

# The War for Independence

by Ray Raphael



British General Burgoyne (center left) surrenders to General Horatio Gates at Saratoga, NY, October 17, 1777, in this Currier print based on a painting by John Trumbull in the US Capitol (New York, 1852). (Gilder Lehrman Collection)

On July 4, 1774, exactly two years before the United States declared independence, a patriotic club in Worcester, Massachusetts, decided that each member should have in the ready two pounds of gunpowder and twelve flints. With the Massachusetts Government Act, Parliament had just revoked key provisions of the colony's provincial charter (like a constitution), and the people of Worcester vowed they were ready to fight to protect their political rights. Two months later 4,622 militiamen—half the adult population of this rural county—rode or walked for as many as fifty miles to gather along Worcester's Main Street and shut down the governmental machinery at the local level. The show of force was so overwhelming that the British military commander in Boston did not dare send in his troops.

Similar events were staged in other county seats. In Plymouth, some 4,000 patriots were so excited after they closed down the court that they tried to move Plymouth Rock up to the courthouse, but that proved more difficult than unseating government officials. So ended British rule in all of Massachusetts outside of Boston. Then on October 4, 1774, twenty-one months before the Declaration of Independence, the people of Worcester said it was time to start a new government from scratch. The *revolution* had begun.

But wouldn't the king and his army fight back? To prepare for that seemingly inevitable event, patriots armed and trained through the winter, and when British troops marched on Lexington and Concord the following spring (1775), the patriots were ready. As British soldiers retreated toward Boston along what we know today as Battle Road, they were fired upon not by hick farmers taking potshots with rusty muskets, but by organized companies who had been training for such an event for half a year.

The war had now begun. American insurgents, after chasing British redcoats back into Boston, ringed the city and began a siege. This was no easy feat. It required the presence and patience of thousands upon thousands of farmers-turned-soldiers, now organized as the Continental Army. How would these men and teenage boys be fed, clothed, housed, and armed? Could they hold their own in the heat of battle? Come harvest time, would they simply pack up and go home to their farms? Through the next seven years, the Continental Congress and the state governments would find questions of supply and manpower as taxing as the military conflict.

Right from the start, the war proved something of a stalemate. When British forces tried to push the Americans off Breed's Hill (misnamed the Battle of Bunker Hill), 226 of their number were killed and another 826 wounded, just to gain a few hundred yards of dirt. Similarly, when American military and political leaders, tired of waiting around, sent an expedition to faraway Quebec, the weakly guarded British outpost in Canada, the invaders were trounced. Whichever side took the initiative was likely to suffer a setback. George Washington, who took command of the Continental Army after the Battle of Breed's Hill, wanted to stage a direct attack on Boston, but much to his credit, he allowed himself to be talked out of the move by his war council.

The following March (1776), with the aid of cannons seized from the British at Fort Ticonderoga in upstate New York, Americans finally took a highland promontory known as Dorchester Heights, which overlooked Boston and its harbor. Rather than suffer an expected bombardment, British officers abandoned the city. Americans celebrated, but not for long. Come summer, 23,000 British regulars, 9,000 Hessian mercenaries (hired soldiers from a German state), a few thousand seamen, and 417 seaworthy vessels armed with some 1,200 cannons gathered in New York harbor. This was the largest military force ever assembled by Great Britain for a single expedition until the twentieth century.

Britain's fleet anchored near New York on July 2, 1776, the very day Congress voted for independence in Philadelphia, one hundred miles away. That vote would prove meaningless if the massive British force managed to crush Washington and his much smaller Continental Army. Military strategy is always easier in hindsight, but it would seem foolish for Washington to commit the bulk of his forces to the first line of resistance on Long Island, where, if defeated, they could be cut off from a retreat to the mainland. But rather than show weakness, the man Americans called "The General" did just that, and he and the fledgling nation almost paid a steep price. After a predictable defeat, American soldiers managed to escape from Long Island only because rough seas inhibited British ships from blocking off their line of retreat.

