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The American Revolution, First Phase

The American Revolution came about fundamentally because by 1763 the English-speaking communities on the far side of the Atlantic had matured to the extent that their interests and goals were distinct from those of the ruling classes in the mother country. British statesmen failed to understand or adjust to the situation. Ironically enough, British victory in the Seven Years' War set the stage for the revolt, for it freed the colonists from the need for British protection against a French threat on their frontiers and gave free play to the forces working for separation.

In 1763 the British government, reasonably from its own point of view, moved to tighten the system of imperial control and to force the colonists to contribute to imperial defense. As part of an effort to make the costs of empire be borne by all British subjects, his majesty's government sought to create an "American Establishment," a force of 10,000 British regular soldiers in North America. The cost of this military force would be paid for by taxes the British Parliament levied on Americans. This imperial defense plan touched off the long controversy about Parliament's right to tax that started with the Stamp and Sugar Acts and led to a final provocative deed in December 1773 at the "Boston Tea Party." This party resulted in the destruction of a cargo of East India Company tea by a patriot mob in a protest against "taxation without representation."

The ten-year controversy over taxation escalated to violence in large measure because several successive British ministries failed to understand the differences that had grown between the American colonies and the metropolitan power. Although possessing a professional army and navy, the British government nevertheless failed to act decisively enough to enforce British regulations or work toward the more viable form of imperial union that the colonial leaders, at least until 1776, insisted they sought.

In response to the Boston Tea Party, the King and his ministers blindly pushed through Parliament a series of measures collectively known in America as the Intolerable Acts: closing the port of Boston, suspending civilian government in Massachusetts, and massing troops in Boston under the military rule of Maj. Gen. Sir Thomas Gage. Outraged by the heavy-handed response to one colony, the other American political leaders called for a continental congress, in effect an American parliament, to coordinate a political drive to defend what the colonists deemed to be their rights and interests as Englishmen.

Since 1763 the colonial leaders, in holding that only their own popular assemblies, not the British Parliament, had a right to levy taxes on Americans, had raised the specter of an arbitrary British government collecting taxes in America to support red-coated regulars who might be used not to protect the frontiers but to suppress American liberties. Placing Massachusetts under military rule gave that specter some substance and led directly to armed revolt.

The Outbreak

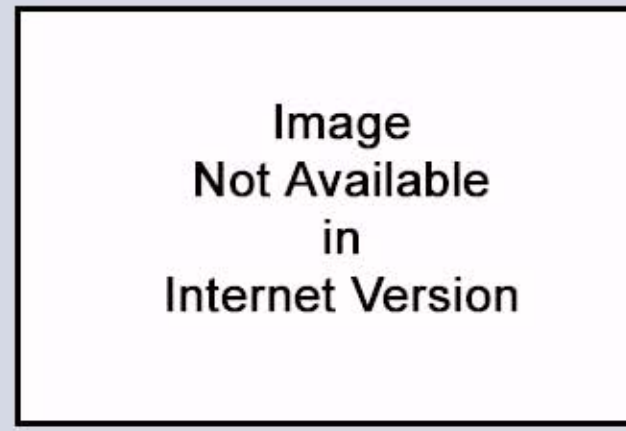
The First Continental Congress meeting at Philadelphia on September 5, 1774, addressed respectful petitions to Parliament and King but also adopted nonimportation and nonexportation agreements in an effort to coerce the British government into repealing the offending measures. To enforce these agreements, committees were formed in almost every county, town, and city throughout the colonies. In each colony, these committees soon became the effective local authorities, the base of a pyramid of revolutionary organizations with revolutionary assemblies, congresses, or conventions, and with committees of safety at the top.

This loosely knit combination of de facto governments superseded the constituted authorities and established firm control over the whole country before the British were in any position to oppose them. The de facto governments took over control of the militia and other colonial military resources such as armories and powder stores. They also identified which local militia officers could be trusted and which were known to be loyal to Britain. Where possible the various colonies reorganized the standing militia and formed rapid response units, including the famous Minutemen intended to turn out fully armed "in a minute's notice." In colonies where a British governor's official control over the militia could not be challenged, volunteer companies began training under the guidance of veterans of the French and Indian War. As winter turned into spring in 1775, patriot leaders were busily shaping the military forces that, if the necessity arose, might oppose the British Army in the field.

Massachusetts, the seat of the crisis, led the way in making military preparations. The Provincial Congress, eyeing Gage's unprecedented military force in Boston, directed town officials to formally enlist a third of their adult males as Minutemen. It began plans to combine local militia companies into regiments and started selecting generals to command the force. It also began to collect ammunition, artillery pieces, and other military stores at locations outside of Gage's immediate reach. One of the most important of these depots lay at Concord, about twenty miles inland from Boston.

The Minuteman

The Minuteman of 1775 did not represent an entirely new idea. The Massachusetts militia's tradition of readiness went back long before King Philip's War; a colonywide directive in 1645 ordered that 30 percent of the entire militia force be ready "at halfe an howers warning." The Minutemen were selected out of the wide pool of able-bodied militia–in essence the entire male population of the colony–to be ready at any time for emergency operations. They were organized into companies that usually consisted of neighbors. Most carried their own smoothbore flintlock muskets, though there was a fund to purchase weapons for militiamen too poor to buy their own. By the spring of 1775 some militia companies were drilling every week and practicing marksmanship. When word of a British advance on Concord spread through the country north of Boston in the early hours of that April Wednesday, the Minutemen were ready.



Minutemen Bid Their Families Farewell
Artist and Date Unknown

General Gage learned of the collection of military stores at Concord and determined to send a force of Redcoats to destroy them. His preparations were made with the utmost secrecy. Yet so alert and ubiquitous were the patriot eyes in Boston that when the picked British force of 700 men set out on the night of April 18, 1775, two messengers, Paul Revere and William Dawes, preceded them to spread the alarm throughout the countryside. At dawn on the next day, when the British arrived at Lexington, the halfway point to Concord, they found a body of militia drawn up on the village green. Some nervous finger—whether of a British regular or an American militiaman is unknown to this day—pressed a trigger. The impatient British regulars, apparently without any clear orders from their commanding officer, fired a volley then charged with the bayonet. The militiamen dispersed, leaving eight dead and ten wounded on the ground. The British column went on to Concord, engaged in another unanticipated skirmish, and destroyed such of the military stores as the Americans had been unable to remove. Their return journey to Boston took a civil disturbance issue and transformed it into open warfare.

By this time, the alarm had spread far and wide, and both ordinary militia and Minutemen had assembled along the British route. From behind walls, rocks, and trees, and from houses, they poured their fire into the columns of Redcoats, while the frustrated regulars found few targets for their accustomed volleys or bayonet charges. Only the arrival of reinforcements from Gage enabled the British column to get back to the safety of Boston. At day's end the British counted 273 casualties out of a total of 1,800 men engaged; American casualties numbered 95 men, including the toll at Lexington. What happened was hardly a tribute to the marksmanship of New England farmers—it has been estimated that 75,000 shots poured from their muskets that day—but

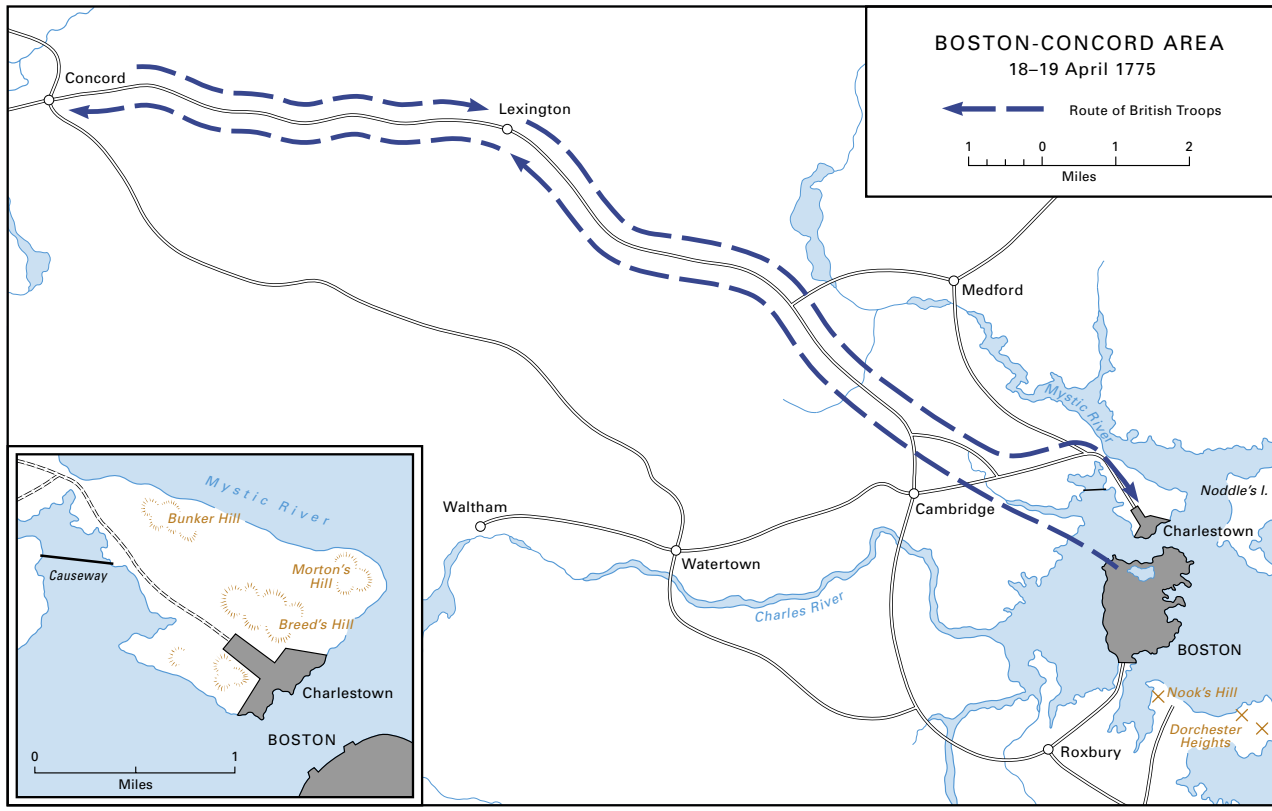
it did testify to a stern determination of the people of Massachusetts to resist any attempt by the British to impose their will by armed force.

