British Conduct of the American Revolutionary War: A Review of Interpretations

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Historians of the American Revolutionary War divide roughly into those who argue that America won the struggle, and those who believe that Britain lost it. It is with the latter group of writers that this essay will deal by surveying what scholars have said about British conduct of the war against the American colonies. Why, these writers ask, did England fall short of subduing her rebellious subjects, especially since she was superior to the colonies in manpower, in naval and army technology, and as some have argued, in seasoned military leaders? Most analysts agree that the war was lost in 1776 and 1777, the first two years of serious military campaigning. But there interpretive unity ends, and Britain’s loss is accounted for by various reasons that cut across political and military lines, such as inferior bureaucrats in London, poor strategic planning, misunderstanding by military leaders of the nature of the American war, conservatism among the king’s generals and admirals, lack of cooperation between army and navy, breakdowns in logistics, an inability to mobilize American loyalists, and problems of finance and dissent against governmental policies at home.

That the British war effort was impressive and seemingly ought to have overwhelmed the much punier one of the American rebels is confirmed by a quick glance at some substantive information concerning the English mobilization. In the early months of 1776, George Germain, Viscount Sackville, secretary of state for the colonies and leader of the government’s conduct of the war, exerted himself mightily to overcome the bureaucratic inefficiency of the British government and bring together the forces needed to subdue the colonists. Before the year was out, London had fielded 32,000 troops under General William Howe in New York, 13,500 under Guy Carleton in Canada, and had sent them “mountains of supplies and equipment.” For the expedition

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against New York alone, the English used 370 transports with a total tonnage of 127,249, a figure unmatched even in the Seven Years’ War. An equal effort was made to supply the army in Canada. At the same time, the Royal Navy sent to American waters under Admiral Richard Howe seventy-three warships manned by 13,000 seamen. Most were larger vessels, and the fleet contained only a few brigs and schooners. This flotilla comprised 45 percent of the entire British Navy at the time.¹

As the war wore on, not even wealthy Britain could sustain such monumental efforts at army mobilization, and her strength wore down; but her expenditures continued to be very high. Throughout the conflict, the crown dispensed money not only to put British soldiers in the field but also to purchase the services of about 30,000 German troops. During the campaign of 1777, Germain sent William Howe 6,100 reinforcements and managed in addition to scrape up 1,600 for Canada. The government procured enormous amounts of supplies for the armies in America, employing about 120,000 tons of shipping each year. No reliable figures exist as to the overall cost of Britain’s war effort against America, but it has been estimated that she spent at least £110 million, thereby weakening herself at home and causing much internal dissension against the war.² It is easy to see why scholars are somewhat mystified by the final results of the mother country’s coercion of her recalcitrant colonies.

This problem has troubled historians. From the time of the first generation of Revolutionary War scholars to the present, much has been written on the subject. But never before the past four decades has the issue been examined with such depth and by such competent writers. Because the historical profession is showing great interest in viewing the Revolutionary War from the perspective of British soldiers and statesmen, it seems useful to evaluate past and present interpretations of why Britain lost a war she seemingly should have won.

During the Revolution and for some years afterwards, most Britons who commented upon the conflict were, or had been, participants in the events about which they wrote, and it comes as no surprise that these men clouded their views with partisan recriminations about the unhappy


² Higginbotham, War of Independence, 130; Mackesy, War for America, 66, 118.
course that events took. Such individuals as King George III; Lord North, the prime minister and leader of the war administration; Lord George Germain; and Horace Walpole, Edmund Burke, and other Whig opponents of governmental policy, all were outspoken in their views, as were military leaders William Howe, Richard Howe, Henry Clinton, and John Burgoyne. None of these British leaders pretended to present impartial scholarship, but their views did become important as source materials for later writers and for that reason (if for no other) they ought to be noted in a historiographical survey.

Even while the recriminators skewered each other with venomous pens, a number of supposedly critical and impartial histories of the Revolution were being published in the 1780s and 1790s. These multivolumed works were written by both British and American authors, none of whom were professionally trained, but some of whom had taken part in the events they described. A small number are unbiased enough to be of some value in studying the attitudes of the postwar generation regarding British conduct of military operations in America. The most important for this subject are, on the British side, Charles Stedman's *History of the Origin, Progress, and Termination of the American War*, and on the American side, David Ramsay's *History of the American Revolution*. Stedman, who served under Clinton and Charles, Lord


4 Important contemporary histories are William Gordon, *The History of the Rise, Progress, and Establishment of the Independence of the United States of America: Including an Account of the
Cornwallis, in the southern campaign of 1780, had witnessed at least part of the war. Ramsay, a Scottish Presbyterian from Pennsylvania, had practiced medicine in Charleston, South Carolina, and had been a prominent American patriot.

Stedman began his analysis of the Revolution by declaring that, although colonies seem to have it in their nature to rebel against the parent country, the Americans could not justify their action by any logical argument. He felt that the colonists had no right to complain about curtailment of their liberties because their own stubbornness had turned British public opinion against them. However, he had been, like Burke and Walpole, somewhat afraid that the conduct of the war by Germain might be "derogatory to the constitution, and contrary to the law." He had applauded the limited war aims of the Howe brothers and the attempts by the prime minister, Lord North, to bring about negotiation. At the same time he thought that the king's use of force was very imprudent. "Formal distinctions" of law, declared Stedman, "fade away before substantial powers," and had the king wisely considered, he would have "treated with" his subjects rather than fight them, despite the illegality of the Continental Congress under the British constitution.

