

Epilogue

Saratoga's Fruit: The Strategic Revolution

British Losses

The American victory at Saratoga radically changed the strategic dynamics of the American Revolution. Piers Mackesy, who wrote about Great Britain's defeat, noted "[t]hat in round figures the British loss at Saratoga was not large. But it would be difficult to replace, and more serious still was the proof of what the perceptive had long suspected: that the American country with its armed population might be beyond the power of Britain to reconquer with any force which she could raise and sustain in America. The grand design of 1775 lay in ruins."¹ This concluding chapter examines why Mackesy's assessment is so cogent.

The first and most obvious of Saratoga's fruits was the elimination of a British army, even one as modest as Burgoyne's. The rebellious Americans had one less army to worry about than they had during the summer and autumn of 1777, and the soldiers who surrendered on October 17 were well-trained, experienced veterans led by competent officers. Britain's limited manpower resources, which had obliged her to hire German regiments, made the loss of the slightly more than 7,000 men who had comprised Burgoyne's army on July 1 a more severe blow than simple numbers might otherwise indicate.

Also lost were thirty-seven guns left at Ticonderoga and Fort George, and another thirty-six field pieces that formed the artillery train committed at Freeman's farm and Saratoga.² Thus, the Americans gained seventy-three valuable pieces of ordnance during the autumn of 1777. In addition, the British losses included thousands of muskets, German Jäger rifles, flints, powder, and cannon balls captured and damaged during the course of the campaign. Bateaux, wagons, carts, and horses added to those losses. These figures do not include the materiel lost when Barry St. Leger failed to take Fort Stanwix. Although not every British article found its way into the American magazine, many—including all of the cannon—did. The result was the substantial enhancing of Patriot combat capability.

More important than Burgoyne's surrender was the defeat of the strategy that had informed Britain's campaigns of 1776 and 1777: using Canada as a base for invading the northern American interior and quickly crushing the rebellion through land offensives. For such a success,

controlling the Champlain-Hudson corridor was imperative. “The advantage of controlling the Hudson line would have been great,” Mackesy observed. “It would have reduced the handicap of operating on exterior lines, for instead of slow communications by sea which were shut entirely in the winter, there would have been a direct land route between the two bases [New York City and Canada]. The unified command which had ceased [Carleton in the north and Howe in the south] could have been restored, and the two armies acted as one.”³ General George Washington’s Fabian tactics against Sir William Howe and Horatio Gates’ defeat of Burgoyne severed the nexus between the two British fronts.

New Military and Economic Strategies

After the loss at Saratoga, the Empire needed a new strategy for prosecuting the war, a need that would have existed even if France had not become a belligerent. Britain’s leaders undertook to develop one that eventually included three elements: negotiated settlement, naval operations, and military pressure.

Negotiating a settlement with the rebels fell to the members of the Carlisle Commission, which owed its creation to the fear that France and the American Congress would form an alliance. Frederick Howard, Earl of Carlisle, led a team that included the Howes (Admiral Richard, Lord Howe, and General Sir William); William Eden, a member of the Board of Trade and brother of Robert Eden, last royal governor of Maryland, and George Johnstone, a Scot and former governor of West Florida. John Berkenhout and Sir John Temple joined the commissioners in New York in August 1778 as secret agents. The ministry gave those commissioners powers to treat with the Congress and, if necessary, suspend all acts since 1763 that affected North America.

The commissioners reached Philadelphia on June 6, 1778. Because the Continental Congress had resolved, on April 22, that anyone, individually or in concert, who reached terms with the commission was an enemy of the United States, their mission was doomed *ab initio*. Sir Henry Clinton’s preparations to evacuate the city made its futility all the more obvious. Lord Carlisle requested a conference on June 9, but the Congress responded on the seventeenth that it would negotiate only British withdrawal and recognition of American independence. On October 3, Lord Carlisle directed a futile direct appeal to Americans that offered a general pardon to all people and to civil and military office-holders who applied within forty days, excepting only those who might be responsible for deaths of British subjects after the date of the appeal. All of the members of the commission—except Temple, who remained behind as an agent—departed America on November 27.⁴