The spark lit in Massachusetts soon spread throughout the rest of the colonies. Whatever really may have happened in that misty dawn on Lexington Green, the news that speedy couriers riding horses to exhaustion carried through the colonies from New Hampshire to Georgia was of a savage, unprovoked British attack and of farmers rising in the night to protect their lives, their families, and their property. Lexington, like Fort Sumter, Pearl Harbor, and September 11 in subsequent years, furnished an emotional impulse that led all true patriots to gird themselves for battle. From the other New England colonies, militia poured in to join the Massachusetts men; together they soon formed a ring around Boston. Other forces mobilized under Ethan Allen of Vermont and Benedict Arnold of Connecticut seized the British forts at Ticonderoga and Crown Point, strategic positions on the route between New York and Canada. These posts yielded valuable artillery and other military stores. The Second Continental Congress, which assembled in Philadelphia on May 10, 1775, found itself forced to turn from embargoes and petitions to the problems of organizing, directing, and supplying a military effort.

Before Congress could assume effective control, the New England forces assembled near Boston fought another battle on their own. After Lexington and Concord, the New England colonies implemented their military plans and, as they had in the earlier wars with the French and Indians, moved to replace the militia gathered before Boston with volunteer forces, constituting what may be loosely called a New England army. Each of the four New England states raised and administered its own force under its own commander. As might be expected with such a loose organization, discipline was lax and there was no unified chain of command. Though Artemas Ward, the Massachusetts commander, exercised overall control by informal agreement, it was only because the other commanders chose to cooperate with him; all decisions were made in council. The volunteers in the Connecticut service had enlisted until December 10, 1775, those from the other New England states until the end of the year. The men were dressed for the most part in homespun clothes and armed with muskets of varied types; powder and ball were short, and only the barest few had bayonets.

As might be expected . . . discipline was lax and there was no unified chain of command.

Late in May Gage received limited reinforcements from England, bringing his total force to 6,500 rank and file. With the reinforcements came three major generals of reputation—Sir William Howe, Sir Henry Clinton, and Sir John Burgoyne—men destined to play major roles in England's loss of its American colonies. The newcomers all considered that Gage needed more elbow room and proposed to fortify Dorchester Heights, a dominant position south of Boston previously neglected by both sides. News of the intended move leaked to the Americans, who immediately countered by dispatching a force onto the Charlestown peninsula, where other heights, Bunker Hill and Breed's Hill, overlooked Boston from the north. (*Map 3*) The original intent was to fortify Bunker Hill, the eminence nearest the narrow neck of land connecting the peninsula with the mainland, but the working party sent out on the night of June 16, 1775 decided instead to move closer in and construct works on Breed's Hill—a tactical blunder, for these



Map 3

exposed works could much more easily be cut off by a British landing on the neck in their rear.

The British scorned such a tactic, making a conscious decision to try and stop the conflict short with a psychologically crushing demonstration of brute force. However, the British generals committed a critical error, having assumed that the assembled "rabble in arms" would disintegrate in the face of an attack by disciplined British regulars. On the seventeenth Gage ferried some 2,200 of his men under Howe over to the tip of the Charlestown peninsula under the cover of Royal Navy warships. Howe then sent his troops directly against the American positions, by this time manned by perhaps an equal force. Twice the British advanced on the front and flanks of the redoubt on Breed's Hill; and twice the Americans, holding their fire until the compact British lines were at close range, decimated the ranks of the advancing regiments and forced them to fall back and re-form. With reinforcements Howe carried the hill on the third try, largely because the Americans had run short of ammunition and had no bayonets. The American retreat from Breed's Hill was, for inexperienced volunteers and militia, an orderly one; and Howe's depleted regiments were unable to prevent the escape. British casualties for the day totaled a staggering 1,054, almost half the force engaged, as opposed to American losses of about 440.

The Battle of Bunker Hill (Bunker gave its name to a battle actually fought on Breed's Hill) has been aptly characterized as a "tale of great

blunders heroically redeemed." The American command structure violated the principle of unity of command from the start; in moving onto Breed's Hill, the patriots exposed an important part of their force in an indefensible position, violating the principles of concentration of force, mass, and maneuver. Gage and Howe, for their parts, sacrificed all the advantages the American blunders gave them, violating the principles of maneuver and surprise by undertaking a frontal attack on a fortified position. Their gamble to end the rebellion with a single stroke had failed.

Bunker Hill was a Pyrrhic victory, its strategic effect practically nil since the two armies remained in virtually the same position they had held previously. Its consequences, nevertheless, cannot be ignored. Although frequently depicted as a force of farmers and townsmen, fresh from their fields and shops, with hardly a semblance of orthodox military organization, the New Englanders used their militia training to field forces modeled on the British. Led by officers with, in some case, more direct combat experience than many of Gage's, the Americans had met and fought on equal terms with a professional British Army. On some of the more senior British commanders this astonishing feat had a sobering effect, for it taught them that American resistance was not to be easily overcome; never again would British commanders lightly attempt such an assault on Americans in fortified positions. Many Americans, on the other hand, misread the battle. Bunker Hill, along with Lexington and Concord, went far to create an American myth that the citizen-soldier when aroused by patriotic emotion is more than a match for the trained professional, a tradition that was to be reflected in American military policy for generations afterward.

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Formation of the Continental Army

The response of George III and his ministers to the events at Lexington, Concord, and Bunker Hill was a determined effort to subdue the rebellious colonists by force. It took time to mount this effort, and after Bunker Hill the Americans enjoyed a respite lasting almost a year. During most of this period the Second Continental Congress reacted to the events in New England and New York by hesitantly assuming the mantle of leadership, but it continued to assert that these actions were defensive in nature. It charged that Americans had banded together to oppose the unconstitutional actions of Parliament but that they still hoped to find a formula for reconciliation by appealing directly to the King for justice. Military preparations were designed for a short struggle, to endure no longer than the end of the year 1776. Nevertheless, the Americans took advantage of the respite to create a national army, to consolidate their hold on the governmental machinery throughout the thirteen colonies, to invade Canada, and finally to force the British to evacuate Boston.

The creation of the Continental Army was in the long run perhaps their most significant achievement. Some time before Bunker Hill the Massachusetts Provincial Congress, aware of the necessity of enlisting the support of all the colonies in the struggle against the British, appealed to the Continental Congress to adopt the New England army. Because of the need to preserve secrecy, Congress made its decision as

The Army Birthday

The creation of a truly American Army on June 14, 1775, was highly significant to the history of our emerging nation. While the colonial militias and volunteer Minutemen were easily aroused in anger and invaluable in controlling population and resources in the countryside, they often melted away as fast as they were raised. In addition, those forces often identified with their own state or region. However, the first ten companies of Continental Army soldiers were a national force even before the nation was fully formed. The first continentals were recruited from several states and were sent from one end of the thirteen colonies and then states to another. In time a nation would grow out of the seeds planted by each continental soldier as he signed up not as a "summer soldier" or "sunshine patriot," to use the immortal words of Tom Paine, but as an American soldier in service to his nation whenever and wherever needed.

a committee of the whole. After determining the necessity of accepting national responsibility for the troops at Boston and in New York, Congress voted to create the Continental Army on June 14, 1775. On the same day it voted to raise ten companies of riflemen—the first soldiers to be enlisted directly in the Continental service—in Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Virginia to march north to join the army before Boston. The message was clear: This was no regional outbreak of violence but was instead the united response of all of the mainland North American colonies.

The next day, June 15, Congress chose George Washington, a Virginian, to be Commander in Chief. As was the case with the riflemen, Congress made the choice for geographical and political as much as for military reasons. The New Englanders felt a southerner should be chosen for the post to prove that this was not a New England–only conflict. Washington's military experience was perhaps greater than that of any other American, and he came from the largest and most important of the southern colonies. His impressive appearance, quiet and confident manner, and good work in the military committees of Congress had impressed all.

The choice proved fortunate. Washington himself recognized, when he accepted the command, that he lacked the requisite experience and knowledge in handling large bodies of men. His whole military experience had been in frontier warfare during the French and Indian War. But he had commanded a brigade of troops from several colonies during the capture of Fort Duquesne in the French and Indian War—he was the only native-born American up to that time to command a force of that size. Experience gained as a political leader in his native Virginia and in directing the business affairs of his large plantation at Mount Vernon also stood him in good stead. He brought to the task traits of character and abilities as a leader that in the end more than compensated for his lack of European military experience. Among these qualities were a determination and a steadfastness of purpose rooted in an unshakable conviction of the righteousness of the American cause, a scrupulous sense of honor and duty, and a dignity that inspired respect and confidence in those around him. Conscious of his own defects, he was always willing to profit by experience. From the trials and tribula-

tions of eight years of war he was to learn the essentials of strategy, tactics, and military organization.

Congress also appointed four major generals and eight brigadiers to serve under Washington, set up a series of staff offices closely resembling those in the British Army, prescribed a pay scale and standard ration, and adopted Articles of War to govern the military establishment. The same mixture of geographical, political, and military considerations governed the choice of Washington's subordinates. Two-thirds of them came from New England, in recognition of the fact that the existing army was a New England army. Three others—Charles Lee, Horatio Gates, and Richard Montgomery—were chosen because of their experience in the British Army. Lee in particular, who had come from England to the colonies in 1773, was in 1775 deemed the foremost military expert in America, and he was for a time to be Washington's first assistant.

The army of which Washington formally took command on July 3, 1775, he described as "a mixed multitude of people … under very little discipline, order or government." Out of this mixed multitude, Washington set out to create an army shaped in large part in the British image. Basing his observations on his experience with British regulars during the French and Indian War, he wrote: "Discipline is the soul of an army. It makes small numbers formidable; procures success to the weak and esteem to all." Employing Gates, his experienced Adjutant General, to prepare regulations and orders, the Commander in Chief set out to inculcate discipline. He and his staff made a strenuous effort to halt the random comings and goings of officers and men and to institute regular roll calls and strength returns. Suspicious of the "leveling" tendencies of the New Englanders, Washington made the distinction between officers and enlisted men more rigid. He introduced various punishments (lash, pillory, wooden horse, and drumming out of camp), and courts-martial sat almost constantly.