But in the final judgment on who or what was responsible for Britain's loss of the war, Stedman spread the guilt widely. Although admitting that the Americans had been worthy antagonists because of the "energy of liberty," he nonetheless maintained that Britain had blundered into the loss of the war. "The eloquence of some legislators in opposition to government; the narrow views of ministers at home,"


who did "not proceed on any grand system that might control particular circumstances and events, but studied to prolong their own authority by temporary expedients...; and the misconduct of certain commanders abroad, through a series of pusillanimity, procrastination, discord, and folly," had been responsible for the British defeat.6

Ramsay also cast the net widely in analyzing the reasons for Britain's defeat. Considering that he had been an active participant in the Revolution and that he transcribed his history only a short time after its culmination, he conveyed remarkably balanced and modern-sounding arguments about the motives and actions of his recent English enemies.7 It was Ramsay's repeated contention that the British were brought low by hubris, an overweening arrogance, confidence, and lust for power that blinded them to the most fruitful course of action. He maintained that in 1775 the government of Lord North was so certain the Coercive Acts would bring the Americans to heel that it "regarded the boldest resolutions of Congress as the idle clamors of an unruly multitude, which proper exertions on the part of Great Britain would speedily silence." The pride of the nation, he declared, "was interested in humbling the Colonists, who had dared to resist the power which had lately triumphed over the combined force of France and Spain." Nor did these attitudes change as the war progressed, for after the battle of Camden in 1780, the British were asserting, "with a confidence bordering on presumption," that they "would soon extirpate rebellion, so effectually as to leave no vestige of it in America" and were showing an "impius confidence in their own wisdom and prowess." Only after Yorktown was the ministry forced "to yield to the superior influence of interest" and give in to what "the pride of Great Britain for a long time resisted."8

Interspersed within this broad theme of British arrogance, Ramsay gave specific military reasons for the ultimate defeat. Like many other observers then and since, he was mystified by the actions of William Howe in 1777, commenting that "for reasons that do not obviously occur" the general decided to sail into the Chesapeake, take Philadelphia, and attempt to capture the Continental Congress. But occupation of the city achieved nothing, and only the "short-sighted" believed that it would; for the legislators departed before William Howe

arrived. In any case, "the great contest for sovereignty of the United States . . . did not rest with a ruler, or a body of rulers, nor . . . the possession or loss of any particular place. It was the public mind, the sentiment and opinions of the yeomanry of the country which were to decide." Commenting on the defeat of Burgoyne at Saratoga in 1777, he said, "the catastrophe proved the folly of planning distant expeditions, and of projecting remote conquests." Collapse of the invasion only encouraged America to persevere, increased the embarrassments of the ministry, helped slow plans for other military expeditions, and produced powerful friends for America in European capitals.9

Like some recent scholars who have examined the ultimate causes of British defeat, Ramsay was struck by Britain's misapprehensions about the role the loyalists should play in the struggle. To begin with, the ministry was receiving bad information from recent exiles and from colonial officials who wanted to feather their own nests by telling Whitehall what it wanted to hear. Hence, Lord North's government was informed that "Congress was supported by a faction, and that the great body of the people was hostile to independence"—a condition that simply was not true. Working on this assumption, William Howe attempted in 1777 to recruit loyalists in New York and New Jersey but secured the services of only 1,114 men. Undaunted by this failure, Clinton tried recruiting in the South after the fall of Charleston in 1780. "It had been confidently asserted," Ramsay wrote, "that a majority of the Americans were well affected to the British government, and that under proper regulation, substantial service might be expected from them." The assumption did not prove out in the South, partly because loyalists were restrained from joining the British army by the activity of patriot guerillas, but mostly because loyalist numbers had been greatly exaggerated in the first place.10 Thus, Ramsay concluded, the English stumbled to defeat.

With the advent of the nineteenth century there began among British historians a period in which little interest would be shown in writing about the Revolutionary War. It is not surprising that the English gentlemen scholars who wrote during the period 1800 to 1890 would concentrate on more glorious themes than the study of a conflict in which Britain had lost an empire.11 In America, however, there emerged

9 Ibid., II, 7, 13–14, 55. It is interesting to note, in light of some later scholarship, that Ramsay believed the British troops to be "amply provided with artillery, military stores, and warlike materials of every kind." Ibid., I, 290.
10 Ibid., I, 148–49, II, 4, 75, 159–64.
in the mid-nineteenth century a writer who could think of no more noble theme than this and who composed a history of the American Revolution on a grand scale. Although George Bancroft was not a synthesizer (he had no monographic materials upon which to draw), he did not write in ignorance. One eminent scholar of the Revolution has said of him, "Probably no one else has known the original sources for the Revolutionary period as well as he, and he knew them when only a small portion had found their way into print."  

The interpretation given by Bancroft for British conduct of the war was recorded in his magisterial History of the United States.\(^\text{13}\) A Jacksonian Democrat, he saw, in what was to become known as the "Whig" interpretation of the war, a Britain that had tried through a long series of unsuccessful attempts to suppress the freedom that grew naturally in American soil. Looking to Burke and William Pitt for inspiration, he saw the Americans of 1776 as the best of a line of men who had first resisted tyranny under the Stuarts. In 1774, Bancroft begins, "The hour of the American Revolution was come. The people of the continent with irresistible energy obeyed one general impulse, as the earth in spring listens to the command of nature, and without the appearance of effort bursts forth to life. . . . the Americans seized as their peculiar inheritance the traditions of liberty." But the Britons, feeling patriotism to be more attractive than justice, united behind King George III, supported Germain's harsh proposal for the immediate application of force, and except for a small minority of right-thinking opponents of the government's policy declared with Jeremy Bentham that the Americans "claimed without the slightest evidence" that their natural rights had been infringed.\(^\text{14}\)  

As for the military conduct of the war, Bancroft portrayed the Howe brothers as men who were well meaning but too indolent and negligent to halt the "merciless cruelties" inflicted by their subordinates on the Americans. Richard Howe "had accepted office from real goodwill to America and England"; but Germain's harsh declaration in early 1777 that the pardoning power could be used no more, was a body blow to the policy of conciliation. Not until after Burgoyne's defeat did North deign once more to offer the Americans a conciliatory policy, but by then the government was too late in offering too little. Charles James Fox, leader of a Whig faction in Commons, declared that the government seemed to

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\(^\text{13}\) George Bancroft, History of the United States From the Discovery of the American Continent (6 vols., New York, 1883–1885).