The Royal Navy’s primary functions, until 1778, were transporting troops and supplies, raiding rebel seaports, and blockading the coast. But the blockade was a manifest failure and probably exceeded the capacity of any navy. Patrolling the extensive Atlantic coastline certainly exceeded Admiral Lord Howe’s resources. His assignment required secure access to sources of fresh water and stores, but the British undertook no sustained aggressive campaign to acquire sufficient bases. They evacuated Boston before taking New York City, and did not capture Newport, Rhode Island, until 1776, nor Philadelphia until 1777, the year of Saratoga.⁵

France’s much-dreaded involvement altered fundamentally the war’s maritime character: the West Indies became, and remained throughout the remainder of the war, the focus of British

naval strategic planning.⁶ John Montagu, Earl of Sandwich and First Lord of the Admiralty, had long championed that order of priorities, and a powerful West Indian lobby supported him. But they would have been less influential had they not reflected a tenable perception of imperial interest. There was obvious reason to question whether Britain would ever recover the North American colonies; whereas, regardless of the course of hostilities, the Indies were incapable of independent existence, and so would remain some nation's colonies.

Their sugar-based wealth was vast. The British West Indies sent almost 300 ships into London during a normal year, and their imports in 1776 were worth 4,250,000 pounds, compared with the East India Company's 1,500,000. The islands fit more logically into the mercantilistic scheme for empire than did the products of American farms and fisheries. They supplied commodities that the home islands would otherwise have to buy from foreign rivals. And, unlike some American goods, they did not compete with domestically-produced ones. West Indian planters were better customers for British manufacturers than Americans because profits from sugar enabled them to pay their debts.⁷ Possessing the Indies would soon repay the war's expenses and help bring the Americans to terms. Lord George Germain was certainly of this mind. "Having them in our possession, instead of cringing to an American Congress for peace," he wrote in his "Thoughts on the Caribbean Stations," dated December 5, 1777, "we shall prescribe the terms and bid America be only what we please."⁸ The Indies seemed to promise all of the following: compensation for losses in America; payment for the war; a favorable trade balance; an economic lever to force the Americans to come to terms; and fruitful operations against France.

The bottom line was that the King was willing to come to terms with America "[f]or the chance of conquering the French West Indies and 'avenging the faithless and insolent France.'" As early as the end of January he had been contemplating a complete withdrawal from the rebel colonies, retaining only Canada, Nova Scotia, and Florida.⁹ He insisted that Britain mobilize her resources against France, and that plans for providing Clinton with more men to resume land operations in the north were dead. A force of 2,000 or 3,000 men could be retained in America to attack rebel ports, with others committed to maintaining garrisons in New York, Rhode Island, Nova Scotia, and Florida. The new strategy, however, demanded that Clinton abandon Philadelphia. All other troops would become part of the force used in the West Indies campaign.¹⁰

With George III and his First Lord of the Admiralty relegating the American theater of operations to a poor second in their priorities, the crucial third party in planning a strategy for the post-Saratoga war was Jeffrey, Lord Amherst, who became the King's chief military adviser, replacing recently deceased General Edward Harvey. On March 19, 1778, he was effectively appointed to command of the army with a cabinet seat—although the title of commander-in-chief was withheld out of consideration for the Duke of Gloucester, the titular incumbent. Amherst had a merited reputation for honesty and competence, but his post as commander of the home forces in England and Wales, his unease among politicians, his taciturnity, and the extraordinary demands of an aggressive West Indian commitment diminished his effectiveness as a strategic planner.

Defeat at Saratoga validated the opinions of two important critics of the strategy of 1776-77. William Knox, undersecretary of the American Department, had believed since the war's outset that attacking the rebels where they were strongest was a mistake, and that trying to

recover the northern colonies was not worth the effort. Instead of following Sir William Howe's plan of using Pennsylvania as a base for operations against Virginia, the army should concentrate its efforts where the rebels were weakest: Georgia and the Carolinas. With the Royal Navy dominating the coast, Clinton's army to the north, and the Indians on the frontier, Virginia would be ready to return to the imperial fold. With the South secured, the northern colonies would be isolated.¹¹

