

The American Revolution

7.1 Introduction

When the **Revolutionary War** began in 1775, 15-year-old Joseph Martin was too young to join the Continental Army. But when recruiters returned to his Connecticut village a year later, he was ready to go.

The recruiters were looking for volunteers to go to New York, where the British were rumored to have landed 15,000 troops. “I did not care if there were fifteen times fifteen thousand,” Martin said later. “I never gave a thought about numbers. The Americans were invincible [unbeatable] in my opinion.”

Just two days after the Declaration of Independence was signed, Martin traded his plow for a musket (an early type of rifle). A week later he arrived in New York City, where he hoped to “sniff a little gunpowder.” As he recalled, “I was now what I had long wished to be, a soldier. I had obtained my heart’s desire; it was now my business to prove myself equal to my new profession.”

If Martin had known what lay ahead, he might not have been so pleased about his new profession. The army in New York was ill trained, ill equipped, and just plain ill. “Almost the whole regiment are sick,” reported a Massachusetts officer of his unit.

The British army, in contrast, was well trained, well equipped, and well supported by the Royal Navy. Rather than the 15,000 troops Martin had heard about, the British had assembled a force of 25,000 men in New York. More than 400 British ships bobbed in New York Harbor. This was the biggest army and the largest fleet the British had ever sent overseas.

In the face of such overwhelming force, the Americans should have been easily defeated. But they were not. In this chapter, you will read how soldiers like Joseph Martin stood up to mighty Britain to win a revolution and a new nation.

7.2 American Strengths and Weaknesses

The Patriots began their revolution in a weak position. They had a hastily organized, untrained army and a tiny navy. Their weaknesses were far more obvious than their strengths.

American Weaknesses The Continental Army was always short of men. General Washington never had more than 20,000 troops at one time and place. Many soldiers enlisted for six months or a year. Just when they were learning how to fight, they would pick up their muskets and go home to tend to their farms and families.

Few Americans were trained for battle. Some could shoot well enough from behind a tree. But when facing a mass of well-disciplined redcoats, they were likely to turn and run.

The army was plagued by shortages. Guns and gunpowder were so scarce that Benjamin Franklin suggested arming the troops with bows and arrows. Food shortages forced soldiers to beg for handouts. Uniforms were scarce as well. In winter, one could track shoeless soldiers by their bloody footprints in the snow.

Such shortages outraged Washington. But when he complained to the Continental Congress, nothing changed. Congress, the new nation’s only government, lacked the power to raise money for supplies by taxing the states (the former colonies).

In desperation, Congress printed paper money to pay for the war. But the value of this money dropped so low that merchants demanded to be paid in gold instead. And like everything else, gold was scarce.

American Strengths Still, the Americans had strengths. One was the patriotism of people like Joseph Martin, who willingly gave their lives to defend their liberty and their homes. Without them, the war would have been quickly lost.

The Americans also received help from overseas. Motivated by their old hatred of the English, the French secretly aided the rebels. During the first two years of the war, 90 percent of the Americans’ gunpowder came from Europe, mostly from France.

The Americans’ other great strength was their commander. George Washington was more than an experienced military leader. He was also a man who inspired courage and confidence. In the dark days to come, it was Washington who would keep the ragtag Continental army together.

7.3 British Strengths and Weaknesses

Britain, in contrast to the American colonies, entered the war with many advantages. But looks can be deceiving, and the British encountered many problems as well.

British Strengths With a professional army of 50,000 troops, British forces greatly outnumbered the Continental Army. In addition, George III hired 30,000 **mercenaries**. These hired soldiers were known as Hessians because they came

from a part of Germany called Hesse-Cassel. The British were also able to recruit many Loyalists, African Americans, and Native Americans into their forces.

British and Hessian troops were well trained in European military tactics. They excelled in large battles fought by a mass of troops on open ground. They also had far more experience than Americans at firing artillery.

The British forces were also well supplied. Compared to the pitifully equipped Continental Army, they seldom lacked for food, uniforms, weapons, or ammunition.

British Weaknesses Even so, the war presented Britain with huge problems. One was the distance between Britain and America. Sending troops and supplies across the Atlantic was slow and costly. News of battles arrived in England long after they had occurred, making planning difficult.