\(^\text{14}\) Ibid., IV, 1, V, 21–22.
know "as little how to make peace as war.''' The king, stubbornly refusing to bend his will, pronounced, "I will rather risk my crown than do what I think personally disgraceful," and he would agree neither to North's attempts to bring peace nor his desire to resign as prime minister.15

Not even the surrender of Cornwallis' army in 1781 could shake the tyrant's will: "No difficulties," said the king, "can get me to consent to the getting of peace at the expense of a separation from America.''' Yet North and Germain were forced to resign, and the way was at last open for the Whigs to come to power and bring the inevitable peace. Bancroft maintained that "The outgoing ministry was the worst which England had known since Parliament had been supreme. 'Such a bunch of imbecility,' said the author of 'Taxation no Tyranny,' '. . . never disgraced the country.''' America, however, had gained independence because of North's mismanagement, and though "posterity has been toward [him] more lenient and less just," the former colonists could hardly bear him a grudge.16

Bancroft's interpretation of British conduct of the Revolutionary War remained standard in America throughout the nineteenth century. It was bolstered in the early-twentieth century by the writings of George Otto Trevelyan, the first Englishman to attempt a monumental study of the events of the American war. Trevelyan's work, The American Revolution, faithfully captured, as no other volumes since written, the drama, the wit, and the manners of the generation that governed and lost the first British empire. Following Bancroft's lead, Trevelyan wrote a sympathetic account of the British opponents of king and ministry. Theodore Roosevelt, a friend of Trevelyan who considered the writer "one of the few blessed exceptions to the rule that the readable historian is not truthful," declared in acknowledgement of the receipt of one of the volumes of the work, "I look forward to reading it as eagerly as any girl ever looks forward to reading the last volume of a favorite novel.'''17

Trevelyan, a gentleman politician, had become in 1885 a member of William Gladstone's cabinet. Serving in the House of Commons until 1897, he finally resigned his seat to devote himself to historical writing. He at first concentrated upon a study of Fox, but a feeling of revulsion at the corrupt politics of the period caused him at last to turn to what he viewed as the more noble task of doing research on the struggle of America for independence. A nineteenth-century Whig in search of his political forbears, he thought he had discovered them among the men

15 Ibid., V, 146-47, 224, 249.
16 Ibid., V, 524, 531.
17 Quoted in Trevelyan, American Revolution, Morris, ed., xi.
who opposed George III during what he perceived as the disastrous ministry of Lord North. His works showed "a small band of dedicated men, the Rockingham Whigs, arrayed against a power-hungry king and a corrupt horde of place-hunters," doing everything within their means to halt the drive toward tyranny. Overpowered by the king and his cohorts, they nevertheless succeeded after American victory and royal failure brought a new alignment to British politics.18

On the military side of the war, Trevelyan thought that Germain was an utter incompetent who had curtailed the independence of William Howe when freedom was needed to effect the aim of bringing peace. Yet he was also critical of the general for his refusal to crush George Washington's army at New York in 1776 when, he said, the chance existed. Moreover, Trevelyan charged, as had Bancroft, that the general had not kept a firm hand upon his troops. Using as a source a history of the war written by Thomas Jones, an American loyalist, Trevelyan showed how British plundering of friend and foe alike had caused much disaffection toward the mother country. But Clinton was not guilty of such practices; in fact, the commander who replaced William Howe had spoken out forthrightly against the custom of recruiting soldiers by offering them a chance for rapine and the collection of booty.19

Even as Trevelyan was reinforcing the old Whig interpretation of the American war, an "unredeemed" Tory historian, John W. Fortescue, was composing the third volume of his History of the British Army,20 in which he studied his country's military performance during the Revolution. Published in 1902, the book was so jingoistically anti-American that one reviewer at the time said it might have been written in the spirit of Germain "or poor old pensioned Dr. Johnson."21 If Fortescue was unsparring in his salty criticism of Yankees, he also berated his own countrymen for their poor leadership of, and bad attitude toward, the British military establishment. Not only was the army inefficient and divided in command, he said, but the ministry's plans for it were inept. The cabinet rested its hopes on loyalists—a chimerical enough course of conduct. But, even worse, usually the ministers' purposes were totally unclear and showed an abysmal lack of understanding about what the army was capable of doing or of what forces and resources would be required to do what was planned. No wonder,

18 Ibid., xiv–xvii; Morgan, American Revolution, 2.
Fortescue concluded, that the performance of the military in America was less than excellent.

Not long after Trevelyan and Fortescue completed their contrasting interpretations of the American Revolutionary War, a new school of historians, most of them Americans, began to reexamine the assumptions upon which the Whig writers had proceeded. As the United States came to the end of its century-long isolation and independence from the rest of the world, these authors, who called themselves "imperialists," questioned what they called the simplistic views of Bancroft and Trevelyan. Most of them fastened upon the earlier history of the colonies to see whether the old British empire, which Bancroft had so roundly denounced, had been poorly administered. They did not address themselves directly to an examination of British conduct of the American war but emphasized instead the background of the conflict, out of which the British formed their assumptions and actions. They did argue, at least by implication, that the sane and rational men who had built and run the empire until 1775 could not have been so inept in conducting the war as they had been pictured by Bancroft and Trevelyan.

The first of the imperial writers was George Louis Beer, a New York tobacco merchant who had studied history at Columbia. Beer had retired from business with a small fortune at the age of thirty-one in order to devote himself to the study of British colonial policy in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In his British Colonial Policy, 1754–1765, he declared that Americans had shamelessly exploited the mother country during the Seven Years' War. Then, once the French menace had been eliminated, they moved toward independence, not in order to preserve civil or political liberty, but because they had nothing further to gain by remaining in the empire. Later events had made the Revolution seem a milestone in the road to democracy, yet Beer predicted "that the political evolution of the next centuries may take such a course that the American Revolution will lose the great significance that is now attached to it, and will appear merely as the temporary separation of two kindred peoples whose inherent similarity was obscured by superficial differences, resulting from dissimilar economic and social conditions." Beer continued the theme of American irresponsibility and British statesmanship in The Origins of the British Colonial System, 1578–1660, and The Old Colonial System, 1660–1688.22

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Continuing Beer's imperial viewpoint were Charles M. Andrews and his students, who viewed the British attitude during the Revolution with sympathy, after having come to understand the problems with which British administrators had to contend. Andrews' brilliant and sweeping magnum opus, *The Colonial Period of American History*, was primarily concerned with the founding of the colonies, but he did approach the Revolution in the last of his four volumes. His students included Lawrence Henry Gipson and Leonard W. Labaree. Gipson, in the eighth volume of his monumental *British Empire Before the American Revolution*, concurred in Beer's belief that the Americans were motivated primarily by selfishness in their relations with Britain. In *The Coming of the Revolution, 1763–1775*, Gipson declared that the Americans talked much about constitutional principles, but questioned the sincerity of their attachment to them, since they shifted from one argument to another as the situation altered. Labaree's *Royal Government in America* gave sympathetic treatment to the royal governors in their conflicts with provincial assemblies.