Charles Jenkinson, later Lord Liverpool, went further and was more influential. He had been a joint secretary of the treasury, was master of the Royal Mint, and became secretary at war in 1778. Like economists Adam Smith and Josiah Tucker, dean of Gloucester, Jenkinson believed that the Americans were so dependent upon British goods that losing the colonies would not necessarily mean losing the American market, and that Britain would profit economically by dispensing with political control of its North American colonies. Dean Tucker argued that a political and military alliance with an independent America "would be more productive of good than an attempt to suppress the 'smothered rebellion.'"¹² Soon after learning of Burgoyne's surrender, Jenkinson urged that, if Britain was going to limit American operations, the wisest course would be to abandon New England and establish the imperial line on the Hudson. He believed, not unreasonably, that New Englanders provided the rebellion's intellectual, ideological, political, and military leadership. However, he erred in assigning Yankee militiamen so much military importance, and that their provincialism would prevent their engaging in operations in the Middle and Southern States if Britain fortified and blocked the Hudson frontier. And he failed, as did most of his contemporaries, to appreciate American capacities for creating a regular military establishment not dependent upon the whims of local militiamen. Yet, his was a remarkable strategic argument.¹³

More unusual was his economic thesis. Piers Mackesy summarized it this way:

England had no need to control New England's trade. Of all the produce of the rebel colonies only the tobacco of the south was worth monopolising by restrictive trade laws; and of England's exports to America only linen and some silks would suffer if every Act of Trade were repealed. New England would always buy British woollen goods, hardware and India goods because we sold them cheapest; indeed, if the woollen import figures of Canada and Nova Scotia meant anything, the New Englanders were buying by stealth at that very moment. Most of their other British imports were for re-export to the Spanish Main, and were finding their way there through other channels. New England's own exported products mostly went to foreign markets.... New England, in a word, could be cast out of the Empire without damage to Britain's wealth and security....¹⁴

Exaggerating the impact of Knox's and Jenkinson's arguments would be unwise. But, even among those in government who did follow them closely, the defeat on the upper Hudson revealed the fallacies upon which the strategy of the past two years had relied. The realities behind the arguments appealed to ministers looking for a new way to deal with the rebellion and the internationalization of the war that France's involvement must make inevitable.

The change in priorities was made manifest in the orders Sir Henry Clinton received on March 18, 1778, notifying him that he would receive no reinforcements, and that 8,000 of his men would leave him for duty in Florida and the West Indies. It only remained for him to

abandon Philadelphia and take what was left of his field army to New York City. France was now the principal enemy, and Britain would concentrate its greatest efforts in the American South and the West Indies.¹⁵

The French Connection

The time has come to turn to how victory at Saratoga changed the war for American independence into an international conflict by persuading France to move from covertly supporting rebellion within its traditional foe's empire into openly allying itself with a Continental Congress that had declared itself, and the people it presumed to represent, independent.

France emerged from the Seven Years' War and the Peace of Paris of 1763 reconciled to renouncing colonial ambitions in North America, but she did not accept a status as a cipher in international politics. Before the ink was proverbially dry on the peace treaty, her foreign minister, Etienne-Francois, Duke of Choiseul, was devoting attention and energy to rebuilding French economic, military, and naval resources to take revenge on perfidious Albion and to reverse the balance of power imposed by the treaty.¹⁶

With a remarkable appreciation of the effect of France's cession of Canada upon the potential for encouraging an independent sentiment among newly-secure Americans, Choiseul planned to fish in what he hoped would become troubled waters, and sent agents to Britain and her restless colonies to report on matters military and political. His successor, Comte de Vergennes, applied his subtle, methodical intellect to bringing the duke's objective to fruition through careful management of relations with Spain and Austria, and to a determination to engage England only with "a sure chance of success."¹⁷ His early reaction to American colonials' discontents was one of cautious interest, which became more responsive to the potential for profiting from those discontents during mid-1775 as Caron de Beaumarchais, functioning as an agent in London, observed through reports and in person that Britain's problems could be exploited to French advantage. During September, Vergennes sent Archard de Bonvouloir, who knew something of America and was fluent in English, to the colonies as a confidential observer, with oral instructions to assure American leaders that France did not covet Canada and would not be hostile to an independent nation on the North American Continent.¹⁸

Even before Bonvouloir reported back to him, Vergennes approached his King about assisting the insurgents by secretly supplying them with munitions and money. While still preparing to present his ideas in a manner that would overcome the King's scruples, he received, on February 27, 1776, his agent's report assuring him that the colonists were, indeed, preparing to declare themselves independent and would fight to make that declaration a reality, and that Bonvouloir, without committing his master, had given the Americans reason to hope that French ports would be open to their trade and for even more concrete assistance.