A second problem was that King George and his ministers were never able to convince the British people that defeating the rebels was vital to Britain's future. There were no Joseph Martins in England volunteering to fight the Americans. The longer the war dragged on, the less happy British taxpayers were about paying its heavy costs.

A third problem was poor leadership. Lord George Germain, the man chosen to run the war, had no real sense of how to defeat the rebels. How could he? He had never set foot in America. Nor did it occur to him to go see for himself what his army was up against. If he had, Germain might have realized that this was not a war that could be won by conquering a city or two. To end the revolution, his forces would have to crush the Patriots' will to fight, state by state. Instead, Germain kept changing plans and generals, hoping that some combination of the two would bring him an easy victory.

7.4 Britain Almost Wins the War

After abandoning Boston in the spring of 1776, Germain came up with his first plan for winning the war. British forces, led by General William Howe, were ordered to capture New York City. From that base, British troops would then move north to destroy the rebellion at its heart—Massachusetts.

To block the British invasion, Washington hurried with his army from Boston to New York. It was there that he heard good news: Congress had finally declared the colonies to be "free and independent states."

Washington had the Declaration of Independence read aloud to his troops. The time had come, he said, to "show our enemies, and the whole world, that free men, contending for their own land, are superior to any mercenaries on Earth." Most of his men agreed that independence was a prize worth fighting for.

African Americans and the War For African Americans, however, the Declaration of Independence raised both hopes and questions. Did Jefferson's words, "all men are created equal," apply to them? Would independence bring an end to slavery? Should they join the Revolution?

Even before independence was declared, a number of African Americans had joined the Patriot cause. Black militiamen fought at Lexington, Concord, and Bunker Hill. Early in the war, however, blacks were banned from the Continental Army. Washington did not want the army to become a haven for runaway slaves.

In contrast, the British promised freedom to all slaves who took up arms for the king. As a result, thousands of runaways became Loyalists and fought for Britain.

A shortage of volunteers soon forced Washington to change his mind. By 1779, about 15 percent of the soldiers in the Continental Army were African Americans. Large numbers of black sailors also served in the Continental Navy.

As black Americans joined the war effort, whites began to question their own beliefs. How could they accept slavery if they truly believed that all people are created equal, with the same rights to life, liberty, and happiness? By the time the war ended, Vermont, Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Pennsylvania had all taken steps to end slavery.

Defeat in New York On August 27, 1776, the American and British armies met in Brooklyn, New York, for what promised to be a decisive battle. The Americans began their defense of the city "in high spirits." But the inexperienced Americans were no match for the British, with their greater numbers and superior training. In two days of fighting, the British lost only 377 men, while the Americans lost 1,407.

Satisfied that the war was nearly won, Howe ordered a halt to the British attack. Washington, he assumed, would do what any self-respecting European general would do in a hopeless situation. He would surrender honorably. And so Howe waited.

Washington had no intention of giving up. But for his army to survive, he would have to retreat. Even though Washington knew this, he could not bring himself to utter the shameful word "retreat."

An officer named Thomas Mifflin rescued him from his pride. "What is your strength?" Mifflin asked. "Nine thousand," Washington replied. "Not enough," said Mifflin bluntly, "We must retreat."

Fading Hopes The battle for New York City was the first of many defeats for the Americans. In the weeks that followed, British forces chased the Americans out of New York, through New Jersey, and finally across the Delaware River into Pennsylvania.

For Joseph Martin and his comrades, this was a trying time. There was little food to eat, and the soldiers grew weak from hunger. As the weather turned cold, muddy roads and icy streams added to their misery. With their terms of enlistment nearly up, many soldiers headed for home. Along the way they spread the word that anyone who volunteered to risk his life in the Continental Army had to be crazy.

By the time Washington reached Pennsylvania, he had only a few thousand men. Many of his remaining troops, he reported, were “entirely naked and most so thinly clad [clothed] as to be unfit for service.” More troops had to be found, and found quickly, he wrote his brother. Otherwise, “I think the game will be pretty well up.”

7.5 A Pep Talk and Surprise Victories

By the end of 1776, the British also thought the war was just about won. General Howe offered to pardon all rebels who signed a statement promising to “remain in peaceful obedience” to the king. Thousands took him up on his offer.