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While establishing discipline in the existing army, Washington had at the same time to form a new one enlisted directly in the Continental service. Out of conferences with a congressional committee that visited camp in September 1775 emerged a plan for such an army, composed of 26 regiments of infantry of 728 men each, plus 1 regiment of riflemen and 1 of artillery, 20,372 men in all, to be uniformly paid, supplied, and administered by the Continental Congress and enlisted to the end of the year 1776. Except for the short term of enlistment, it was an excellent plan on paper; but Washington soon found he could not carry it out. Both officers and men resisted a reorganization that cut across the lines of the locally organized units in which they were accustomed to serve. The men saw as their first obligation their families and farms at home, and they were reluctant to reenlist for another year's service. On December 10, despite pressures and patriotic appeals, many of the Connecticut men went home and militia from New Hampshire and Massachusetts had to be brought in to fill their places in the line. Others, who had jeered and hooted when the Connecticut men left, also went home when their enlistment expired only three weeks later. On January 1, 1776, when the army became "Continental in every respect," Washington found that he had only slightly more than 8,000 troops in the lines around Boston instead of the 20,000 planned. Returns in early March showed only a thousand or so more. "I have often thought how

much happier I would have been," wrote a sorely tried commander, "if, instead of accepting a command under such circumstances, I had taken up musket on my shoulder and entered the ranks, or, if I could have justified the measure to posterity and my own conscience, had retired to the back country and lived in a Wigwam."

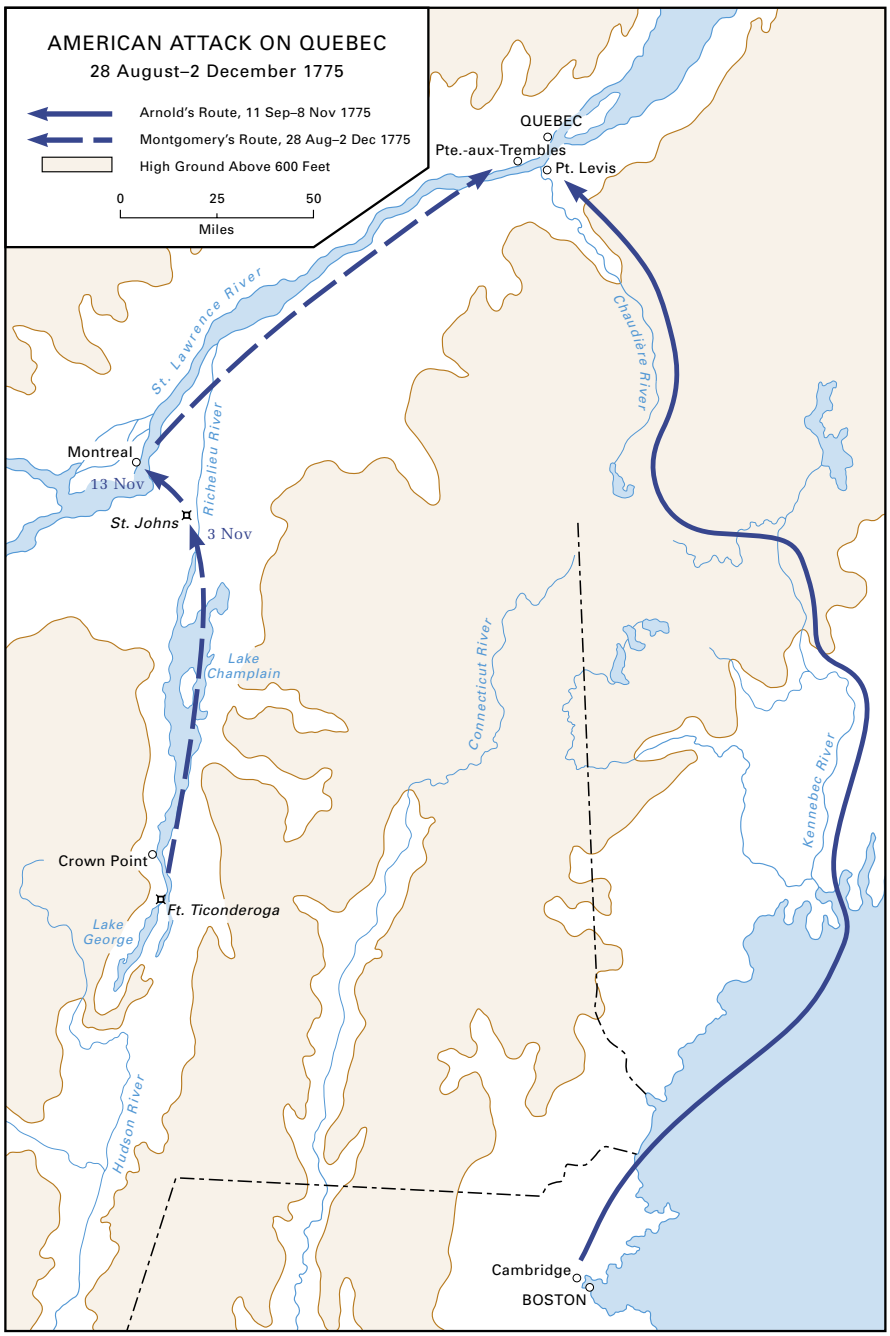
While waiting for the regiments to reach full strength, short-term militia continued to fill the gaps in the lines. A Continental Army had been formed, but it fell far short of the goals Washington and Congress had set for it. This army was enlisted for but a year, and the whole troublesome process would have to be repeated at the end of 1776. The short term of enlistment was, of course, a cardinal error; but in 1775 everyone, including Washington, had anticipated only a short campaign.

While organizing and disciplining his army, Washington had also to maintain the siege of Boston and overcome his deficiencies in supply. In these efforts he was more successful. Congress and the individual colonies sponsored voyages to the West Indies, where the French and Dutch had conveniently exported quantities of war materials. Washington put some of his troops on board ship and with an improvised navy succeeded in capturing numerous British supply ships. He sent Col. Henry Knox, later to be his Chief of Artillery, to Fort Ticonderoga; and Knox in the winter of 1775–1776 brought some fifty pieces of captured cannon to Cambridge over poor or nonexistent roads in icebound New York and New England. By March 1776, despite deficiencies in the number of continentals, Washington was ready to close in on Boston.

The Invasion of Canada and the Fall of Boston

The major military operations of 1775 and early 1776 were not around Boston but in faraway Canada, which the Americans considered the fourteenth colony needing only a little shove to join the others in rebellion against Britain. Canada seemed a tempting and vulnerable target. To take it would eliminate a British base at the head of the familiar invasion route along the lake and river chain connecting the St. Lawrence with the Hudson. Congress, while appealing to the Canadians to join in the cause, in late June 1775 instructed Maj. Gen. Philip Schuyler of New York to take possession of Canada if "practicable" and "not disagreeable to the Canadians."

Schuyler managed to get together a force of about 2,000 men from New York and Connecticut, thus forming the nucleus of what was to become known as the Northern Army. In September 1775 Brig. Gen. Richard Montgomery set out with this small army from Ticonderoga with the objective of taking Montreal. To form a second prong to the invasion, Washington detached a force of 1,100 under Col. Benedict Arnold, including a contingent of riflemen under Capt. Daniel Morgan of Virginia, to proceed up the Kennebec River, across the wilds of Maine, and down the Chaudière to join with Montgomery before Quebec. (*See Map 4.*) Montgomery, advancing along the route via Lake George, Lake Champlain, and the Richelieu River, was seriously delayed at the British fort at St. Johns but managed to capture Montreal on November 13. Arnold, meanwhile, had arrived opposite Quebec on November 8, after one of the most rugged marches in history. Part of



Map 4

his force had turned back, and others were lost by starvation, sickness, drowning, and desertion. Only 600 men crossed the St. Lawrence on November 13, and in imitation of Wolfe scaled the cliffs and encamped on the Plains of Abraham. It was a magnificent feat, but the force was too small to prevail even against the scattered Canadian militia and British regulars who, unlike Montcalm, shut themselves up in the city and refused battle in the open.

Arnold's men were finally forced to withdraw to Point aux Trembles, where Montgomery joined them with all the men he could spare from the defense of Montreal—a total of 300. Although the Canadians did raise two regiments for the Continental Army, most did not rally to the American cause. With the enlistments of about half their men expiring by the new year, Arnold and Montgomery undertook a desperate assault on the city during the night of December 30 in the middle of a raging blizzard. The defenders outnumbered the Americans, and the attack was a failure. Montgomery was killed and Arnold wounded.

The wounded Arnold, undaunted, continued to keep up the appearance of a siege with the scattered remnants of his force while he waited for reinforcements. Continental regiments raised in New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania came in driblets. There were never enough to build a force capable of again taking the offensive, though a total of 8,000 men were eventually committed to the Canadian campaign. Smallpox and other diseases took their toll; and the supply line never brought in adequate food, clothing, or ammunition. Meanwhile, the British received reinforcements and in June 1776 struck back against a disintegrating American army that retreated before them almost without a fight. By mid-July the Americans were back at Ticon-

deroga, where they had started less than a year earlier. The initiative on the northern front passed to the British.

While the effort to conquer Canada was moving toward its dismal end, Washington finally took the initiative at Boston. On March 4, 1776, he moved onto Dorchester Heights and emplaced his newly acquired artillery in position to menace the city; a few days later he fortified Nook's Hill, standing still closer in. On March 17 the British moved out. It would be presumptuous to say that their exit was solely a consequence of American pressure. Sir William Howe, who succeeded Gage in command, had concluded long since that Boston was a poor strategic base and intended to stay only until the transports arrived to take his army to Halifax in Nova Scotia to regroup and await reinforcements. Nevertheless, Washington's maneuvers hastened his departure, and the reoccupation of Boston was an important psychological victory for the Americans, balancing the disappointments of the Canadian campaign. The stores of cannon and ammunition the British were forced to leave behind were a welcome addition indeed to the meager American arsenal.