Concurrently with the imperial scholars in America, another school of historians in Britain was attacking many of the assumptions of the Whig writers regarding the role of eighteenth-century British politics in the conduct of the war in America. The leader of the movement and its namesake was Lewis Namier, who in 1929 wrote *Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III* and a year later completed *England in the Age of the American Revolution*. In these studies, Namier conclusively refuted Trevelyan's contention that the Rockingham Whigs, or any other of the Whig factions, constituted a party. There were, he said, no political parties in England during the Revolution; hence, it would be quite impossible to say that the Rockingham Whigs were the defenders of liberty against the usurpations of George III. In reality, most members of the factions and followings that did exist were motivated primarily by the desire to secure privileges for themselves and their constituents. Matters of national concern bothered them very little, and therefore the monarch held a much larger responsibility than had been realized. When the king maneuvered to get bills through Parliament, he was doing no

more than was necessary to keep the wheels of empire turning. That he made mistakes with his responsibility was not denied, but Namier thought it obvious that he had no taste for tyranny.24

As the imperial and Namierist schools hammered out their largely political interpretations of British conduct of the Revolutionary War, a handful of American historians directed their attention to the British military effort.25 Edward E. Curtis' *The Organization of the British Army in the American Revolution*, emphasized that the military establishment at the outbreak of the war was plagued with problems of logistics and recruiting, duplication of effort, unclear authority between overlapping jurisdictions, and decentralized responsibility. Unfortunately, few of these things got better as time went on. In 1929, Claude H. Van Tyne signaled a growing interest among scholars in looking at the war from English as well as American angles. In *The War of Independence*, an old but still sound and readable essay, he gave as much attention to British military problems as to those of the patriots, concluding that Germain was a miserable war director and that William Howe was inept—especially in his conduct of the campaign of 1777.26 For these and other reasons, he concluded, Britain lost a war and an empire.

Van Tyne's interpretation of the careers of English soldiers and statesmen signaled a trend toward writing new scholarly studies of these individuals—a trend that would grow in the 1930s. Many books and articles focusing on British conduct of the war began to appear at that time, and the outpouring that started then does not show much sign of abating. In order to discuss adequately this proliferation of scholarship, it seems useful to focus on some themes that writers on the Revolutionary War have emphasized in the past four decades to account for British


failure, and on what historians have said about important English political and military figures during that conflict.

Three general histories of the Revolutionary War have been written in the past few years from an English—or more specifically a Namierist—point of view: Eric Robson’s profound and important *The American Revolution in Its Political and Military Aspects, 1763–1783*, Esmond Wright’s *Fabric of Freedom, 1763–1800*, and Piers Mackesy’s *The War for America, 1775–1783*—the most valuable single volume survey of this period from a British perspective. Robson began his book by asking whether Britain could have defeated the Americans under any circumstances, and the answers he gave seemed contradictory, perhaps because his work was incomplete when he died. In one place he said that “the scales were weighed against the British from the beginning and ... only a staff comprised of men of military genius, backed by a decisive and imaginative government in London, could have secured a British victory in this war.” The men involved in directing the effort were possessed of “considerable talent, and of much goodwill and conviction,” but they were ensnared in “an impossible task.” In another place, however, Robson maintained that “had an energetic policy been followed from the start,” in putting troops and supplies where they were needed, in isolating centers of disaffection and dealing with each one separately, “the rebellion could have been crushed before France entered the war.” The problem was that no single-minded, overriding plan was adhered to. America was “lost through absence of mind,” as the British “shuffled between policies of firmness and appeasement until it was too late effectively to apply either.”

The bulk of Robson’s book confirms that his first opinion was the one he more strongly adhered to, for he listed numerous reasons for England’s lack of success. Terrain was against British commanders in the field; generals thought and moved in predictable patterns and used hidebound tactics; supply problems put armies in precarious positions at times, especially when they moved inland from their sea bases; the government was bound up in bureaucractic inefficiency, allowed ad-


28 Eric Robson’s point about Britain’s logistical difficulties (which obviously runs counter to Ramsay’s views) has been reinforced recently by R. Arthur Bowler, *Logistics and the Failure of the British Army in America, 1775–1783* (Princeton, 1975). It is R. Arthur Bowler’s well documented contention that at least part of the explanation for the failure of England’s armies in America lies in the fact that royal soldiers were not “adequately fed, clothed, housed, transported, and serviced generally.” *Ibid.*, 4.
ministrative roadblocks to encumber action, fell into financial problems with the great expenses of the conflict, and was not organized for centralized control of the war; generals were given too much leeway in planning, which proved to be unfortunate since they were not good strategists; too many Englishmen had only contempt for Americans and underestimated their ability to endure; and, finally, no consistent policy was applied to the use of loyalists as a source of reserve manpower.