Soon after Bonvouloir's report reached the foreign minister, Beaumarchais, who was in contact with Arthur Lee, correspondent of the Continental Congress' Secret Committee of Correspondence, sent Vergennes his "Peace or War" memoir, which the minister passed on to the King. Lee had represented to Beaumarchais "[t]hat if the American insurrectionists should become too discouraged at the futility of their efforts to obtain from the French Ministry aid in

the shape of powder and munitions, they might join forces with England and fall on the French sugar islands.” The young author and amateur agent suggested to the King that the way to secure those precious islands was to “give help to the Americans, so as to make their forces equal to those of England,” and that France provide secret aid to the rebels.¹⁹ The argument helped overcome the monarch’s scruples against supporting rebellion.

With cautious persistence Vergennes maneuvered to commit Louis XVI and the nation to his program of revenge against England and aid to her rebellious subjects. To shorten a long and complex story, he succeeded, against controller of finance Baron Turgot’s strenuous opposition, in persuading the King: to adopt a policy of convincing Great Britain that France and her ally, Spain, desired peace; to reorganize the army and navy; and to support the Americans’ revolution with money and munitions. On May 2, 1776, Louis directed that 1,000,000 livres be made available to the rebels through a fictitious company, Roderique Hortalez et Cie.²⁰ Charles III of Spain soon matched Louis’ contribution for distribution through the same dummy trader. France thus responded to the coldly logical principles of balance-of-power politics by offering aid to Britain’s rebellious colonists before any agent of the Continental Congress even arrived in Paris. It did so while preparing to engage her ancient foe [England] in war when the opportune moment arrived.

American Diplomacy

The agents the colonies had employed previously to represent their interests in London were, excepting Benjamin Franklin and Arthur Lee, inadequate to the task of providing diplomatic services for the Continental Congress. America’s “foreign office” had its real origin in the secret committee “for the sole purpose of corresponding with our friends in Great Britain, Ireland and other parts of the world,” created by the Congress on November 29, 1775.²¹ Less than a fortnight later, on December 12, the Committee of Secret Correspondence initiated American diplomatic correspondence when it directed Arthur Lee, in London, to report on European governments’ attitudes toward the rebellious Americans.²²

Youngest of the five famous revolutionary Lee brothers (the others being Philip Ludwell, Richard Henry, Francis Lightfoot, and William), Arthur was well-educated, patriotic, unstable, and an important participant in the new republic’s rallying of international support. Sometime during 1775 Lee met Beaumarchais at John Wilkes’ house and began the fruitful dialogue that produced Hortalez et Cie’s creation and the launching of secret foreign support. Under Silas Deane’s management, critical aid flowed to the rebel cause.

July 1776 brought significant change to Franco-American diplomacy. The Continental Congress declared the insurrectionist provinces independent, and it appointed John Adams, John Dickinson, Robert Morris, Benjamin Harrison, and Benjamin Franklin to a committee for drafting a plan for treaties. On July 18, they reported a set of model articles, which the delegates adopted on September 17, and a week later drafted instructions to accompany the “Plan of 1776.”²³

On December 4, 1776, Benjamin Franklin—one of the authors of the “Plan of 1776”—arrived in France. He was the most famous American, and he soon overshadowed Silas Deane and the choleric Arthur Lee. Franklin appealed to the European romantic’s idea of what an unspoiled American should be, and aristocratic France throbbed with sympathy for the brave

men who were contending for rights flowing from natural law. With Vergennes' connivance the Marquis de Lafayette illegally sailed to join General Washington's army. Prussian Freiherr Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben left France to offer his professional expertise to the amateurish Americans. Many officers applied to the American commissioners with offers to volunteer—with appropriate rank and pay—and at least twenty-eight entered the Continental Army during 1776-1777.²⁴ One, the Comte de Broglie, brother of the Marshall de Broglie, aspired to replace Washington and become a dictator, establishing a kind of stadtholderate in the newly-independent land.²⁵ Bavarian Johan Kalb, who is embalmed in American hagiography as “Baron de Kalb,” initially came to America as Broglie's agent and remained to become a major general and die of wounds received at Camden, South Carolina, in 1780.

