case in New York.

The equations of troop numbers made these issues apparent, not least the problems posed for finite British military resources and for supply provision by maintaining large garrison forces. Indeed, the latter point lent further military point to the political strategy of pacification, as such a strategy would reduce the need for garrisons and produce local Loyalist forces, as well as diminishing the number of Patriots.

In an instance of a longstanding issue in both strategy and operational planning, notably, but not only, in counterinsurgency struggles, the British emphasis possibly should have been on destroying the Continental Army. It was not easy to fix opponents so as to destroy them in battle. This, however, was definitely a prospect in 1776-7 and certainly in the immediate aftermath of Long Island. Instead, the stress was on regaining major centres, not least as this policy was seen as a way of demonstrating the return of royal authority, particularly by ensuring that large numbers of Patriots again came under the Crown. Indeed, from the period when the Empire struck back, the summer of 1776, the British gained control of most of the leading cities, either for much of the war (New York from 1776, Savannah from 1778, Charleston from 1780), or, as it turned out, temporarily (Newport from 1776 to 1778, and Philadelphia from 1777 to 1778).

Yet this policy still left important centres, most obviously Boston from March 1776, that were not under British control, as well as much of the interior including territory within striking distance of the cities, which forced a need for substantial garrisons. This point indicated the fundamental political problem facing the British and, more generally true in strategic planning: whatever they won in the field, it would still be necessary to achieve a political settlement, at least in the form of a return to loyalty. The understanding of this issue was an achievement for the British, but also posed a major problem. Correspondingly, this understanding was also both achievement and problem for the Patriots.

The British government and army were cautious in their treatment of the Patriots, despite the fact that they were legally rebels. Raids on rebel-held towns, such as the one by the amphibious force that destroyed Falmouth (now Portland, Maine) on 18 October 1775, created outrage on the part of the Patriots, but they were not typical of the conflict. Similarly the propaganda use the Patriots made of the scalping of Jane McCrea by Indian scouts working for the British in 1777 created a false impression, although such propaganda was seen as important to the stiffening of resistance. It also reflected normative values on the nature of acceptable violence.

The Declaration of Independence complained that George III «has endeavoured to bring on the inhabitants of our frontiers the merciless Indian savages, whose known rule of warfare is an undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes, and conditions». In fact, the generally cau-

tious British approach reflected the politics of the war: the restoration of the colonies to royal government would be of limited value if subsequently holding them down required a substantial garrison and if the embers of rebellion remained among a discontented population. In contrast, conflict between Patriots and Loyalists could be far more vicious, and was so, in particular, in the South in 1780-1. Local Patriots considered the Loyalists as rebels against the legitimate government, and so justified their inflicting the harsh treatment appropriate for defeated rebels or in accord with the «law of retaliation». One retaliation naturally led to another, particularly in an environment where so much of the military activity was carried out by independently-operating and institutionally-weak militia forces, where kinship loyalties were strong, and where there were established rivalries, notably over land.

There was a contrast between the treatment of civilians (and prisoners) in Scotland in 1746, however, and that in the War of Independence, although, in each case, the British were responding to a rebellion. In Scotland, there was considerable harshness on the part of the regular army. This indicates the extent of variety that subverts any single or simple account of the subject.

The need to secure support helps explain the attention devoted by Patriot leaders throughout the war to politics, as political outcomes were needed to secure the persistence and coherence of the war effort. The British, in turn, could try, by political approaches and military efforts, to alter these political equations within the Thirteen Colonies. At times, they succeeded in doing so, as in the new political prospectus offered in South Carolina after the successful British siege of Charleston in 1780. Indeed, in tidewater South Carolina, the part of the colony most exposed to British amphibious power and most dependent on trade, British authority was swiftly recognised. This success appeared to be a vindication of the British strategy of combining military force with a conciliatory political policy, one offering a new imperial relationship that granted most of the Patriot demands made at the outbreak of the war. It was scarcely surprising that Northern politicians, such as Ezekiel Cornell of Rhode Island, came to doubt the determination of their Southern counterparts.

To treat this conflict, on either side, therefore simply as a military struggle is to underplay the key role of political goals. Indeed, these goals affected not only the moves of armies (a conventional, but overly-limited, popular understanding of strategy), but even the nature of the forces de-

ployed by both sides. The British use of German «mercenaries» and, far more, of Native Americans and Blacks, provided opportunities for political mobilisation on the part of the Patriots hostile to this use; even though, in practice, there was little British use of Blacks as soldiers and certainly nothing to match the Union during the Civil War.