Wright, in Fabric of Freedom, generally agreed with Robson and expanded on the question of British motive for prosecuting the war. He insisted that the revolutionary struggle, from the perspective of London, was a product more of executive weakness than tyranny; more of vacillation on the part of Parliament than of the king; more of chronic irresolution among administrators in England and the colonies than of any desire on their part to rid the colonists of their liberties. Mackesy, in his indispensable The War for America, focused on governmental inefficiency and examined, in what amounts to the military equivalent of Namier's political views, the consequences of conducting a war within an outdated system. The struggle that opened at Lexington, he said, "was the last great war of the ancien régime"; the ruling classes of England were too mired in their own sloth to throw off old ways. George III by his rancor "had driven into opposition the ablest men in politics"—Burke, Fox, William Shelburne, and Richard Sheridan. Even the ones who continued to support government were not controlled by party discipline. Army and naval commanders were chosen as much for political as military reasons, and they could not, because of their connections, be kept in line or dismissed when they proved to be inept. Finally, since financial matters appeared to hold the key to any successful war effort against America, the king's leading minister, North, kept control of the offices of Treasurer and Chancellor of the Exchequer; but, as Mackesy said, "sound financiers make the worst war ministers," and North proved to be too parsimonious of public treasure to finance the conflict adequately.

Mackesy asserted, however, that given these conditions—the only ones by which men of the time ought to be judged—certain ministers whom Whig historians roundly denounced as being incompetent and ignorant of American conditions in fact did as well as could be expected.

29 Don Higginbotham, who reviewed Piers Mackesy's book, applauded the author for his attempt "to remove military history from the narrow confines of battlefield operations and to place it within the framework of society as a whole." See his review in American Historical Review, LXX (Jan. 1965), 475.

30 Mackesy, War for America, 4–11, 14, 19, 21–22.
Germain was sensible and energetic, willing to give a free hand to generals in the field while fighting bureaucratic delays in England. John Montagu, the Earl of Sandwich, was a good naval administrator at the Admiralty, even if he was sometimes timid and obstructionist in his conduct of the war. North certainly headed a wreck of a government, but he did not create the conditions with which he contended, and had Pitt been forced to suffer similar circumstances, he would not have done better. True, North’s ministry presided over a defeat in America, but after 1778 it fended off great hazards from France and Spain and concluded the war with some remarkable naval victories that helped balance Britain’s losses.

Besides the Namierist-oriented surveys by Robson, Wright, and Mackesy, two other excellent and provocative general evaluations of the reasons for Britain’s failure in America need to be noted: Paul H. Smith’s *Loyalists and Redcoats* and John Shy’s “The American Revolution: The Military Conflict Considered as a Revolutionary War.” Smith held that from the very start of the war, but more so after 1778, the British blindly believed that loyalists were a potent majority of the American population who, once mobilized, could repress the few dissident patriot hotheads. As the war dragged on and spread from Boston to other parts of the colonies, royal commanders began to use loyalists for replacement troops and tried to plan operations in areas where governmental ministers (especially Germain) believed these citizens to be numerous. In the southern campaign, loyalists became central to British political and strategic thinking and were to be liberated as well as protected in their home territory. By that late stage of the war, however, loyalists had been left so many times by British military withdrawals to the tender mercies of patriot neighbors that they became cynical about promises of assistance and refused to turn out in support of regular armies. Hence, British policy toward the king’s friends contributed to defeat by putting too much reliance upon the loyalists’ political potential and too little on their military potential—until it was too late to emphasize the latter.31

It is Shy's well-argued contention that the British lost the Revolutionary War not because they were stupid, but because their generals and politicians made basic mistakes as the conflict evolved through three basic stages. In stage one, from 1774 to June 1775, English planners felt that Boston was the center of insurgency and that if this infectious area could be isolated and controlled, the crisis might be brought to a successful end. In this phase they misapprehended the will and ability of the colonists to resist. In phase two, from Bunker Hill to Saratoga, the planners came to see a solution to the crisis in the application of conventional warfare—maneuvering to bring the enemy to battle or to destroy him without fighting. But they were working under a misguided belief that success in battle would automatically bring restoration of political control. In phase three, which emerged after a year of bickering among the planners, the English came to see that the civilian population must be central to their thinking, that they must implement "a comprehensive plan of pacification directed against a revolutionary war." They tried this scheme in the South and failed because guerillas disrupted their program. Hence, Cornwallis reverted back to classical, traditional warfare and finally collapsed at Yorktown. "British estimates of American attitudes," Shy maintained, "were frequently in error, but seldom were they completely mistaken." Citing Smith, he noted that English planners "were prone to exaggerate the intensity of loyalism, they usually blurred the relationship between attitude and likely behavior, and they often mistook loyal behavior as a sign of unshakable loyalty." But while they were partly right about these things, they were wrong about a more significant point—that many Americans, probably a majority, were neutral and were swayed to the patriots because proximate redcoat armies disrupted their lives.32

While some scholars viewed the causes of Britain's defeat from the perspective of the general survey, many others took a biographical approach. Most key English military and political figures received at-

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tention in works that were uneven in both quantity and quality. George III merits first consideration, because he was supposedly of primary importance in the eighteenth-century British scheme of things. For Bancroft and Trevelyan the king had been an unmitigated tyrant, no more and no less. Since these men wrote, the reputation of George III has undergone considerable refurbishing, and even so-called neo-Whig historians, such as Edmund S. Morgan, have argued that the monarch had no wish to restore Stuart tyranny. "Though he wanted desperately to keep his American colonies," Morgan said, "he was wholeheartedly committed to the supremacy of Parliament . . . ." Namier has bolstered this view, as have Romney Sedgwick, Richard Pares, John Brooke, Stanley Ayling, and John Clarke. In addition to making Morgan's point that George III possessed considerable talents for keeping a faltering government in operation, Namier concluded that the king, conscientious almost to a fault, got involved in parliamentary politics only because he had to, not because he wished to secure power for himself. Despite the Namierists' views, Herbert Butterfield, in George III, Lord North, and the People, 1779-1780, was not impressed with the king's leadership. In fact, Butterfield argued, by 1780 the government was on the verge of collapse from internal and external pressures, including financial ones, and all that saved George III from disaster were the Gordon Riots, which allowed him to dissolve Parliament and hold new elections to give ministers a slightly wider power base. So, while the king's image has been improved, his supporters have not convinced everyone.

