

Saratoga Spells British Defeat

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Though the American Revolution cannot be simplified merely to the confines of the Revolutionary War that broke out between Britain and its North American colonies in rebellion, the Revolution likely would not have managed to succeed absent of a military victory for the insurgents. Thus, it is crucial to examine just how thirteen intractable colonies managed to topple an empire that was so clearly their military superior in one of the greatest upsets history has yet seen. In particular, why did the Battle of Saratoga turn the tides of war and give the colonists momentum enough for eventual victory? Britain's resolve crumbled, beginning with their two-part downfall at Saratoga, because they shifted too much focus to fending off a European threat. They also began to forfeit the ideological motivations for war to the Patriots when they sent the Carlisle Commission, and they found themselves alone on the North American front, facing too many enemies after having suffered too demoralizing a defeat.

The ideological aftershocks from Saratoga that reverberated throughout the Empire were too much for Britain to suppress. When news reached the Mother Country regarding General Burgoyne's surrender, Parliament—which had been handling the war effort largely in secret up to that point—was forced to open their doors to the people to plot their next steps, engaging in a rudimentary form of popular politics so despised by the Authoritarians.¹ The people protesting continuation of the conflict had grown tired of the strain, indicating that the British ministers were losing the crucial support of Loyalists.² Rumors of the unrest Saratoga triggered began to spread, extending to correspondence written from James Madison to his father in March of the following year.³ He described news that “Burgoyne's disaster had produced the most violent fermentation in England” that resulted in “a motion for acknowledging our independence [being]

¹ Andrew Draper, “The Place of Saratoga in the Revolutionary War,” *Proceedings of the New York State Historical Association* 12 (1913): 96.

² *Ibid.*,

³ James Madison to James Madison, Sr., March 6, 1778, in *Founders Online: National Archives*.

overruled by a small majority only.”⁴ Just as the tides of war were beginning to turn for the first time in the colonists’ favor, British citizens were beginning to lose their ideological motivation for continuing the fight.

Inversely correlated with the Loyalists’ growing wariness of war was the boost in Patriot morale this victory provided. They began propagandizing their triumph, using it as motivational fodder for downtrodden and dismayed troops. One month after Burgoyne’s men were escorted out of Saratoga, George Washington issued a rallying cry to New Jerseyans because “the Enemy [had] thrown a considerable force into their state” as well.⁵ To lift their spirits, he cited the “glorious effects” achieved by brave fighting and “that Spirit of Union” present in Saratoga that caused British troops to “lay down their Arms in the most submissive manner.”⁶ Such a decisive blow dealt to the British affirmed the plausibility of an eventual victory for the colonies. In one exaggerated account published in the *North-Carolina Weekly Gazette*, the surrender was described as a “fatal blow” that “must surely check the pride and vindictive spirit” of the opposition.⁷ The writer went on to describe the “festive joy” that followed the arrival of the news and issued an imperative: “Let every countenance brighten and every heart overflow with joy, at the important event.”⁸ Thusly, they were sufficiently confident in their cries for independence when the Carlisle Commission arrived, rendering the effort for peace futile and cementing the colonists’ desire for nothing less than liberty for all.

The Carlisle Commission only added fuel to the fire of the colonists’ pursuits; this had the opposite effect of Britain’s intentions in sending the delegation. In his extensive history of

⁴ Ibid.,

⁵ George Washington to the Militia of Certain New Jersey Counties, November 20, 1777, in *Founders Online: National Archives*.

⁶ Ibid.,

⁷ “Supplement to the North-Carolina Gazette.” *North-Carolina Weekly Gazette* (New Bern, NC), Nov. 7, 1777, in *Newspapers.com*.

⁸ Ibid.,

the Revolution, early historian William Gordon gave an account of the Continental Congress' response to the commission. He described the colonists' notion that "the said bills [were] intended to operate upon the hopes and fears of the good people of these states" in promising them all of the concessions that could have forestalled the war had they precluded it.⁹ He quoted from their response, which turned down the proposed peace terms so decisively by making it treasonous for anyone in the colonies to "make any...agreement with the British commissioners."¹⁰ Wanting to prevent "the commission's proposals [from weakening] American resolve," colonial spokespeople denouncing it employed inflammatory dismissive rhetoric.¹¹ If Britain really did want peace, the colonists' writing off the effort as an attempt to "create divisions...and a defection from the common cause" was sure to reignite some flabbergasted colonists.¹² Similarly, Gouverneur Morris penned a series of open letters to "get the propaganda advantage."¹³ In his June 20th letter he reminded the American people—through a public response to the Earl of Carlisle—that "the blood of the innocent [was] upon [British] hands."¹⁴ He categorized the Earl's efforts as the topstone to a pyramid of blunders" and reasserted that the British argument for the proposal crumbled under scrutiny.¹⁵ He nullified their incentive of "Security of your person and property" which would supposedly have been achieved by "[becoming] a subject of the King" by saying that "[his] person and property [were] secure already" and that he "had much rather make laws for [himself] and govern [himself]."¹⁶ By