The Patriot reliance on France, correspondingly, increased domestic support for war in Britain and greatly hit sympathy there for the Patriots. They could now be presented as hypocrites, willing to ally with a Catholic autocracy (two, when Spain joined in in 1779), and with Britain's national enemy (enemies from 1779) as well. These alliances brought the war to a new stage, as there was no inherent clarity as to the allocation of British resources between the conflict with the Bourbons and that with the Patriots. It was relatively easy for the Patriots to abandon the Greater American plan of conquering Canada, after failure in 1776 was followed by British military efforts in the Thirteen Colonies that had to be countered. This prefigured the challenge posed by Britain in 1814 when British forces attacked the Chesapeake, and, even more, what would have been Britain's strategy had there been intervention in the Civil War.

In contrast, during the War of American Independence, there was no such agreement over strategy in Britain among those committed to the war. Partisan politics came into play, not least the politics of justification, with the Opposition, itself far from united, repeatedly pressing for a focus on the Bourbons (France and Spain), not the Patriots, and the ministry unwilling to follow to the same extent. It neither wished, nor thought it appropriate, to abandon hopes of regaining America.

This debate was not settled until Yorktown, not so much, crucially, the surrender of the besieged and defeated British force on 19 October 1781 as, rather, the political consequences in Britain. This was specifically the fall of the North ministry the following March, and the fact that it was succeeded not by a similar one following royal views, but, rather, that the Opposition, under Charles, 2nd Marquess of Rockingham, came to power. As a result of the central role of politics in strategy, 1782 was a key year of the war.

In turn, in both the short and the long term, Britain won the battle of the peace by dividing the opposing coalition and offering peace terms separately. Crucially, the alliance between the Patriots and France ceased to be effective. Instead, there was a flexibility that created opportunities for new alignments. In June 1786, William Eden, an MP who was acting

as the British envoy in Paris to negotiate a trade treaty (which he succeeded in doing), reported

> there are strong appearances here of a disposition to believe that Great Britain and France ought to unite in some solid plan of permanent peace: and many of the most considerable people talk with little reserve of the dangers to be apprehended form the revolted colonies, if they should be encouraged to gain commercial strength and consistency of government[27].

That was not an option, but, in 1787, when Britain and France came close to conflict in the Dutch Crisis, there was scant prospect of America wishing to help, or being able to help, the French[28]. So also in 1790, when Britain came close to war with France and Spain in the Nootka Sound Crisis. This outcome underlines the conceptual problems of conceiving of strategy in terms of its military operationalisation.

At the same time, the dynamic character of strategy had been amply displayed by the unexpectedness of the challenge posed by the American Revolution. However much they might seek to see politics and strategy in a bilateral fashion, that of Britain and the Patriots, there was a number of other players, and the combined consequences were not that these also needed to be considered, but that they also greatly affected Britain and the Patriots. The most significant of these others were France, Spain, the Dutch, the Loyalists, the Native Americans, and European powers that were not directly involved but whose power politics could affect those otherwise involved, for example Austria and Prussia.

For France in 1778, there was a stark choice between intervening in North America or fulfilling treaty commitments to Austria in the War of Bavarian Succession. Had the latter choice been taken, France might well not have benefited, as it was to do, from the weakening of British power caused by supporting the Patriots in order to secure the loss of the Thirteen Colonies, for France would have been involved in war with Prussia, the dominions of which included territories in the lower Rhineland. Prussia would also have been in a position to attack France's other, and more vulnerable, allies in Germany. From this perspective, the absence of German unification was a precondition of American independence, for the rivalry between Austria and Prussia and the extent to which, unlike

[27] Eden to Francis, Marquess of Carmarthen, Foreign Secretary, 6 June 1786, NA, Foreign Office, 27/19, f. 116.

[28] P.P. Hill, *French Perceptions of the Early American Republic, 1783-1793*, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia 1988.

in 1866 when they fought, there was no rapid and decisive result, provided France with an opportunity to fight Britain in 1778. In contrast, France abandoned its commitment to the civil war in Mexico in part due to the rapid Prussian victory over Austria in 1866.

War between Austria and Prussia providing France with an opportunity to fight Britain had been the feared outcome by British ministries in the 1740s and 1750s, notably in 1741 and 1757. Yet, rather than providing an obvious pattern of causation, there was no clear path to American independence, whether due to Patriot progressivism and fighting methods, or to French intervention. It is time to turn to the narrative.