Lord North has also received some attention from biographers, but considering his importance to late-eighteenth-century politics, the prime minister's assayers have been surprisingly inadequate. J. Steven Watson,
for instance, commented in 1960, "It is striking that there is no scholarly biography of Lord North." Watson characterized Reginald Lucas' *Lord North* as "old fashioned in its approach to politics," and W. B. Pemberton's *Lord North* as lacking sufficient "original material to be a contribution to knowledge." North's latest biographer, Alan Valentine, has fared little better than his predecessors in the critics' arena, for he has been accused—and deservedly so—of unevenness in presentation and inaccuracy of information. In his life-and-times analysis, Valentine pictured a prime minister with many virtues but with a singular lack of the ones most called for by the times. A man of peace, he had to preside over a war, but he refused to take direction of it because he did not believe in its aims and because he felt each cabinet minister ought to be responsible for his own office. These factors, plus North's natural lethargy, brought the nation by 1779 to the brink of disaster. North "saw the rocks ahead and was smitten with a numbing dismay," Valentine concluded. "Knowledge of those rocks and of his own incapacity to avoid them was the central element in North's personal tragedy." Yet despite all North's faults, Germain emerged as the villain of this work and was saddled with most of the blame for the ministry's problems in America.

The subject of Germain's role in Britain's war effort has been the object of much historical study. Some scholars have taken the position that the American secretary did an adequate job under the circumstances, others that he was responsible for English defeat. Coming to his office on the heels of William Legge, Earl of Dartmouth, Germain inherited a policy of using only the most limited force against America. But the new American secretary, a determined advocate of coercion, took the lead in prosecuting a war when no other ministers would. It is not surprising that he became a controversial figure, presiding as he did over an unsuccessful military repression of fellow subjects. G. H. Guttridge, in an article in 1927, assessed Germain's performance in office and came up with a generally negative view: "His ill-balanced disposition and his resentment of criticism," said Guttridge, "made him totally unfit to conceive and direct large schemes based on a broad

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statesmanlike outlook. . . .'' Moreover, the scandal of his court martial after the battle of Minden "led to opposition and personal animosities which were increased by his quick temper and thwarted ambitions." In spite of all this, North could not dismiss him from office because he was too closely identified with the policy of coercion, which the government continued to pursue; hence, he remained in power with only lukewarm support from the crown.38

This analysis of Germain's career by Guttridge was bolstered by the publication of Valentine's *Lord George Germain*, an unpersuasive book that received even worse reviews than the author's *Lord North*. From this biography, Germain emerged as more devil than man, an unprincipled egomaniac who misused his talents while scrambling for advancement. As American secretary, Germain seized control of the war, but his constant quarrels with his generals, his desire to plan campaigns and sometimes even to direct them (especially Burgoyne's movements in upstate New York in 1777), and his carelessness in the execution of his projects, all contrived to bring Britain down to defeat. Finally, he remained in office only because, as Guttridge had said earlier, he had become a symbol of the king's determination not to grant the colonies independence. The reviewers justifiably tended to discount these interpretations as expressing more the author's personality than Germain's, as reinvigorating the old Whig "devil theory" in face of much new evidence that Valentine ignored, and as being factually inaccurate.39

Balanced, reasonable, better documented, and therefore more commonly accepted interpretations of Germain's career are found in Gerald Saxon Brown's fine work, *The American Secretary: The Colonial Policy of Lord George Germain, 1775-1778*, and Mackesy's *War for America*. Brown's is a rehabilitating study of Germain, but one that remains balanced and judicious in approach. The author portrays Germain as a man who got caught up in the factionalism of English politics, and he convincingly ascribes many of the secretary's problems to his political opponents. In military matters, Germain has been given an unfairly bad press by his critics and later historians. Carleton's problems in 1776 were of his own making, not Germain's. A year later, Burgoyne's


defeat was the fault of Germain only to the degree that the latter gave
both Burgoyne and William Howe too much leeway in planning the
campaign. Brown insisted, however, that most of the responsibility for
the defects of military movements in 1777 must be ascribed to William
Howe, who advanced on Philadelphia by sea rather than by land and did
not leave himself enough time to cooperate with Burgoyne. In sum,
according to Brown, Germain was a competent military strategist. As a
navalist, he was not merely adequate but good, and had his ideas
prevailed the French fleet might have been rendered neutral. In ad-
ministration, he did reasonably well dealing with a very complex
situation, one which was even more serious than Pitt had faced in the
Seven Years’ War. Many of these points are echoed in Mackesy’s War
for America, which was published a year after Brown’s book appeared.
Carrying his study of Germain’s career to the end, Mackesy maintained
that Germain in the latter stages of the war was justified in dispersing
Britain’s American forces into the South, arguing that if the American
secretary “was deluded about the situation in the southern colonies, the
generals in the theater shared his errors.”

While some scholars have debated the role of British political figures
in England’s loss of the Revolutionary War, others have examined the
conduct of the king’s military men. The outpouring has been prolific,
and some attention has been directed to all the highest ranking officers.
The best overall introduction to these important English generals and
admirals is a collection of essays edited by George A. Billias, George
Washington’s Opponents.

General Thomas Gage, who was commander-in-chief of Britain’s
North American forces in 1775 and also governor of Massachusetts,
received the attention of John Richard Alden in General Gage in
America. In this well-researched and pleasingly presented biography,
Alden pictured Gage as a man possessed of some insight and in-
telligence. The general clearly perceived that Americans were aroused
and belligerent by 1774, but when he conveyed this news to London, he
was rewarded with little support, much ridicule, and finally dismissal
from his posts. His views, alas, were not those that the government
wanted to hear, no matter how true they may have been. In strategic

40 Gerald Saxon Brown, The American Secretary: The Colonial Policy of Lord George Germain,
1775–1778 (Ann Arbor, 1963); Mackesy, War for America, 409.
41 George A. Billias, ed., George Washington’s Opponents: British Generals and Admirals in the
42 John Richard Alden, General Gage in America: Being Principally a History of His Role in the
American Revolution (Baton Rouge, 1948).
thinking, Gage had more perception than initiative; but in fortifying
Boston, in using the troops he had on hand, and in his command of the
army at Bunker Hill, he did a workmanlike job.