The New Nation

The Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776, established a new nation and transformed a limited uprising to secure rights within the British Empire into a far-reaching revolution aimed at complete independence from British control. Since the King and his ministers had determined to restore British rule, the Americans now faced a long, hard struggle for independence that required a sustained national effort such as they had not expected in 1775.

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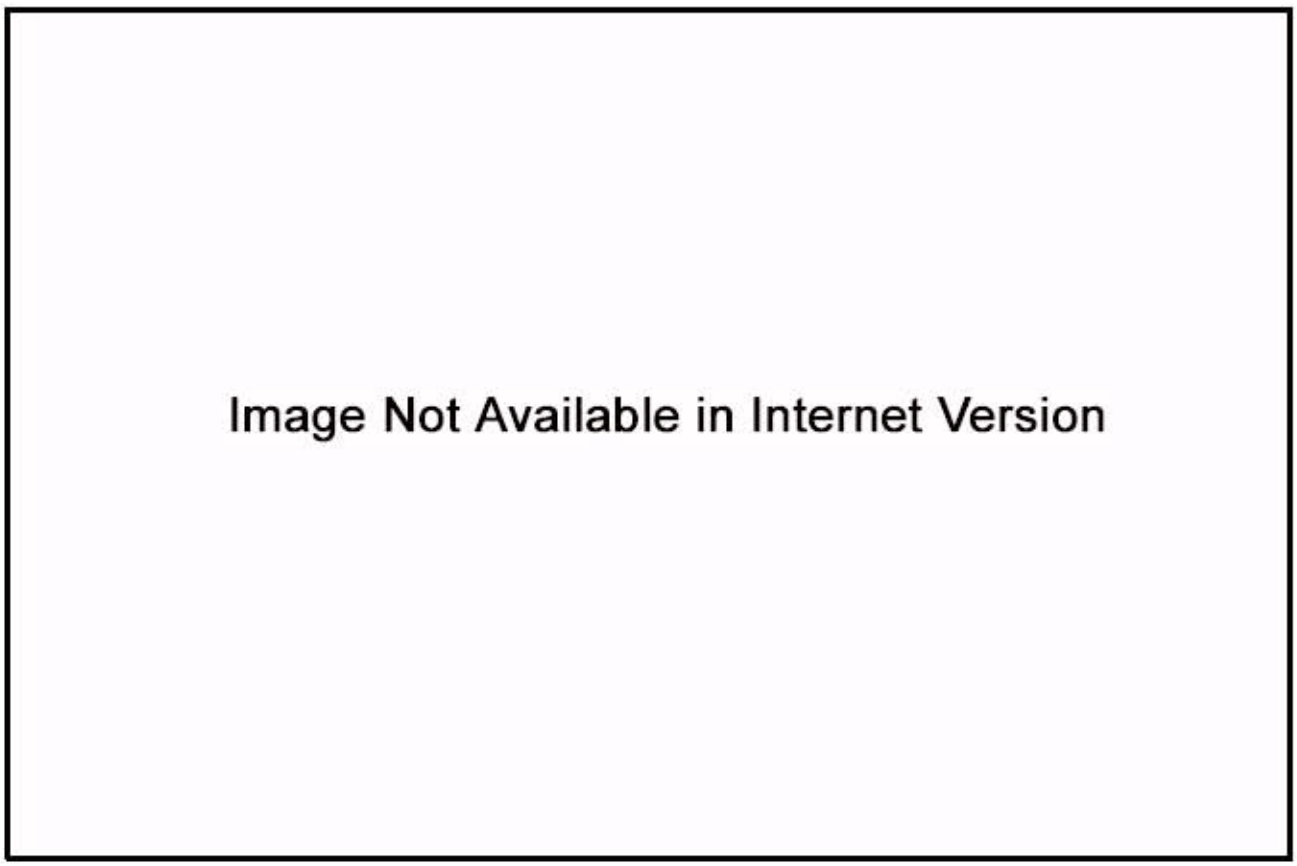
The new nation was still a weak confederation of thirteen independent states. Such national feeling as existed was a new phenomenon growing out of common opposition to British measures. Colonial tradition, divided loyalties, the nature of the economy, and the spirit of a revolt born in opposition to the use of military force to suppress popular liberties all worked against the creation of any new strong central authority capable of mobilizing resources effectively for the long struggle that lay ahead.

The thirteen states proclaiming their independence in 1776 possessed a total population of about 2.5 million people, but not all the males of military age were part of the military potential. About 20 percent were African American slaves who except under special circumstances were not eligible for service, though African Americans did serve in the Revolution in integrated units (a feature that Americans did not repeat until after World War II). A significant minority within the colonies remained loyal to the King, either reluctantly out of sense of obligation or passionately as armed supporters. As in any society, there were also the apathetic and indifferent who swayed with the tide. The genuine patriots still provided a far larger potential of military manpower than the British could possibly transport and supply across the Atlantic, but most of the men of military age were farmers with families. Whatever their patriotic sentiments, few were ready to undertake long terms of military service, fearing that their farms and families at home would suffer. Accustomed to the tradition of short-term militia service under



Presenting the Declaration of Independence, *John Trumbull, 1796*

local commanders, they infinitely preferred it to longer terms in the Continental Army.

The economy of the thirteen new states was neither self-sufficient nor truly national. The states were essentially a collection of separate agricultural communities accustomed to exchanging their agricultural surplus for British-manufactured goods and West Indian products. Manufacturing was still in its infancy, and America produced few of the essentials of military supply. Despite diligent efforts to promote domestic production during the war years, the Continental Army had to rely primarily on captures and imports from Europe and the West Indies, run through a British blockade, for much of its military hardware and even for clothing. While the country produced foodstuffs in ample quantity, transport from one area to another was difficult. The normal avenues of commerce ran up and down the rivers, not overland; roads running north and south were few and inadequate. There were always shortages of wagons, boats, and other means of transportation. Under these circumstances, it was far easier to support local militia for a few days or weeks than any sizable and continuously operating national army in the field.

The governmental machinery created after the Declaration was characterized by decentralization and executive weakness. The thirteen new "free and independent states" transformed their existing de facto

revolutionary governments into legal state governments by adapting institutions. Almost invariably the new constitutions vested most of the powers of government in the state legislatures, successors to the popular assemblies of the colonial period, and severely restricted the executive authority of the governors. At the national level the same general distrust of strong authority was apparent; and the existing Continental Congress, essentially a gathering of delegates chosen by the state legislatures and without either express powers of its own or an executive to carry out its enactments, was continued as the only central governing body. Articles of Confederation stipulating the terms of union and granting Congress specific but limited powers were drawn up shortly after the Declaration, but jealousies among the states prevented ratification until 1781. In the interim, Congress exercised most of the powers granted it under the Articles; but the Articles did not include either the right to levy taxes or the power to raise military forces directly under its auspices. Congress could only determine the Confederation's need for troops and money to wage war and set quotas for the states to meet in proportion to their population and wealth. It had no means of ensuring that the states met their quotas; indeed, they seldom did.

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One major weakness of this decentralized structure was that it provided no adequate means of financing the war. The state legislatures, possessing the power to tax that Congress lacked, hesitated to use it extensively in the face of popular opposition to taxation and was usually embarrassed to meet even its own expenses. Congress very early took unto itself the power to issue paper money and to negotiate domestic and foreign loans, but it shared these powers with the states, which also printed paper money in profusion and borrowed both at home and abroad to the extent they could. The paper money was a useful expedient in the early part of the war; indeed, the Revolution could not have been carried on without it. But successive issues by Congress and the states led to first gradual and then galloping inflation, leaving the phrase "not worth a Continental" as a permanent legacy in the American language. The process of depreciation and the exhaustion of credit gradually robbed both the states and Congress of the power to pay troops, buy supplies, and otherwise meet the multitudinous expenses of war.

Evolution of the Continental Army

It is not surprising that under these circumstances Washington never got the kind of army molded in the European image that he desired. The experience before Boston in 1775 was repeated many times, as local militia had to be called in frequently to give the American Army a numerical superiority in the field. The Continental Army nevertheless became the center of American resistance and its commander, Washington, the symbol of the patriot cause. The extent to which militia could be expected to rally to that cause was very largely determined by the Continental Army's success or failure in the field.

Though the militia belonged to the states, the Continental Army was a creation of the Continental Congress. Congress prescribed its size and composition, chose its generals, commissioned its officers, and governed the system for its administration and supply. Suspicious on principle of a standing army and acutely aware of historic examples of

seizure of political power by military leaders, its members kept a watchful eye on the Army's commanders and insisted they defer to civilian authority. Washington countered these suspicions by constantly deferring to congressional wishes, and he was rewarded by the assiduity with which Congress usually adopted his recommendations.

Lacking an executive, Congress had to rely on committees and boards to carry out its policies—unwieldy devices at best and centers of conflicting interest and discord at worst. In June 1776 it set up a Board of War and Ordnance, consisting of five of its members, the lineal ancestor of the War Department. In 1777 Congress changed the composition of the board, directing that it henceforth be made up of persons outside Congress who could devote full time to their military duties. Neither of these devices really worked well, and Congress continually handled administrative matters by action of the entire membership or by appointment of special committees to go to camp. In 1781, with the implementation of the Articles of Confederation, the board was replaced by a single Secretary at War.

Under the Articles of Confederation, while the Continental Congress passed the authorizing legislation setting the terms, size, and configuration of the army, the states remained responsible for raising the troops. Therefore, recruiting and equipping efforts depended heavily on thirteen separate bodies, each acting in response to local conditions and concerns. State authorities called out militia sometimes at the request of Congress and sometimes on their own initiative. When they joined the Continental Army, the militia normally shared in its supplies and equipment. The states, however, maintained an interest in supplying and administering the troops of their own "lines" as well as their militia. As a result, the Continental agents continually went through delicate negotiations with state officials any time they tried to accomplish major tasks. Lines of authority crisscrossed at every turn.