The Crisis Washington knew that he had to do something, and quickly. Gathering his last troops together, he read to them from Thomas Paine’s new pamphlet, *The Crisis*:

These are the times that try men’s souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country; but he that stands it NOW, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman.

Next, Washington outlined a daring plan to attack Hessian troops who were camped for the winter in Trenton, New Jersey. Heartened by Paine’s words, his men did not “shrink from the service of their country.”

Victory in Trenton Late on December 25, 1776, Washington’s army crossed the ice-choked Delaware River in small boats. On the New Jersey shore, Washington gave his men the password for the long night march ahead: “Victory or Death.”

As the Americans made their way toward Trenton, a driving snow chilled them to the bone. Ice and rocks cut through their worn-out shoes. One officer reported to Washington that the troops’ guns were too wet to fire. “Use the bayonets,” the general replied. “The town must be taken.”

When the Americans reached Trenton, they found the Hessians happily sleeping off their Christmas feasts. Caught completely by surprise, the mercenaries surrendered. Washington took 868 prisoners without losing a single man. A week later, the Americans captured another 300 British troops at Princeton, New Jersey. These defeats told Howe that it would take more than capturing New York City and issuing pardons to win the war.

News of Washington’s victories electrified Patriots. “A few days ago they had given up their cause for lost,” wrote an unhappy Loyalist. “Their late successes have turned the scale and they are all liberty mad again.” The game was not yet up.

7.6 The Tide Begins to Turn

When the Revolution began, both sides adopted the same military **strategy**, or overall plan for winning the war. That strategy was to defeat the enemy in one big battle.

After barely escaping from New York, Washington revised his strategy. In the future, he wrote Congress, he would avoid large battles that might put his army at risk. Instead, the war would be “defensive.” Rather than defeating the British, Washington hoped to tire them out.

A New British Strategy Germain revised the British strategy as well. His new plan was to divide the rebels by taking control of New York’s Hudson River Valley. Control of this waterway would allow the British to cut New England off from the rest of the states. Without men and supplies from New England, the Continental Army would surely collapse.

To carry out this plan, General John Burgoyne left Canada in June 1777, with about 8,000 British soldiers and Indian warriors. He planned to move this army south to Albany, New York. There he would meet up with General Howe, who was supposed to march his army north from New York City.

Problems with Burgoyne’s Plan There were two big problems with Burgoyne’s plan. The first was that what looked like an easy invasion route on a map was anything but easy. The route Burgoyne chose from Canada to Albany took his army through more than 20 miles of tangled wilderness. His army had to build bridges, chop down countless trees, and lay out miles of log roads through swamps as it crept toward Albany.

To make matters worse, Burgoyne didn't travel light. His army was slowed by more than 600 wagons, 30 of them filled with his personal baggage. Even in the wilderness, "Gentleman Johnny" Burgoyne sipped champagne with his supper.

The second problem with Burgoyne's plan was that General Howe had his own ideas about how to win the war. Instead of marching to Albany, Howe headed for Philadelphia, the rebels' capital. There he hoped to lure Washington into another major battle. Howe hoped it would be the last one.

Washington, however, refused to risk his army in another big battle. He would not fight for Philadelphia. Instead, he played hide-and-seek with Howe, attacking here and there and then disappearing into the countryside.

A Turning Point By the time the slow-moving Burgoyne finally reached Saratoga Springs on the Hudson River, the area was swarming with militia. Although the rebels outnumbered his army, Burgoyne ordered an attack. Again and again the rebels beat back Burgoyne's troops. On October 17, 1777, Gentleman Johnny accepted defeat.

Burgoyne's surrender marked a turning point in the war. Before the victory at Saratoga, the American cause had looked hopeless to most of the world. Now the Americans had shown they could stand up to a British army and win.

Not long after this victory, France came into the war as an **ally** of the United States. The French government sent money, weapons, troops, and warships to the Americans. Spain also entered the war against Britain. The American cause no longer looked quite so hopeless.

Winter at Valley Forge Saratoga was a stunning victory, but the war was far from over. While General Washington's army roamed the countryside, Howe's forces still occupied Philadelphia.