In Shy's "Thomas Gage: Weak Link of Empire," Gage was less
generously, and perhaps less consistently, interpreted than in Alden's
book. Shy conceded that the general was in an impossible situation as
military governor of Massachusetts, that he could not satisfy both the
citizens of that province and North's government, and that he "was
doomed to satisfy neither." But at least part of his problem, Shy
suggests, was that he acted with much less vigor than the ministry
expected of him, and even his friends began to caution him about his
alarmist correspondence with the government. Yet Shy also noted that a
few men in London "had both the knowledge and the self-control to
realize that Gage was right." As a military commander, the general was
a failure, showing limitations in both plan and execution at Lexington-
Concord and at Bunker Hill. Even worse, he came very late to realize
that strategically Boston was a dead end, and that military operations
ought to be mounted from New York. His worst problem and his
fatal contribution to the war effort was to convince Britain "that the
main obstacle to the use of military force in America was legal, not
practical; that Britain actually could coerce the colonists whenever it
decided to pass the necessary laws." 43 Although Shy's argument is
interesting, the evidence can just as easily be read to indicate that Gage,
rather than attempting to persuade London to use coercion, was merely
pointing out how enormous such an undertaking would be and con-
vinced ministers in London of only one thing: that he was not the
general to carry out their plans.

A British army commander who seems to have drawn more than his
share of analysis is Carleton, around whom controversy has raged in
regard to his prosecution of the military effort against Americans in
Canada and upper New York during 1776. Little consensus about his
career has yet been reached. His critics, including A. L. Burt, Paul H.
Smith, Mackesy, and Paul David Nelson, contend that Carleton did not
vigorously pursue American forces retreating from the walls of Quebec
in the spring of 1776, that he conducted a policy of conciliation toward
the enemy when such a plan had little possibility of success, that he
made little effort to entrap patriot forces before they retreated into New
York, and that he acted with too much lassitude in moving against his

43 John Shy, "Thomas Gage: Weak Link of Empire," Billias, ed., Washington's Opponents,
22-25, 26-27, 29-31, 33.
weak foes on Lake Champlain and at Fort Ticonderoga—giving them considerable time to prepare their defenses. Carleton’s supporters, among whom are Perry Eugene Leroy and R. Arthur Bowler, argue that the general’s failure to achieve a decisive victory against his enemies was due not to lack of will but of opportunity and means. Contrary winds kept his transports from bringing royal soldiers forward on the St. Lawrence River; his reinforcements arrived in parcels rather than all at once and restrained his effective use of them; his new troops arrived from England fatigued by their ocean voyage and could only be pushed so far; his intelligence network informed him that the rebels were stronger in both numbers and morale than they really were; and his problems with logistics severely handicapped the effectiveness of the campaign.44

Just as controversial among historians is the conduct of the Howe brothers in the years 1776 and 1777. As early as 1927, Claude H. Van Tyne argued that William Howe (rather than Germain) was responsible for the failure of Burgoyne’s expedition. There was no proof, argued Van Tyne, that Germain’s bureaucratic inefficiency kept William Howe from receiving orders to march north and assist Burgoyne. Howe knew full well what role the ministry expected him to play, and even though his move to the south was approved by Germain, still he ought to have known it would be impossible both to take Philadelphia and aid his colleague on the Hudson River. “England not only expected every man beyond the seas to do his duty,” said Van Tyne, “but to use some sense about it.” Jane Clark, in her “Responsibility for the Failure of the Burgoyne Campaign,” agreed with Van Tyne that Burgoyne’s defeat was largely Howe’s fault but changed the reasoning slightly. The problem, she said, was that Howe ignored Clinton’s entreaties to leave more troops under the latter’s command in New York for a cooperative venture with Burgoyne in the Hudson Valley. Even with the few soldiers he did have, Clinton managed a campaign against the highland

forts that, if it accomplished nothing else, conditioned the peace terms when Burgoyne was compelled to capitulate.45

In the 1930s the Howes received more attention, for the last word was far from being said in the works of Van Tyne and Clark. Little light was shed on the Howes’ conduct by the publication of Bellamy Partridge’s Sir Billy Howe, which one critic called “a superficial narrative,” or by any of the earlier biographies of the admiral.46 Troyer Steele Anderson’s The Command of the Howe Brothers During the American Revolution is a superior and much more important work. Looking for evidence mostly in official dispatches and concentrating largely on the general’s role, Anderson dispassionately concluded that William Howe was overwhelmed by the vastness of his task. In all his plans and battles, Howe applied traditional European thinking, and by this criterion he judged himself at first a successful leader. Yet in 1777 he did not assist Burgoyne, even when it became clear he should alter his plans to help his colleague; probably more from indolence than by design did he allow Burgoyne to flounder. Certainly, the Howe brothers did not deliberately subvert the British war effort because, as Partridge had claimed, they were Whigs who favored the patriot cause; nor did they hold back from prosecuting the military effort because they were peace commissioners.47 Anderson concluded that the perplexing conditions which the Howes met progressively became too much for their traditional ways of thinking and acting, and that a growing feeling of defeat and isolation from the ministry finally induced in them a corrosive pessimism that ultimately led to their resignations. Yet their caution must be attributed as much to their feeling of lack of support from London as any personal failures, for they had to act as both warrior and peacemaker, try to overcome gigantic logistical problems created by having to ship all supplies from home, operate over vast distances, and do so without the promised but chimerical support of loyalists. Anderson, in effect, said the Howe brothers and the ministry failed in a war that simply could not be won.