It was an inefficient military system for an organized national effort. Washington could never depend on having enough trained men or supplies. He continually inveighed against sending militia to fight his battles and by early 1776 had concluded that he needed an army enlisted for the duration of the war. Congress did not, as has often been charged, ignore his wishes. In October it voted a new establishment, superseding the plan developed for the army before Boston in 1775 and haphazard arrangements made in the interim for raising Continental regiments in various states. This establishment was to contain eighty-eight infantry regiments, or about 60,000 men, enlisted to serve three years or "during the present war," with each state assigned a quota in proportion to its population. After the disastrous retreat across New Jersey in December 1776, Congress authorized additional regiments to be recruited by Washington's officers directly into the Continental service, including regiments of artillery and light cavalry. These regiments remained the authorized strength of the Continental Army until 1781, when Congress cut it to fifty-nine.

The large army fell short from the start. Many states found it impossible to sustain their quotas, especially as the war dragged on. By the winter of 1777–1778, the effort to enlist men for the duration of the war collapsed; the following spring, with the sanction of Washington, Congress reverted to a system of shorter enlistments and recommended

to the states that they institute a system of drafting men from the militia for one year's service. This first American wartime draft was applied irregularly because it was not a national program. Each state followed its own policies and procedures, some effectively; but most states performed no better when trying to draft men than they had when trying to encourage volunteers. Bounties, instituted by both the states and the Congress very early in the war and progressively increased one step behind the pace of inflation, also produced only temporary and irregular results.

The coin did have another side. In reality the shortage of arms and ammunition and of facilities for producing them limited the number of men who could be kept continuously in the field as effectively as did the failure of enlistment drives. The militia system allowed many able-bodied males to perform part-time military service and still remain most of the time in the labor force that kept the economy going. It is doubtful whether the American economy could have sustained such an army as Washington and Congress had proposed in 1776, even had there been a central administration with adequate power. As it was, the small Continental Army that did remain in the field intermittently faced extreme hardship and even near starvation. On the other hand, the American ability to raise local armies in any threatened region helped to balance the strategic mobility that the British Fleet gave to the British Army. Although militia generally did not perform well in regular warfare, when highly motivated and ably led they could fight well on terrain suited to their capabilities. Washington and most of his generals recognized this and sought to use the mobilized militia for flank security or to perform envelopments of isolated British detachments and outposts. Given the conditions under which the Revolution was fought, the American military system was more effective than its critics have recognized, though it failed to provide adequately for a sustained military effort over a period of years.

Perhaps Washington's greatest achievement was simply in maintaining the Continental Army continuously in the field. Despite its many vicissitudes and defeats, that army remained constituted as an

Extract from the Draft Articles of Confederation, Article XVIII, July 12, 1776

The United States assembled shall have Authority for the Defence and Welfare of the United Colonies and every of them, to agree upon and fix the necessary Sums and Expences—To emit Bills, or to borrow Money on the Credit of the United Colonies—To raise Naval Forces—To agree upon the Number of Land Forces to be raised, and to make Requisitions from the Legislature of each Colony, or the Persons therein authoritized [*sic*] by the Legislature to execute such Requisitions, for the Quota of each Colony, which is to be in Proportion to the Number of white Inhabitants in the Colony, which Requisitions shall be binding, and thereupon the Legislature of each Colony or the Persons authorized as aforesaid, shall appoint the Regimental Officers, raise the Men, and arm and equip them in a soldier-like Manner; and the Officers and Men so armed and equipped, shall march to the Place appointed, and within the Time agreed on by the United States assembled.

ever-present threat to any British field force, while the American militia units solidified patriot control of all the areas not fully garrisoned by the British. The Army of the United States was thus shaped by the war into a distinctively American military organization, neither a replica of a professional European Army on which it was modeled nor yet the type of national army raised by conscription that was to appear in France after the Revolution of 1789.

The Continental Army operated in territorial divisions or departments, each containing one or more maneuver forces. Washington exercised direct command over the main area and defended the Middle States, operating most of the time in the area between New York City and Philadelphia. After the British retreat from Boston, the New England department operated mostly in the Rhode Island area. The Northern Department was located in northern New York, and the Southern Department controlled military operations in the Carolinas, Virginia, and Georgia. Two additional departments existed at times with limited independent roles: the Western Department centered on Pittsburgh, and the Canadian Department focused on Canada until the retreat from that region in the summer of 1776. A special territorial area, the Highlands Department, consisting of the mountains in the vicinity of West Point, was an area of such great strategic concern that it deserved its own department.

Although Washington was Commander in Chief of the Continental Army, the commanders of the other departmental armies still operated with a considerable measure of independence.

Although Washington was Commander in Chief of the Continental Army, the commanders of the other departmental armies still operated with a considerable measure of independence. Congress, rather than Washington, named their commanders and communicated directly with them. Of the two "separate armies," the Northern Army was by far the most important until 1777; the small Southern Army performed limited defensive missions in a relatively quiet sector of the country. By 1780 the situation was reversed as the British transferred their main effort to the southern states.

The Continental Army was composed mainly of infantry with limited cavalry and artillery. The basic unit of infantry organization was the regiment, composed of eight or more companies. Regiments were administrative formations; different terms were used when talking about tactical employment. A battalion served as the basic tactical unit. It contained eight platoons, the number needed in linear warfare to provide a constant wave of volley fire. Customarily in both the American and British armies of the Revolution, a regiment of eight companies would form a single battalion with each company serving as a single platoon. A brigade was usually formed of several regiments plus an attached direct support artillery company and was usually commanded by a brigadier general; a division consisted of several brigades commanded by a major general. In the northern areas, the artillery consisted of a brigade of four regiments and several separate companies under the Chief of Artillery, Henry Knox. Knox employed some of the separate companies in direct support of the infantry brigades but used others in garrison or general support assignments. The army's mounted arm consisted of four regiments of light dragoons, normally employed in reconnaissance and counterreconnaissance duties, plus several smaller units, including two deep-strike partisan corps (a mix of light dragoons and light infantry). Other regular forces included a corps of engineers; three companies of

sappers and miners; several military police elements; two regiments of artificers, who handled the servicing and repair of ordnance and vehicles; and a headquarters guard force.

Washington was provided with a staff generally corresponding to that of contemporary European armies. One of his critical staff officers was the Quartermaster General, responsible not only for transportation and delivery of supplies but also for arranging the camp, regulating marches, and employing the army's watercraft. There were also an Adjutant General (responsible for issuing orders for the commander and administrative paperwork), a Judge Advocate General, a Paymaster General, a Commissary General of Musters, several Commissary Generals of Provisions (procurement and issue of rations), a Clothier General, a Chief Surgeon, and a Chief Engineer. Each of the separate armies usually had staff officers in these positions, designated as deputies to those of the main army. Early in 1778 the Continental Army introduced a new innovation—the Inspector General. This officer provided a focal point for developing standard battle drills and written tactical texts and during the second half of the war emerged as Washington's de facto chief of staff.

All these staff officers had primarily administrative and supply functions. The modern concept of a general staff that acts as a sort of collective brain for the commander had no real counterpart in the eighteenth century. For advice on strategy and operations, Washington relied on a council of war made up of his principal subordinate commanders; and, conforming to his original instructions from Congress, he usually consulted the council before making major decisions.

Both organization and staff work suffered from the ills that afflicted the whole military system. Regiments were constantly under strength, were organized differently by the various states, and prior to Valley Forge used varying systems of drills and training. In the promotion of officers in the state lines, Continental commanders shared authority with the states; the confused system gave rise to all sorts of rivalries, jealousies, and resentment, leading to frequent resignations. Staff officers were generally inexperienced, and few had the patience and perseverance to overcome the obstacles posed by divided authority, inadequate means, and poor transportation and communication facilities. The supply and support services of the Continental Army never really functioned efficiently; and with the depreciation in the currency, they came close to collapse.

Contrary to popular belief, American soldiers in the Revolutionary War generally carried cartridge boxes, rather than powder horns and shot pouches. The cartridge box held fixed cartridges of paper for faster loading, even in damp weather. This Pattern 1777 cartridge box represents one of the Army's first attempts at standardizing military equipment.

The British Problem

Whatever the American weaknesses, the British government faced no easy task when it undertook to subdue the revolt by military force. Even though England possessed the central administration, stable financial system, and well-organized army and navy that the Americans so sorely lacked, the whole establishment was ill prepared in 1775 for the struggle in America. A large burden of debt incurred in the wars of the preceding century had forced crippling economies on both Army and Navy. British administrative and supply systems, though far superior to anything the Americans could improvise, were also characterized by division and confusion of authority; and there was much corruption in high places.

To suppress the revolt, Britain had first to raise the necessary forces, then transport and sustain them over 3,000 miles of ocean, and finally use them effectively to regain control of a vast and sparsely populated territory. Recruiting men for an eighteenth century army was most difficult. The British government had no power to compel service except in the militia in defense of the homeland, and service in the British Army overseas was immensely unpopular. To meet Howe's request for 50,000 men to conduct the campaign in 1776, the ministry resorted to an old practice of obtaining auxiliary troops, mercenaries, from many of the small German states, particularly Hesse-Cassell (hence Hessians). These German states were to contribute almost 30,000 men to the British service during the war—complete organizations with their own officers up to the rank of lieutenant general and schooled in the system of Frederick the Great. Howe did not get his 50,000 men; but by midsummer 1776 his force had grown to 30,000 British and Hessians, and additional reinforcements were sent to Canada during the year.

Maintaining a force of this size proved to be another problem. The attrition rate in America from battle losses, sickness, disease, and desertion was tremendously high. English jails and poorhouses were drained of able-bodied men; bounties were paid; patriotic appeals were launched throughout England, Scotland, and Ireland; and all the ancient methods of impressments were tried. But the British were never able to recruit enough men to meet the needs of their commanders in America and at the same time defend the home islands and provide garrisons in the Caribbean, the Mediterranean, Africa, and India.