⁹ William Gordon, *The History of the Rise, Progress, and Establishment of the Independence of the United States of America* (London: Printed for the Author, 1788), 78.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*,

¹¹ Gouverneur Morris, *To Secure the Blessings of Liberty: Selected Writings of Gouverneur Morris*, ed J. Jackson Barlow (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2012).

¹² Gordon, 78.

¹³ See Footnote 11.

¹⁴ Gouverneur Morris to the Earl of Carlisle, Lord Viscount Howe, June 20, 1778, in *Online Library of Liberty*.

¹⁵ Gouverneur Morris to the Earl of Carlisle, July 21, 1778, in *Online Library of Liberty*.

¹⁶ Gouverneur Morris to his Excellency the Earl of Carlisle, September 19, 1778, in *Online Library of Liberty*.

relentlessly debunking the tenets of the British argument for restoration of unity and peace, Morris seized the ideological reins and turned what could have caused dissent in the colonies into a unifying thing to repel.

The Patriot victory at Saratoga was also militarily advantageous. The “Yankees were not always successful, but they could be when they had to be. Saratoga proved it.”¹⁷ If ever there were a time where the Patriots had to prevail, this was it, as Saratoga held a crucial position for both sides. Because New England was a known Patriot stronghold, Britain wanted to cut it off to choke it out, which would allow them to shift focus elsewhere. New York in particular had a pivotal role—the British generals figured if they could only manage to subdue it, the rest would come easily.¹⁸ Historians diverge from here on the degree of inevitability of British defeat in a southern campaign following this first failure. Theodore Corbett presented the argument that Loyalists in the North were not completely debilitated by the loss and launched at least one attack each year, originating in Canada, for the remainder of the war.¹⁹ While one can grant the premise of his argument—that even though the British failed to dominate in the North as they had intended, the colonists did not either—the colonists did not need to decisively and enduringly conquer for this to be an impactful point in history.²⁰ Rather, theirs was a war of attrition, and their success in fending off Burgoyne’s surge demonstrated that they had the stamina to outlast Great Britain.

In addition to maintaining their relative control over the New England region, the Patriots dealt the British army some heavy blows at the battle of Saratoga. Lieutenant Armstrong of the

¹⁷ Draper, 93.

¹⁸ Ibid.,

¹⁹ Theodore Corbett, *No Turning Point: The Saratoga Campaign in Perspective* (University of Oklahoma Press: Norman, 2012): 258.

²⁰ Ibid.,

8th Regiment of the Massachusetts Infantry Continentals kept a diary during the war in which he wrote “An Acct. of Genl. Burgoin’s Army & how they have been destroy’d.”²¹ He itemized a list of British losses, including thousands of British prisoners captured, the “Sick & Wounded” which amounted to 598, and an estimated 600 men killed sometime between September 17th and October 18th of 1777, all totaling to 9575 “destroy’d” persons.²² In addition, Patriots seized a number of small cannons and 5000 Stands of Arms, which helped fill in some of the gaps in their own supply.²³ Even more detrimentally, Britain lost six members of Parliament who had been serving in the army and ten officers, which significantly weakened their leadership.²⁴ This is considered the most humiliating British loss in the entire war; even if it was not decisive enough to be the last straw, it proved to sufficiently undermine the British, which led to their eventual downfall.²⁵

The Patriot victory at Saratoga “opened the floodgates and threw off all disguise.”²⁶ Prior to this victory, the French had been covertly sending funds, equipment, and other essentials to the rebellious colonists, but the Patriots finally earned sufficient respect for them to shift from secret aid to an open alliance.²⁷ According to Alan Taylor, “the Patriot pluck...reassured...Louis XVI that a French-American alliance could beat the British.”²⁸ French diplomats perceived a new vigor in the Patriot cause after “Gates’ triumph at Saratoga” and decided to breathe new life into the struggle.²⁹

²¹ Joseph Lee Boyle and Samuel Armstrong, “Notes and Documents: From Saratoga to Valley Forge: The Diary of Lt. Samuel Armstrong,” *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 121 no. 3 (1997): 251.