Franklin, Deane, and Lee devoted themselves during 1777 to increasing the flow of covert assistance, while simultaneously working zealously to persuade their secret ally to accord official recognition to American independence and to enter into a formal alliance against the common foe. On their own initiative they made solemn promises not to make a separate peace with Britain if, as a result of a treaty of commerce and amity, Britain went to war with France and Spain.²⁶ The Congress soon provided official sanction for a triple alliance, pledging to fight on until Britain was expelled from North America and the West Indies and Portugal was subjugated—making peace only upon the concurrence of all three parties.²⁷

From mid-1776 through 1777, France inched toward war, influenced by the varying fortunes of American arms. When the rebels seemed to achieve some success and increase the likelihood of making good their declaration of independence, the French edged a little closer to the brink; Washington's defeats on the lower Hudson and retreat from Manhattan and across New Jersey caused them to draw back. His spectacular recovery at Trenton and Princeton gave some cause for momentary optimism, but his Fabian tactics, Congress' abandoning Philadelphia, and rumors of peace overtures that would reconcile England and her colonists made France and her ally, Spain, hesitate to intrude themselves into a war whose outcome was so problematic. So Vergennes and his Spanish counterparts, first Jeronimo Grimaldi and then Jose Floridablanca, confined their involvement to watchful waiting and keeping the American rebellion alive through covert support.

The Impact of Saratoga

But then everything changed. When news of Burgoyne's surrender reached Paris on December 3, fevered consideration of national interest replaced watchful waiting. Questions about Americans' ability to fight a campaign to a successful conclusion seemed resolved. Adequately armed and provisioned, they might rend the fabric of Britain's empire — and overt Franco-Spanish engagement could help assure that happy end. But France must act quickly: fear of an Anglo-American reconciliation, never far from Vergennes' thoughts, made immediate recognition of the United States and open military and logistical support imperative. On December 17, 1777, and without waiting to consult Floridablanca, the French foreign minister promised the commissioners recognition through a treaty of alliance and commerce that would guarantee independence, and would in turn engage the United States to not accept alluring terms from Britain—terms that would leave France fighting her ancient enemy alone.²⁸

The minister's fear that Britain, shocked by the disaster at Saratoga, would try to persuade

the American commissioners to accept favorable terms short of independence was realistic. Spies had reported to Whitehall that, before Saratoga, Franklin and Deane would have been receptive to such an overture and were averse to a French alliance; and agent Paul Wentworth met with Franklin and Deane on January 6 to sound them out. They rebuffed him, and Wentworth returned to London to report his failure to Undersecretary William Eden, whose competent secret service agents—including Edward Bancroft, who was to become the commission’s secretary — kept Lord North’s ministry well-informed about the details of Franco-American negotiations.²⁹

For two weeks Vergennes waited for Floridablanca to respond to his proposal that Spain join France in an alliance with the Americans, but the Spaniard opposed recognizing their independence. Fearful that further delay would be fatal to his objectives, the French minister advised the commissioners on January 8 that Louis XVI was disposed to enter into an alliance.³⁰

After a month’s delay the French and American plenipotentiaries signed two treaties on February 6. One, the treaty of “conditional and defensive alliance,” became operative if France and Great Britain went to war. It affirmed, in Article II, that “The essential and direct End of the present defensive alliance is to maintain effectually the liberty, Sovereignty, and independence absolute and unlimited of the said united States, as well in Matters of Gouvernement [sic] as of commerce.” The other eleven articles detailed the allies’ obligations and rights and made important mutual pledges to “aid each other with their good Offices, their Counsels and their forces,” that France renounced future possession of the Bermuda Islands “as well as of any part of the Continent of North America...”; that “Neither of the two Parties will conclude either Truce or Peace with Great Britain, without the formal consent of the other first obtained; and that they mutually engage not to lay down their arms, until the Independence of the united states shall have been formally or tacitly assured by the Treaty or Treaties that shall terminate the War,” as well as a famous perpetual guarantee of territory.³¹ The other treaty, one of amity and commerce, mutually conferred most favored nation trading privileges on the parties.³²

On March 20, Louis XVI ceremoniously received the Continental Congress’ commissioners in his court at Versailles. The treaties and the King’s reception transformed the war from a civil war into an international conflict that eventually involved Spain and brought into existence the League of Armed Neutrality—a true revolution in international affairs.

American independence became a reality.