Late in 1777, Congress declared a day of thanksgiving. By this time, Washington and his army were on their way to Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, to make camp for the winter. Joseph Martin described the army's "celebration":

We had nothing to eat for two or three days previous.... But we must now have what Congress said, a sumptuous [lavish] Thanksgiving.... It gave each and every man a gill [a few ounces] of rice and a tablespoon of vinegar! The army was now not only starved but naked. The greatest part were not only shirtless and barefoot, but destitute of [without] all other clothing, especially blankets.

Washington's troops were hungry because many farmers preferred to sell food to the British. The British paid them in gold, while Congress paid them in paper money. As for uniforms and blankets, merchants had raised the prices for these items sky-high. This desire for profits at the army's expense outraged Washington. "No punishment," he fumed, "is too great for the man who can build his greatness upon his country's ruin."

To distract his men from their misery, Washington put Baron Friedrich von Steuben, a volunteer from Prussia, in charge of training. The Prussian's method, wrote Martin, was "continual drill." It worked wonders. "The army grows stronger every day," wrote one officer. "There is a spirit of discipline among the troops that is better than numbers."

Another foreign volunteer, the Marquis de Lafayette, also helped raise the troops' spirits. Although he was one of the richest men in France, Lafayette chose to share the hardships of Valley Forge. He even used his own money to buy the men warm clothing. "The patient fortitude [courage] of the officers and soldiers," Lafayette wrote, "was a continual miracle."

When at last spring arrived, Washington received news that the British were about to abandon Philadelphia. The time had come to put his newly trained army to the test.

The Battle of Monmouth By this time, Sir Henry Clinton had replaced General Howe as commander of the British forces in America. In Clinton's view, taking over Philadelphia had gained the British nothing. He ordered his army to retreat to New York City, where the Royal Navy could keep it supplied by sea.

Now it was Washington's turn to chase an army across New Jersey. On June 28, 1778, he caught up with the retreating British near Monmouth, New Jersey. In the battle that followed, Washington was everywhere, constantly rallying his men to stand and fight. "Cheering them by his voice and example," wrote Lafayette, "never had I beheld [seen] so superb a man."

Late that night, the British slipped across the Hudson River to safety in New York City. Washington camped with his army nearby. It was pleasing, he wrote, "that after two years maneuvering...both armies are brought back to the very point they set out from." Neither army knew it yet, but the war in the North was over.

7.7 The War Goes South

After failing to conquer any state in the North, the British changed strategies yet again. Their new plan was to move the war to the South. There, they believed, thousands of Loyalists were just waiting to join the king's cause.

Clinton began his “southern campaign” with a successful attack on Savannah, Georgia. From Georgia, he moved on to take control of North and South Carolina. At that point, Clinton returned to New York City, leaving Lord Charles Cornwallis to run the war in the South.

Saving the South Cornwallis soon learned that he did not really control the Carolinas after all. **Guerrillas**—soldiers who are not part of a regular army—kept the American cause alive. One of them was Francis Marion, who was also known as the “Swamp Fox.” Marion’s band of rebels harassed the British with hit-and-run raids. Then they faded into the swamps and forests like foxes.

Late in 1780, Washington sent General Nathaniel Greene to slow the British advance through the South. Greene’s army was too small to meet Cornwallis in a major battle. Instead, Greene led Cornwallis’s troops on an exhausting chase through the southern backcountry. He wrote of his strategy, “We fight, get beat, rise, and fight again.”

Greene’s strategy worked wonderfully. In April 1781, Cornwallis wrote that he was “quite tired of marching about the country.” He moved his army to Yorktown, a sleepy tobacco port on Chesapeake Bay in Virginia, for a good rest.

A Trap at Yorktown By the time Cornwallis was settling into Yorktown, France had sent nearly 5,000 troops to join Washington’s army in New York. In August, Washington learned that another 3,000 troops were scheduled to arrive soon in 29 French warships.

Washington used this information to set a trap for Cornwallis. Secretly, he moved his army south to Virginia. When they arrived, they joined the French and surrounded Yorktown on land with more than 16,000 troops.

Meanwhile, the French warships showed up just in time to seal off the entrance to Chesapeake Bay. Their appearance was a crucial help to the Americans. Now Cornwallis was cut off from the British navy and any hope of rescue by sea.

The trap was sprung on October 6, 1781. Joseph Martin watched as a flag was raised to signal American and French gunners to open fire on Yorktown. “I confess I felt a secret pride swell in my heart,” he wrote, “when I saw the ‘star-spangled banner’ waving majestically.” The shelling went on for days, until “most of the guns in the enemy’s works were silenced.”