Washington's army was pushed back again, first from Manhattan to the mainland, then across the Hudson River and southward through New Jersey, with a British force at its heels. And winter was coming on. "These are the times that try men's souls," wrote Thomas Paine, who accompanied the Army as it drew back.<sup>[1]</sup> Early that same year, Paine's *Common Sense* had fueled the movement toward independence; now, in a series of writings called "The Crisis," Paine spurned "sunshine patriots" and urged the ragtag soldiers who remained with the Army to stay on.

They almost didn't. Enlistments were due to expire at the end of the year, and unless something could be done to change the men's minds, many and perhaps most would not re-enlist. That's when George Washington, who had voiced nothing but disdain for greenhorn militiamen, suddenly allied himself with local forces in a daring assault. On Christmas night of 1776, risking all, he staged a three-pronged crossing of the half-frozen Delaware River to surprise and defeat the British advance guard at Trenton. Striking again quickly, Washington and the Continentals, with help from local

militias who knew the terrain, achieved another victory at Princeton a week later before settling into winter camp.

These two victories staved off defeat, but even so, the Continental Army found itself undermanned. At the outset men had volunteered, but after the first year they needed to be enticed by bounties, and when even that proved not enough, they were drafted. Each state and town needed to come up with its quota of soldiers. Many local governmental bodies staged lotteries, but when a man's number came up, that did not mean he had to go off and fight. If he had the money, he could hire someone else to take his place, and that is how the Continental Army came to be filled with poor men in need of money or a job and teenage boys out for adventure. They were patriots still, but this crew, for the most part, differed from those who first signed up.

As state and local governments searched for men to fill their quotas, they abandoned their earlier prohibitions against men of color (blacks and mulattoes, whether free or slave) fighting in the Army. Free blacks, often in need of money and a trade, made ready substitutes for white draftees who were willing to pay a price to avoid service. As the manpower shortage worsened, several state governments offered bounties to masters who allowed their slaves to serve. Sometimes, but not always, slaves were promised their freedom in return for service, and sometimes, but not always, those promises were honored at war's end. As a result of all these measures, the ranks of the Continental Army in the North were filled by a disproportionate percentage of men of color. These patriot soldiers did not rise in the military hierarchy, but they served with honor. The all-black First Rhode Island Regiment of the Continental Army, organized in 1778, fought valiantly in the Battles of Rhode Island, Red Bank, Red Bank, and Yorktown.

Only in South Carolina and Georgia were blacks not recruited by American forces. Instead, to alleviate the manpower shortage, these states offered slaves as bounties to white recruits. Not welcomed in the American Army, thousands upon thousands of slaves fled to the British, who actively recruited them. In the upper South too, British promises proved effective. Lord Dunmore's proclamation of 1775, which offered freedom to slaves who fought on the British side, was followed by General Henry Clinton's offer of "full security" and an "occupation" to "every Negro who shall desert the Rebel standard."<sup>[2]</sup> Women as well as men responded to these appeals, but as with patriot promises, British pledges often fell flat. When more slaves fled than British forces could handle, many were turned away to face the wrath of patriot slaveholders. Others were made servants of British officers or taken as slaves to British islands in the Caribbean. Some, meanwhile, turned into professional British soldiers, serving in the West Indies and eventually in the Napoleonic Wars. In 1783, when the British evacuated New York, 3,000 blacks who had fled for their freedom departed to Canada, where they were granted small plots of mostly poor land. Totaling almost half a million in number, almost 20 percent of the total population, African Americans held at least a share of the balance of power in the American Revolution, and as both sides contended with this truth, the lives of free blacks and slaves were significantly altered.

Women, too, played significant roles in the conflict. Because they were not subject to the same level of scrutiny, female riders were able to carry messages across contested terrain. Thousands traveled with the Continental Army, filling everyday functions necessary to military campaigns. They cooked and cleaned, they hauled supplies, and they worked on artillery teams. Most of the tasks required to keep an army in the field could be filled by woman power as well as man power, and in the Revolutionary War they were.