Providing adequate support for this army over a long ocean supply line was equally difficult. Even for food and forage, the British Army had to rely primarily on sea lines of supply. Transports were in short supply, the hardships of the two-to-four-month voyage terrible, and the loss of men and supplies to natural causes heavy. Moreover, though the Americans could muster no navy capable of contesting British control of the seas, their privateers and the ships of their infant navy posed a constant threat to unprotected troop and supply transports. British commanders repeatedly had to delay their operations to await the arrival of men and supplies from England.

British armies could find no strategic center or centers whose capture would bring victory.

Once in America, British armies could find no strategic center or centers whose capture would bring victory. Flat, open country where warfare could be carried on in European style was not common. Woods, hills, and swamps suited to the operations of militia and irregulars were plentiful. A British Army that could win victories in the field over the continentals had great difficulty in making those victories meaningful. American armies seemed to possess miraculous powers of recuperation; a British force, once depleted or surrendered, took a tremendous effort to replace.

As long as the British controlled the seas, they could land and establish bases at nearly any point on the long American coastline. The many navigable rivers dotting the coast also provided water avenues of invasion well into the interior. But to crush the revolt, the British Army had to cut loose from coastal bases and rivers. When it did so, its logistical problems multiplied and its lines of communications became vulnerable to constant harassment. British armies almost inevitably came to grief every time they moved very far from the areas where they could be

nurtured by supply ships from the homeland. These difficulties, a British colonel asserted in 1777, had "absolutely prevented us this whole war from going fifteen miles from a navigable river."

The British could not, in any case, ever hope to muster enough strength to occupy with their own troops the vast territory they sought to restore to British rule. Their only real hope of meaningful victory was to use Americans loyal to the British cause to control the country, as one British general put it, to help "the good Americans to subdue the bad." However, there were many obstacles to making effective use of the Tories. Patriot organization, weak at the center, was strong at the grass roots, in the local communities throughout America; the Tories were neither well organized nor energetically led. The patriots seized the machinery of local government in most communities at the outset, held it until the British Army appeared in their midst, and then normally regained it after the British departed. Strong local control enabled the patriots to root out the more ardent Tories at the very outset, and by making an example of them to sway the apathetic and indifferent. British commanders were usually disappointed in the number of Tories who flocked to their standards and even more upset by the alacrity with which many of them switched their allegiance when the British Army departed. They found the Tories a demanding, discordant, and puzzling lot; they made no earnest effort to enlist them in British forces until late in the war. By 1781 they had with their armies some 8,000 "provincial rank and file"; perhaps 50,000 in all served the British in some military capacity during the war.

On the frontiers, the British could also expect support from the Indian tribes who almost inevitably drifted into the orbit of whatever power controlled Canada. But support from the Indians was a two-edged sword, for nothing could raise frontier enthusiasm for battle like the threat of an Indian attack. Ruthless Indian raids would often polarize a frontier community that otherwise might have remained sympathetic or at least neutral to the British cause.

Finally, the British had to fight the war with one eye on their ancient enemies in Europe. France, thirsting for revenge for its defeat in the Seven Years' War, stood ready to aid the American cause if for no other purpose than to weaken British power. By virtue of the Bourbon family connections, France could almost certainly carry Spain along in any war with England. France and Spain could at the very least provide badly needed money and supplies to sustain the American effort and force the British to divert their forces from the contest in America. At most, the combined Franco-Spanish fleet might well prove a match for the British Fleet and neutralize that essential control of the seas the British needed to carry on the American war. As the war dragged on, the British found themselves increasingly isolated from the international community.

Of Strategy

The story of the American Revolution can hardly be told in terms of long-term strategy and its success or failure. Neither side ever had any really consistent plan for the conduct of the war. The British, who retained the strategic initiative most of the time, failed to use it to great advantage. They were highly uncertain about their objective; they laid

plans from year to year and seldom coordinated them even for a single year. Blame for this uncertain approach falls in almost equal part on the administration in England and the commanders in America. King George III; Lord North, his Principal Minister; and Lord George Germain, Secretary of State for the American Department, were the three British officials mainly responsible for the conduct of the war. If they never provided the timely guidance that might have been expected of them, their inability to do so came about in part because the commanders in the field never furnished accurate enough predictions of what to expect and differed so much among themselves as to the proper course to pursue. In assessing blame in this fashion, one must keep in mind the difficulties of logistics and communications under which the British labored, for these difficulties made it virtually impossible to coordinate plans over great distances or to assemble men and materials in time to pursue one logical and consistent plan.

The American strategy was primarily defensive and consequently had to be shaped largely in terms of countering British moves.

The American strategy was primarily defensive and consequently had to be shaped largely in terms of countering British moves. Uncertainties as to the supply of both men and materials acted on the American side even more effectively to thwart the development of a consistent plan for winning the war. Yet Washington was never so baffled by the conditions of the war or uncertain of his objective as were the various British commanders. After some early blunders, he soon learned both his own and the enemy's strengths and weaknesses and did his best to exploit them. Though unable to develop a consistent plan, he did try to develop a consistent line of action. He sought to maintain his principal striking force in a central position to block any British advance into the interior; to be neither too bold nor too timid in seeking battle for limited objectives; to avoid the destruction of his army at all costs; and to find some means of concentrating a sufficient force to strike a decisive offensive blow whenever the British overreached themselves. He showed a better appreciation than did the British commanders of the advantages in mobility their Navy gave them. After 1778, when the French entered the war, he clearly saw that the decisive blow he desired could be struck only by a combined effort of the Continental Army and the French Fleet.

The British Offensive in 1776

If the British ever had a single strategic objective in the war, it was the Hudson River–Lake Champlain line. The British believed that by taking and holding this line they would separate New England, considered to be the principal center of the rebellion, from colonies they considered more malleable in the south. Howe proposed to make this the main objective of his campaign in 1776 by landing at New York, securing a base of operations there, and then pushing north. He wanted to concentrate the entire British force in America in New York, but the British government diverted part of it to Canada in early 1776 to repel the American invasion, laying the groundwork for the divided command that was so to plague British operations thereafter.

After the evacuation of Boston, Howe stayed at Halifax from March until June, awaiting the arrival of supplies and reinforcements. While he tarried, the British government ordered another diversion in the south,

George Washington at Princeton
Charles Peale Polk, 1777

George Washington as Military Commander

Although George Washington is universally acknowledged as the "father of his country," it is only fitting to explain his position in history as a great military leader. If one merely scores him based on battlefield wins and losses, he might not be viewed in the first rank of commanders. However, his dynamic leadership qualities, strategic vision, and ability to make the most of tactical mobility make a mere tally of victories and defeats meaningless. Not for nothing did General Howe call him a "wily old fox."

Washington took the rawest of American raw material and made soldiers out of them. He then kept them together as an army in the field despite defeats and deprivations and often turned on the pursuing British forces like a fox and dealt them sharp blows before escaping again. He learned from his mistakes, maintained a force in being, bottled up the British in coastal enclaves, and finally isolated and forced the surrender of a large British Army. He was a great military commander.

aimed at encouraging the numerous loyalists who, according to the royal governors watching from their havens on board British warships, were waiting only for the appearance of a British force to rise and overthrow rebel rule. Unfortunately for the British, a naval squadron and army expedition sent from Ireland under Sir Peter Parker was delayed and did not arrive off the American coast until late in May. By this time all hopes of effective cooperation with the Tories had been dashed. Loyalist contingents had been completely defeated and dispersed in Virginia, North Carolina, and South Carolina.

Parker joined Lt. Gen. Henry Clinton, sent south by Howe, off the North Carolina coast. Undeterred by the local setbacks, they determined to attack Charleston, the largest city in the south. There, South Carolina militia and newly raised continentals from the Carolinas and Virginia had prepared and manned defenses under the guidance of Maj. Gen. Charles Lee, whom Washington had dispatched south to assist them. The South Carolinians, contrary to Lee's advice, centered their defenses in Fort Moultrie, a palmetto log fort constructed on Sullivan's Island, commanding the approach to the harbor. It was an unwise decision, somewhat comparable to that at Bunker Hill, but fortunately for the defenders the British had to mount an uncoordinated attack in haste. Clinton's troops landed on nearby Long Island, but on the day

the Navy attacked, June 28, the water proved too deep for them to wade across to Sullivan's Island as expected. The British Army consequently sat idly by while the gunners in Fort Moultrie devastated the British warships. Sir Peter suffered the ultimate indignity when his pants were set afire.

The battered British Fleet hastily embarked the British soldiers and sailed north to join Howe at New York, for it was already behind schedule. For three years following the fiasco at Charleston the British were to leave the south unmolested. Overconfident Americans decided they did not need to send any large regular forces to the south, creating a weakness that would come back to haunt them. The latent loyalists in the south, whatever their potential strength in 1775, never recovered from the devastating blows they suffered while expecting British help. Loyalist refugees in London and New York, however, continued to insist that large numbers of loyal subjects of the King were still waiting for the British in the south, ready to rise again if only British troops returned.

Howe was meanwhile beset by other delays in the arrival of transports from England, and his attack did not get under way until late August, leaving insufficient time before the advent of winter to carry through the planned advance along the Hudson River–Lake Champlain line. He therefore started his invasion of New York with only the limited objective of gaining a foothold for the campaign the following year.

The British commander had, when his force was all assembled, an army of about 32,000 men, supported by a powerful fleet under the command of his brother, Admiral Richard Howe. To oppose him, Washington had brought most of his army down from Boston; Congress exerted its utmost efforts to reinforce him by raising Continental regiments in the surrounding states and issuing a general call for the militia. Few of Washington's roughly 19,000 troops could match Howe's forces in training, nor did his senior commanders have much in the way of experience in maneuvering large forces in the open.

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Washington and Congress made the same decision the South Carolinians had made at Charleston and Maj. Gen. Sir Guy Carleton had made in Canada in 1775—to defend their territory in the most forward positions—and they paid the price for their mistake. The geography of the area gave the side possessing naval supremacy an almost insuperable advantage. The city of New York stood on Manhattan Island, surrounded by the Hudson, Harlem, and East Rivers. (*Map 5*) There was only one connecting link with the mainland, Kingsbridge across the Harlem River at the northern tip of Manhattan. Across the East River on Long Island, Brooklyn Heights stood in a position dominating the southern tip of Manhattan. With the naval forces at their disposal, the Howes could land troops on either Long Island or Manhattan proper and send warships a considerable distance up either the East or the Hudson River.