²² Boyle and Armstrong, 251.

²³ *Ibid.*,

²⁴ Draper, 94.

²⁵ *Ibid.*,

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 99.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 98.

²⁸ Alan Taylor, *American Revolutions: A Continental History, 1750-1804*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2016): 188.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 187.

The alliance with the French “will make the boldest among you tremble.”³⁰ This taunting remark from Gouverneur Morris in his letter rebuffing the Carlisle Commission is emblematic of the shift in advantage provided by the French entrance into war. King George III tried to assuage British fears about the alliance via Lord Weymouth’s parliamentary address in March, republished in the *Pennsylvania Ledger*.³¹ Believing he still had the “zealous and affectionate support” of his countrymen—which, as previously mentioned, was no longer a guarantee—he was “prepared to exert...all the force and resources of his kingdoms” to triumph.³² But, the British had already shown their hand by sending the Carlisle Commission, intending to bring an end to the conflict before other European powers could test their might.³³ Thus, the Treaty of Alliance, signed February 6, 1778, legally bound France to fight “until the Independence of the united states shall have been formally...assured.”³⁴

The new allies went one step further in Article 10 of their treaty by deciding to formally “invite...other Powers who may have received injuries from England” to join their alliance, an invitation accepted by Spain and eventually Holland.³⁵ Suddenly embroiled in a global war, the British army had to be more tactically reserved following the surrender at Saratoga. Still hoping to retain their imperial influence, they began to “divert military resources” that would have helped put down the revolution in America.³⁶ This was in an effort to defend their holdings in the West Indies and India.³⁷ Brits knew their European adversaries could not pass up a chance at “crippling their arch enemy” and might “[encourage] the American Revolt” as a guise to launch

³⁰ Gouverneur Morris to the Earl of Carlisle, July 21, 1778, in *Online Library of Liberty*.

³¹ “Parliamentary Proceedings. House of Lords,” *Pennsylvania Ledger* (Philadelphia, PA), May 9, 1778, in *America’s Historical Newspapers*.

³² *Ibid.*,

³³ Draper, 96.

³⁴ “Treaty of Alliance Between the United States and France,” signed February 6, 1778, in *The Avalon Project*.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, Article 10.

³⁶ Taylor, 191.

³⁷ *Ibid.*,

an attack elsewhere.³⁸ Thus, to prevent war from reaching their own doorstep, the British army kept “half of the Royal Navy at home” in their effort to guard the English Channel.³⁹ This was particularly costly because the English relied on their naval might to quell the colonial conflict.

Nearly as worrisome as the outright threat of a theater of war opening up in Europe was the newly proclaimed neutrality of Russia, Denmark, and Sweden.⁴⁰ When Britain appealed to other potential European allies—who had no interest in entangling themselves in a war across the Atlantic—the Russian Queen veiled a critique of Britain’s military tactics as a compliment to turn him down gracefully.⁴¹ She insisted that it would be below Britain’s dignity to hire foreign troops to assist them in their effort, a source of pride they had already forfeited by their hiring ten thousand Hessians.⁴² Alone at war with many formidable enemies, Britain’s hopes of success plummeted following Saratoga.

After Burgoyne’s surrender at Saratoga, the colonists began to believe that their “independence [was] undoubtedly secured,” even though the conflict was far from over.⁴³ This certainty that eventually the colonists would prevail resulted from the clear notion that this one victory was indicative of what was to come. After this battle, the colonists’ correspondence and publications read as if they were trying to set up a self-fulfilling prophesy and will triumph into existence, which they achieved by using this one success as an encouraging weapon to wield when the people got listless. Moreover, the French entrance into war proved absolutely crucial to the colonial war effort, giving them both a much-needed boost in morale and the legitimacy sufficient for other countries to take up arms alongside them and take them seriously as a nation.

³⁸ Draper, 98.

³⁹ Taylor, 191.

⁴⁰ Draper, 101.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 98.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 98.

⁴³ Robert Morris to George Washington, May 9, 1778, in *Founders Online: National Archives*.

This was in stark contrast to Britain's sudden isolation and need to preserve their other imperial holdings, which forced them to take a much more reserved tactical approach that led to their eventual downfall.

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