Women contributed on the home front as well. With men off to war and laborers scarce, they had to work that much harder. Wartime shortages forced them to weave more cloth, stretch food

resources, and find ingenious ways to make do on limited budgets. In a war of attrition, which the Revolutionary War turned out to be, such everyday tasks took on military significance. If one side could not hold out, that side would lose.

As the war dragged on, a pattern emerged. The British were able to grab and hold New York and other port cities like Newport and Philadelphia, which they could resupply by sea. Whenever they journeyed into the interior, however, they confronted a small but dedicated Continental Army beefed up by homegrown militias that functioned, in the words of military historian John Shy, like “sand in the gears, . . . a great spongy mass that could be pushed aside or maimed temporarily but that had no vital center and could not be destroyed.”<sup>[3]</sup> That’s certainly what happened in 1777 when the British General John Burgoyne set out with 8,000 soldiers from Canada down Lake Champlain and the Hudson River toward New York City, hoping to disunite the United States by cutting the new nation in two. With Washington and the main force of the Continental Army far to the south, local militiamen quickly came to the aid of the Northern Army, swelling its ranks to more than twice the British total and defeating the invaders handily.

Burgoyne’s surrender at a place called Saratoga proved to France that the United States stood a chance at defeating Great Britain, its archenemy for the past hundred years. This had two consequences that altered the course of the war. First, France sent aid in the form of money, men, munitions, and eventually vessels that could challenge British command of the seas. Second, but equally important, it led to a renewal of armed hostilities between France and Great Britain, not only in America but also across the globe. In 1779 Britain was forced to defend against a combined French and Spanish fleet that gathered in the English Channel. The following year the Dutch joined with France and Spain, and by 1781 Britain found itself engaged in armed conflict against these allies in the North Sea, the Mediterranean Sea, the southern tip of Africa, India, and the East Indies. With British forces spread this thinly, Washington, the Continental Army, and local militias stood a far better chance of prevailing in America.

Even so, the Americans could not disengage the British from their coastal enclaves, any more than the British could take and hold the interior. Aided by French support from the sea, they tried to dislodge a British fleet and army of occupation from Newport in 1778 but failed. Washington also wanted to attack the enemy in New York, but he once again ceded to better council and simply waited and watched from his outpost north of the city at West Point.

In 1779 Washington took aim at an easier target: Iroquois who had allied with British soldiers to stage attacks in Pennsylvania and western New York. He ordered General James Sullivan and 4,500 troops “to lay waste” to Indian towns “in the most effectual manner, that the country may not be merely overrun, but destroyed.”<sup>[4]</sup> Houses, orchards, and fields were burned, but that did not stop Indian resistance and the war in the west continued.

Five years into the war, there appeared no endgame for either side. The primary job for each army was to remain on duty, and even that proved difficult. To gather supplies, the British needed to raid American farms, thereby alienating local people, or ship goods across three thousand miles of ocean. American soldiers relied on civilians who already felt overburdened by the war, and the civilians did not always come through. The hard winter at Valley Forge (1777–1778) was followed by even harder times at Morristown, New Jersey (1779–1780, the coldest winter on record for the eastern seaboard of the United States), where soldiers were reduced to eating dogs and shoe leather. It was a war of endurance, to be lost rather than won.

Hoping to break the stalemate, British generals shifted their attention southward, where they expected to receive support from local loyalists. They took Savannah in 1778, held it against an American siege the following year, and in May of 1780, after a prolonged siege of their own, gained control of the South's major port, Charleston. British soldiers then marched inland, where the fighting became notably brutal. Prisoners on both sides were not taken but slaughtered. The local population divided, some supporting the Americans and others the British, and entire battles were fought with hardly a redcoat in sight. Amid all this, slowly, a British army under General Charles Cornwallis made its way northward into Virginia, winning battles and gaining ground but losing many men.