Cornwallis Surrenders With Yorktown exploding around him, at first Cornwallis clung to the hope that the British navy would come to his rescue. When no ships arrived, he finally agreed to surrender.

On October 19, 1781, American and French troops formed two long lines that stretched for more than a mile along the road to Yorktown—the French on one side, the Americans on the other. The two lines could not have looked more different. The French were dressed in elegant uniforms that gleamed with gold and silver braid in the afternoon sun. The Americans’ uniforms—and not everyone even had uniforms—were patched and faded. Behind the lines stood civilians who had traveled for miles to witness this glorious event.

After hours of waiting, the crowd watched as 8,000 British troops left Yorktown to lay down their arms. The defeated troops moved “with slow and solemn step.” They were accompanied by a slow tune known as “The World Turned Upside Down.” This same sad tune had been played at Saratoga after the British surrender.

Cornwallis did not take part in this ceremony, saying that he was ill. In reality, the British commander could not bear to surrender publicly to an army that he looked down on as “a contemptible and undisciplined rabble [mob].” While Cornwallis sulked in his tent, his men surrendered their arms. Many of them wept bitter tears.

To the watching Americans, there was nothing sad about that day. “It was a noble sight to us,” wrote Martin, “and the more so, as it seemed to promise a speedy conclusion to the contest.”

7.8 The War Ends

The conclusion of the war was not quite as speedy as Martin had hoped. When Lord North, the British prime minister, heard about Cornwallis’s defeat, he paced up and down the room repeating, “Oh God! It is all over!” The British public agreed. Yorktown took the heart out of whatever support was left for the war. Still, months dragged by before King George was finally forced to accept defeat.

For most Americans, the end of the war was a time for joy and celebration. They had gained the freedom to govern themselves and create their own future. But liberty came at a high price. At least 6,200 Americans had been killed in combat. An estimated 10,000 died in camp of diseases, and another 8,500 as British prisoners. As a proportion of the total population, more Americans died fighting the Revolutionary War than in any other conflict except the Civil War, in which Americans fought one another.

The Treaty of Paris Early in 1783, representatives of the United States and Britain signed a peace **treaty** (agreement) in Paris. The Treaty of Paris had three important parts. First, Great Britain agreed to recognize the United States as an independent nation. Second, Britain gave up its claims to all lands between the Atlantic Coast and the Mississippi River,

from Canada south to Florida. Third, the United States agreed to return all rights and property taken from Loyalists during the war.

Many Loyalists did not trust the treaty's promise of fair treatment—and for good reason. During the war, Loyalists had been badly treated by Patriots. More than 80,000 black and white Loyalists left the United States to settle in British Canada.

The Influence of the American Revolution The Revolutionary War had a major impact in other parts of the world. In the 1800s, it would help inspire revolts against European rule in South America. In Europe, it thrilled liberals who dreamed of creating their own democracies. The American example was especially influential in France, which soon had its own revolution. As one Frenchman wrote, “They [Americans] are the hope of the human race; they may well become its model.”

7.9 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, you read how the American colonies won their independence from Great Britain. You used a visual metaphor to record factors that helped to decide the outcome of the Revolutionary War.

At the start of the war, the Americans seemed sure to lose the fight with Britain. The poorly trained and poorly equipped American forces were no match for Britain's professional army and huge navy. But patriotic feeling, help from overseas, and a magnificent commander helped to overcome British strengths. In addition, fighting a war in far-off America posed major problems for the British.

Still, the British enjoyed a string of victories in the early part of the war. After the loss of New York, only Washington's leadership kept the Americans going. Then, beginning with the victory at Saratoga, the tide began to turn. When France and Spain joined in the conflict, the Americans had the help they needed to outlast the British.

The war's climax came when the Americans, with the help of the French, trapped Cornwallis's army at Yorktown. After Cornwallis surrendered, it was only a matter of time until Britain gave up the fight.

The conflict ended officially with the signing of the Treaty of Paris. In this agreement, Britain recognized the United States as an independent country.

At great cost in lives and property, Americans had won their freedom. They had also set an example that inspired people in other countries to dream of winning their own liberty. Now they faced the task of organizing a government for their new nation.