Washington decided he must defend Brooklyn Heights on Long Island if he was to defend Manhattan. He therefore divided his army between the two places—a violation of the principle of mass and the first step toward disaster. For all practical purposes, command on Long Island was also divided. Maj. Gen. Nathanael Greene, to whom Washington first entrusted the command, came down with malaria and was


BATTLE OF LONG ISLAND
27 August 1776
American Lines (Approx)
British Attack
0
3
Miles
Kingsbridge
Harlem River
Harlem Heights
Hudson River
MANHATTAN I.
NEW JERSEY
Kip's Bay
East River
NEW YORK
Brooklyn
to Jamaica
Bedford
Newburgh
West Point
NEW YORK
Peekskill
Stony Point
Hudson River
North Castle
NEW JERSEY
White Plains
Dobbs Ferry
Passaic River
Pell's Pt.
Ft. Lee
Ft. Washington
Hackensack River
Morristown
NEW YORK
Brooklyn
LONG ISLAND
STATEN ISLAND
Raritan River
New Brunswick
Perth Amboy
Princeton
Delaware River
McConkey's Ferry
Assunpink Creek
Trenton
PENNSYLVANIA
Bordentown
RETREAT FROM NEW YORK
October–December 1776
Route of American Retreat
10
0
10
Miles

Map 5

replaced by Maj. Gen. John Sullivan. Not completely satisfied with this arrangement, at the last moment Washington placed Maj. Gen. Israel Putnam over Sullivan; but Putnam hardly had time to become acquainted with the situation before the British struck. The forces on Long Island, numbering about 10,000, were disposed in fortifications on Brooklyn Heights and in forward positions in back of a line of thickly wooded hills that ran across the southern end of the island. Sullivan was in command on the left of the American forward line, Brig. Gen. William Alexander on the right. Four roads ran through the hills toward the American positions. (*See Inset, Map 5*.) Unfortunately Sullivan, in violation of the principle of security, left the Jamaica-Bedford road virtually unguarded.

Howe consequently was able to teach the Americans lessons in maneuver and surprise. On August 22 he landed a force of 20,000 on the southwestern tip of Long Island and, in a surprise attack up the Jamaica-Bedford road against the American left flank, crumpled the entire American position. Alexander's valiant fight on the right went for naught as some of the more inexperienced American units along the line fled in terror before the British and Hessian bayonets, falling back to the fortifications on Brooklyn Heights. Had Howe pushed his advantage immediately, he might have carried the heights and destroyed half of the American Army then and there. Instead, perhaps rendered cautious by his repulse the previous year at Bunker Hill, he halted at nightfall and began to dig trenches, signaling an intent to take the heights by "regular approaches" in traditional eighteenth century fashion. Washington managed to evacuate his forces across the East River on the night of August 29. According to one theory, wind and weather stopped the British warships from entering the river to prevent the escape; according to another, the Americans had placed impediments in the river that effectively barred their entry. In any case, it was a narrow escape, made possible in large measure by the skill, bravery, and perseverance of Col. John Glover's Marblehead Regiment, infantrymen who had been recruited from Massachusetts fishing villages, who manned the boats.

Washington had two weeks to prepare his defenses on Manhattan before Howe struck again, landing a force at Kip's Bay above the city of New York (now about 34th Street) on September 15 under the cover of a devastating naval bombardment. Raw Connecticut militia posted behind shallow trenches at this point broke and ran "as if the Devil was in them," defying even the efforts of a raging Washington to halt them. Howe once again had an opportunity to split the American Army in two and destroy half, but again he delayed midway across the island to wait until his entire force had landed. General Putnam was able to bring the troops stationed in the city up the west side of Manhattan to join their compatriots in new fortifications on Harlem Heights. There, the Americans held out for another month and even won a morale-enhancing skirmish; but this position was vulnerable to being outflanked.

In mid-October Howe landed again in Washington's rear at Pell's Point. The American commander then finally evacuated the Manhattan trap via Kingsbridge and took up a new position at White Plains. He left a garrison behind to hold Forts Washington and Lee, on opposite sides of the Hudson, in an attempt to block British ships from going up

the river. Howe launched a probing attack on the American position at White Plains and was repulsed; but Washington, sensing his inability to meet the British in battle on equal terms, moved away to the north toward the Hudson highlands. Uncertain of Howe's next move, Washington divided his forces into three elements. Lee with one contingent remained on the east side of the Hudson to counter any advance into Connecticut. Washington crossed over to the west bank with a comparable force to counter any attempt by Howe to invade New Jersey. Maj. Gen. William Heath occupied the forts in the Highlands themselves to provide the lines of communication between the two maneuver forces and to prevent a British advance up the river. On November 16 Howe turned against Fort Washington and with the support of British warships on the Hudson stormed it successfully, capturing 3,000 American troops and large quantities of valuable munitions. Greene then hastily evacuated Fort Lee; by the end of November Washington, with mere remnants of his army, was in full retreat across New Jersey with Lord Charles Cornwallis, detached by Howe, in hot pursuit.

While Washington was suffering these disastrous defeats, the army that had been gathered was slowly melting away.

While Washington was suffering these disastrous defeats, the army that had been gathered was slowly melting away. Militia left by whole companies when their periods of service expired. Casualties and disease took their toll among the continentals. By early December Washington had crossed the Delaware River into Pennsylvania, where his small force began to regroup and draw supplies from Philadelphia's extensive network of depots. Other regiments, including forces released by the British retreat to Canada, slowly joined him while other regiments from Lee's force swung through the Highlands and started south toward Washington (without their general, who was captured in a tavern by a British cavalry raid). Washington's situation was precarious, but he determined to go on the offensive as soon as possible and began planning a lightning descent on West Jersey toward the end of December.

Neither the unreliability of the militia nor the short period of enlistment fully explained the debacle that had befallen the Continental Army. Washington's generalship also came under criticism. In contrast to the defeat of British invasion forces at Charleston and Lake Champlain, where militia seemed to be more effective than Continental regulars, the main defenses of the important city of New York crumpled at the first blow. Many faulted the Commander in Chief's decision to hold Fort Washington. General Lee, the ex–British colonel, ordered by Washington to bring his forces down from New York to join him behind the Delaware, delayed, believing that he might himself salvage the American cause by making incursions into New Jersey. He wrote Horatio Gates, "entre nous [between us], a certain great man is most damnably deficient."

There was only one bright spot in the picture in the autumn of 1776. While Howe was routing Washington around New York City, other British forces under Carleton were attempting to follow up the advantage they had gained in repulsing the attack on Canada earlier in the year. Carleton rather leisurely built a flotilla of boats to carry British forces down Lake Champlain and Lake George, intending at least to reduce the fort at Ticonderoga before winter. Benedict Arnold countered by throwing together a much weaker flotilla of American boats to contest the British passage. Arnold lost this naval action on the lakes, but

he so delayed Carleton's advance that the British commander reached Ticonderoga too late in the year to consider undertaking a siege. He returned his army to winter quarters in Canada, leaving the British with no advance base from which to launch the next year's campaign. Once again Arnold had shown himself one of the most dynamic and courageous of the patriot commanders.

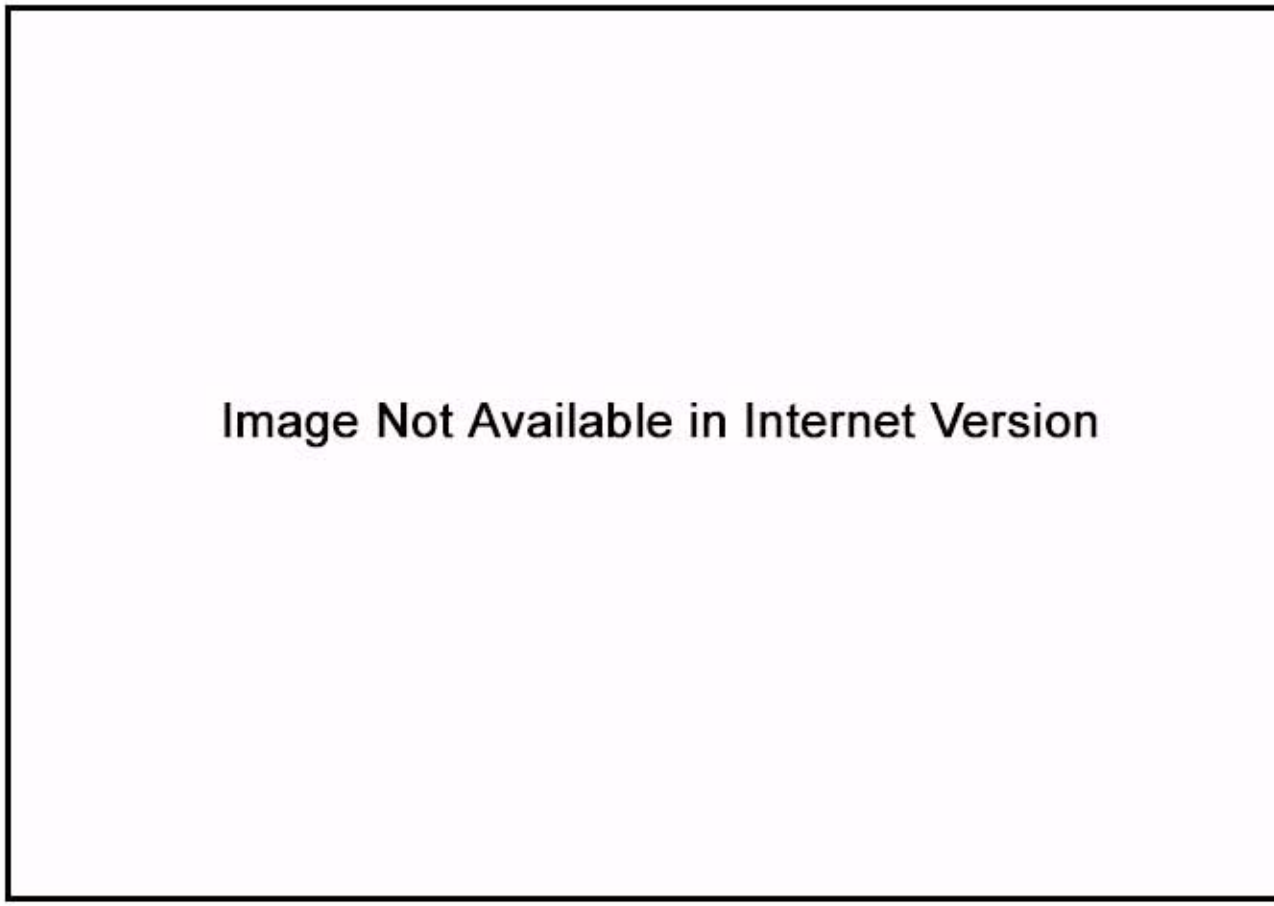
The British . . . had high hopes that the American Army would simply fade away and the rebellion would collapse.