Back at West Point, meanwhile, Washington's patience was tried. In 1780 French allies landed in Newport, which the British had just abandoned to head south, but Washington could not interest the French commanders in a combined assault on New York. Finally, in May of 1781, he heard that a large French fleet under Admiral Comte de Grasse would soon be headed to the West Indies and available for short-term support on its way. In August, he learned further that the fleet was about to arrive in the Chesapeake Bay, in close proximity to Cornwallis and his southern army. Seizing the moment, he rushed the bulk of his troops southward, and the French force from Newport followed. The timing worked well. Expecting aid from British vessels, Cornwallis had parked his troops at Yorktown, Virginia, on a vulnerable peninsula. While the French fleet kept British ships from delivering supplies, Washington, the Comte de Rochambeau, and a combined American and French army staged a successful siege on land. Outnumbered, outmaneuvered, and with food growing scarce, Cornwallis offered to surrender on October 17, 1781, and two days later 7,000 soldiers under his command marched between the American ranks and laid down their arms.

According to most accounts, Yorktown marked the end of the War for Independence, but that is not exactly correct. Although Lord North, the British prime minister, remarked "Oh, God, it's all over!" upon hearing the news, King George III thought it was not. His countrymen, after they recovered from the "shock" of the loss, would certainly "find the necessity of carrying on the war," he said.<sup>[5]</sup> In fact, there were still 47,000 British soldiers—more than four times as many men as served at that moment in the Continental Army—stationed in Canada, New York, South Carolina, Georgia, and the West Indies, and these could have been redeployed to continue the war. That's exactly what worried George Washington, who warned Congress that failure to keep the Army in a state of preparation would "expose us to the most disgraceful disasters."<sup>[6]</sup>

The war lingered on for almost another year. More Americans lost their lives in battle during that time than during the eventful first year of the war, which had included the notable battles of Lexington, Concord, Bunker Hill, and Quebec. In the end, though, the British conceded, not simply because of Yorktown, but because they were suffering losses in the Mediterranean, Africa, and India as well. The British Empire was simply spread too thin, and it was time to pull back. By giving up the fight in America, Britain would be better able to solidify its authority elsewhere.

And that is how the United States managed to double its size in the 1783 Treaty of Paris, which formally ended the war. Had Great Britain held onto the vast territory between the Appalachian Mountains and the Mississippi River, it would have accumulated great expenses and quite possibly found itself embroiled in future wars on the North American continent. On the other hand, by ceding this land to the United States, Britain would facilitate the growth of a new power that could challenge its traditional adversaries, France and Spain, for control of the American interior, thereby placing a strain on *their* resources. This is the global perspective so often lost in telling the tale of our national origins. The War for Independence was won not only because of the grit of the

Americans; that was a necessary but not sufficient component. The war was won, and a new nation created, because the mother country had become so overextended it needed to contract.

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[1] Thomas Paine, “The American Crisis,” No. 1, December 19, 1776, in *Thomas Paine Reader*, eds. Michael Foot and Isaac Kramnick (New York: Penguin, 1987), 116.

[2] Sir Henry Clinton, Phillipsburg Proclamation, June 30, 1779, quoted in Ray Raphael, *A People’s History of the American Revolution* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002), 331.

[3] John Shy, *A People Numerous & Armed: Reflections on the Military Struggle for American Independence*, rev. ed. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004), 238.

[4] George Washington to John Sullivan, May 31, 1779, in *The Writings of George Washington*, ed. John C. Fitzpatrick (Washington, DC: United States George Washington Bicentennial Commission, 1926) 15:189–93. Accessible on the Web at “Washington Resources at the University of Virginia Library, <http://etext.virginia.edu/washington/fitzpatrick/>.

[5] William Baring Pemberton, *Lord North* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1938), 335; King George III to Lord North, November 28, 1781, in *The Correspondence of King George III with Lord North* (London: W. Bodham Donne, 1867), 2:393.

[6] Washington to President of Congress, October 17, 1781, in Washington, *Writings*, 23:297.

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**Ray Raphael** is the author of *Founders: The People Who Brought You a Nation (2009)* and *A People’s History of the American Revolution: How Common People Shaped the Fight for Independence (2001)* and co-editor, with Alfred F. Young and Gary B. Nash, of *Revolutionary Founders: Rebels, Radicals, and Reformers in the Making of a Nation (2011)*. His latest book is *Mr. President: How and Why the Founders Created a Chief Executive (2012)*.