Although the consequences were to be far reaching, this limited victory did little to dispel the gloom that fell on the patriots after Washington's defeats in New York. The British, aware that Continental enlistments expired at the end of the year, had high hopes that the American Army would simply fade away and the rebellion would collapse. Howe halted Cornwallis' pursuit of Washington and sent Clinton with a detachment of troops under naval escort to seize Newport, Rhode Island. He then dispersed his troops into winter quarters, establishing a line of posts in New Jersey at Perth Amboy, New Brunswick, Princeton, Trenton, and Bordentown and retiring himself to New York. Howe had gained the object of the 1776 campaign, a strong foothold, and possibly, as he thought at the time, a great deal more.

Trenton and Princeton

While Howe rested comfortably in New York, he dispatched Clinton to capture Newport, Rhode Island, as a much-desired winter anchorage for the Royal Navy. Washington took advantage of this distraction. By the last week of December 1776, Washington had built up a small, but competent striking force of veteran regiments about 7,000 strong. If he was to use this force, he would have to do so before the enlistments expired on December 31. With great boldness, Washington formulated a plan to strike enemy garrisons along the Delaware River early on the twenty-sixth of December, when the troops might be expected to have relaxed their guard for holiday revelry. The plan was for American forces to cross the river simultaneously and conduct raids on the outposts at Trenton and Bordentown, each held by a reinforced brigade of Hessian soldiers. A Continental force of around 2,400 men under Washington's personal command was to cross the Delaware at McConkey's Ferry above Trenton and then proceed in two columns by different routes, converging on the opposite ends of the main street of Trenton in the early morning of December 26. (*See Map 6.*) A second force, mainly militia under Col. John Cadwalader, was to cross below near Bordentown to attack the Hessian garrison there. A third force, also militia, under Brig. Gen. James Ewing, was to cross directly opposite Trenton to block the Hessian route of escape across Assunpink Creek.

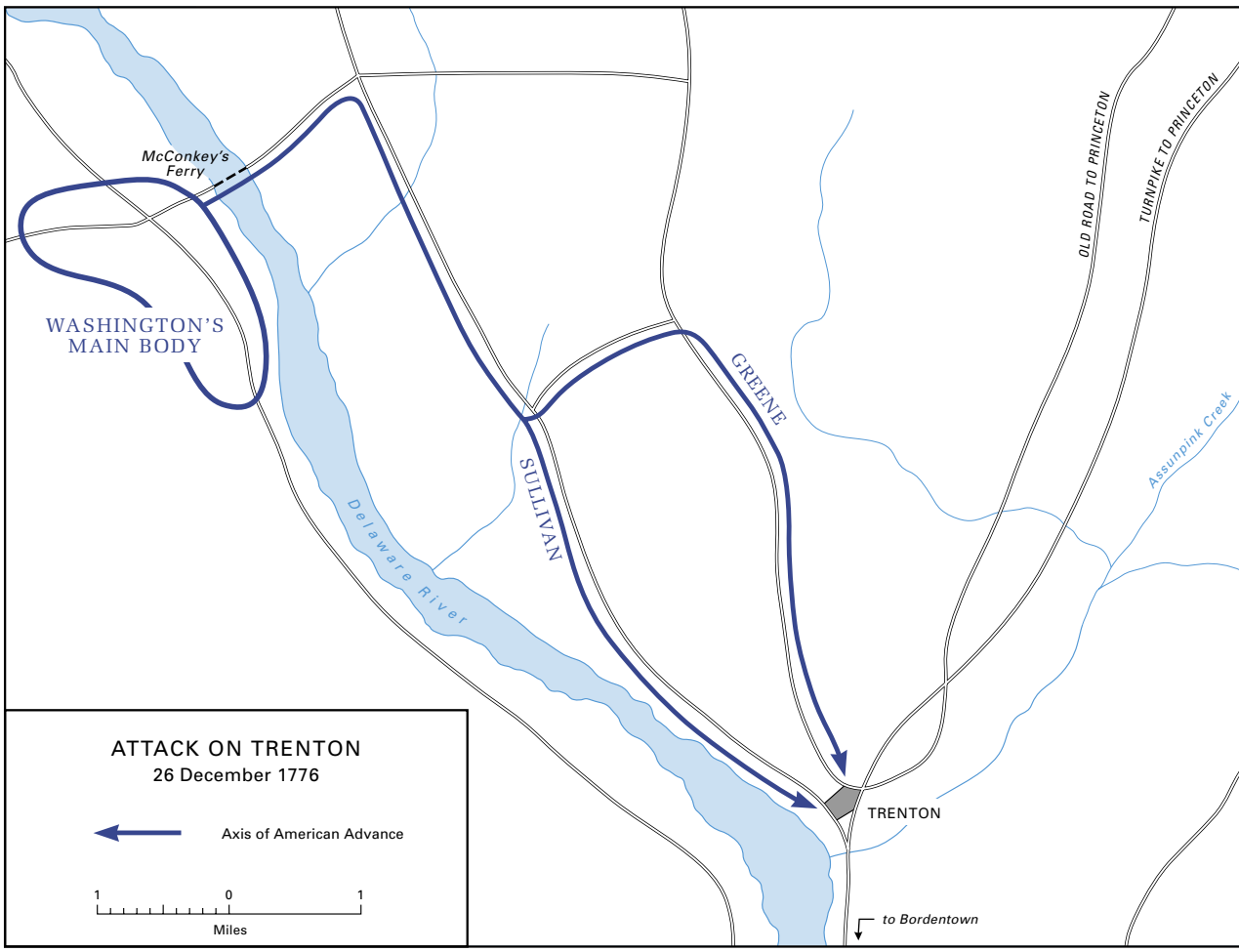
Christmas night was cold, windy, and snowy; and the Delaware River was filled with blocks of ice. These adverse conditions prevented Cadwalader and Ewing from fulfilling their parts of the plan. Driven on by Washington's indomitable will, the main force did cross as planned; the two columns, commanded respectively by Greene and Sullivan, converged on Trenton at eight o'clock in the morning of December 26, taking the Hessians completely by surprise. A New England private noted in his diary for that day: "This morning at 4 a clock we set off with our Field pieces and Marched 8 miles to Trenton where we ware



Surrender of Hessian Troops to General Washington after the Battle of Trenton, December 1776, *Artist Unknown, 1850*

attacked by a Number of Hushing and we Toock 1000 of them besides killed some. Then we marched back and got to the River at Night and got over all the Hushing." This rather undramatic description of a very dramatic event was not far wrong, except in attributing the attack to the "Hushings." The Hessians surrendered after a fight lasting only an hour and a half. Forty were killed, and the prisoner count was 918. Only 400 escaped to Bordentown, only because Ewing was not in place to block their escape. The Americans lost only 2 dead and 2 wounded, among the wounded being future President James Monroe.

Encouraged by this success, Washington determined to make another foray. By an impassioned appeal to the patriotism of the men, supplemented by an offer of a $10 bounty in hard money, he persuaded at least part of his old army to remain for six more weeks. With a force of around 5,000 Washington again crossed the Delaware on the night of December 30–31. By this time Cornwallis had hastily gathered together the scattered British garrisons in New Jersey and took up a position confronting Washington at Trenton on January 2, 1777. Convinced that he had the Americans in a trap, he put off battle until the next day because of the exhausted state of his troops. In the night Washington slipped away, leaving campfires burning brightly to deceive the



Map 6

British. The next morning he struck another surprise blow at Princeton, inflicting heavy losses on three British regiments just leaving the town to join Cornwallis. Washington then went into winter quarters in the hills around Morristown, New Jersey. Cornwallis did not pursue. The British had had enough of winter warfare, and Howe drew in his outposts in New Jersey to New Brunswick and Perth Amboy.

Trenton and Princeton not only offset the worst effects of the disastrous defeats in New York but also restored Washington's prestige as a commander with friend and foe alike. In the execution of the two strokes east of the Delaware, Washington had applied the principles of offensive, surprise, and maneuver with great success and finally achieved stature as a military commander. If these victories did not assure him that he could recruit such an army as Congress had voted, they did at least guarantee that he would be able to field a force the following year. Sir William Howe found that, despite his smashing rout of the Americans in New York, he was left with little more than that city, a foothold in New Jersey, and the port of Newport in Rhode Island. The rebellion was far from being crushed.

Discussion Questions

1. Discuss the various differences between the Massachusetts Minutemen and the British troops they fired on during the battles of Lexington and Concord.

2. What were the strengths and weaknesses of the British military system and the new American Army in the opening days of the Revolution? What challenges did each side face in its attempts to prosecute its military operations?

3. Given the state of the American Army in 1776, how do you think Washington should have conducted operations in the New York City area? What should Howe have done?

4. Discuss the element of surprise in Washington's attacks at Trenton and Princeton. Did he make good use of this principle? What were the dangers in relying on surprise?

5. What role did Congress play in setting military policy and determining military operations in the opening days of the Revolution? Why was this important?

6. Why was it important to create the Continental Army in 1775 rather than relying upon the existing state militias to prosecute the war?

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