Maldwyn A. Jones found this view of the war questionable in his well-

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reasoned article, "Sir William Howe: Conventional Strategist." Jones contented that, until Saratoga, perhaps the king and Germain were right "in their conviction that the rebellion could be subdued by force of arms." If so, "then Howe's military failures were neither unimportant nor irrelevant." Beginning with Bunker Hill, where the general's battlefield leadership under Gage contributed to British disaster, William Howe showed no spark of the genius that would be necessary to overcome his unique problems. At Long Island, at White Plains, and in New Jersey in late 1776, the general was within striking distance of destroying Washington's army. But he mismanaged his troops, moved slowly and cautiously, and adhered to conventional European military wisdom. If the general did not merit all the blame for Burgoyne's defeat in the campaign of 1777, he was still such a limited strategist that he moved at a critical time "away from the strategic center," thus depriving himself "of the opportunity of influencing events." His fatal error was not so much that he chose to invade Pennsylvania, but that he did not do so over land, and thus allow himself to stay within supporting distance of Burgoyne. Ultimately, however, Germain must bear the burden of Britain's defeat in 1777 because "he was responsible for coordination." As to the charge that William Howe deliberately held back from annihilating the enemy because of his political views, Jones found this indictment "unsubstantiated" and "almost certainly false."48

The latest word on the motives of the Howes, but not the last, if reviews of his book are any indication, comes from Ira Gruber, in The Howe Brothers and the American Revolution.49 Arguing a thesis that has been suggested before but never so fully or interestingly elaborated, Gruber said the brothers intended to end the war by conciliation, even though the ministry's greatest hope "of recovering America lay in coercion, in destroying all armed resistance, dispersing the rebels, and restoring loyalists to power." Skillful enough "to create the illusion of success, to mask the opportunities they were losing in the cause of peace," receiving support enough within the ministry "to escape direct censure or recall," the brothers wasted one campaign "trying to make British terms palatable to the colonists," another looking for loyalists in


49 Part of Gruber's conclusions were presented earlier in Gruber, "Lord Howe and Lord George Germain," 225–43.
British Conduct

Pennsylvania, and "part of a third, preparing to go home." By the end of 1777, Britain was on the verge of world war and had "lost its best prospect for ending the rebellion," a prospect that "the Howes had spurned in the cause of peace."\(^{50}\) Not because of personal weakness, then, had the Howes pulled their punches. Nor was their vacillation due to traditional military thinking. Encouraged somewhat by North and Dartmouth, and working behind the backs of Germain and Sandwich, they had ignored their hardline instructions. William Howe had allowed Washington to escape time after time while the British army frittered away its strength in seizing and occupying territory. Gruber concluded that the brothers almost made their scheme work. Only after it failed did they become apathetic, indecisive, and preoccupied with a wish to justify themselves. Based on enormous archival research, Gruber's *Howe Brothers* has been praised for its contribution to an understanding of British failure in the war for America. But some scholars have voiced skepticism about his conclusions, and the question of the Howe brothers' motives still seems to be open to debate.\(^{51}\)

Another British general, Burgoyne, has received considerable attention from historians, but not as much as the Howes, with whom his career was intimately connected. Of course, in discussing the causes of Burgoyne's failure in the campaign of 1777, often the Howes (or specifically William Howe) have been saddled with the blame. The name of Germain comes up as well, especially among those who, like William B. Willcox, in "Too Many Cooks: British Planning Before Saratoga," see the roots of failure at Saratoga as much in fundamental errors of planning as in Burgoyne's carrying out those plans. Burgoyne's role was not made clear by such biographies as Edward B. de Fonblanque's *Political and Military Episodes in the Latter Half of the Eighteenth Century* and F. J. Hudleston's *Gentleman Johnny Burgoyne*. Several recent studies have


reliably assessed the general’s contribution to British failure in 1777. One of the less persuasive is George A. Billias’ “John Burgoyne: Ambitious General.” In this essay, Billias pictured Burgoyne as a man who was flexible enough in his military thinking to utilize new tactical ideas and psychological warfare. Moreover, Burgoyne was bold and aggressive in leading his troops and quick to understand that in America he must fight ideology as much as armies. Yet in the end, none of these things mattered. The campaign of 1777 was doomed by its initial planning, especially in that Germain did not make clear to William Howe that he was to cooperate with Burgoyne on the Hudson River. Billias, however, is somewhat contradictory in showing Burgoyne still certain as late as August 20, 1777, that he could succeed without assistance from William Howe, a fact that indicated overconfidence on Burgoyne’s part rather than any real flaw in the initial plan. Moreover, the author pointed out that Burgoyne’s own military rigidities helped write a disastrous period to the campaign—a reversal of his argument that the original strategic plan was the major problem.

A somewhat clearer and more consistent assessment of Burgoyne emerges from Richard John Hargrove’s useful and interesting dissertation, “General John Burgoyne, 1722–1777.” In this, the most complete survey of Burgoyne’s contributions to Britain’s loss of America, Hargrove refuted most earlier writers on the subject of the Saratoga campaign by blaming the general rather than Germain and Howe for his many troubles. Even as the expedition was being organized, Burgoyne began to make mistakes that ultimately led to his downfall—especially in neglecting to consider the perils of an expedition into the wilds of northern New York. As for cooperation with William Howe, Burgoyne never expected it and felt in any case that it did not matter. He knew, for instance, as early as May that no assistance would be forthcoming from the south, but he confidently went ahead with his plans. Only after the battle of Bennington did he begin to change the tone of his letters and talk as though he expected to unite his army with William Howe’s on the Hudson. After the fall of Fort Ticonderoga, he chose the wrong route of invasion, a decision that by August was causing his army serious provisioning difficulties. At this point his ego kept him from withdrawing into


Canada, although perhaps such a recourse would have been best. Instead, he drove on in the face of mounting enemy strength, rashly ordered his army into battle against a larger, well-entrenched force, and finally attempted to shift blame for his impending surrender onto the shoulders of Clinton. For these failings, Burgoyne received deserved censure, even though Germain and William Howe should get some blame for the disaster because of their lapses in planning and execution.

The most recent analysis of Burgoyne's American failure is James Lunt's *John Burgoyne of Saratoga*. Lunt, a retired British general, brings his military expertise to bear on the career of his earlier colleague. He presents an assessment of Burgoyne that is similar to Hargrove's in that he also blames Burgoyne alone for the British defeat at Saratoga. Lunt maintains that the general knew when he crossed the Hudson and broke communications with Fort Ticonderoga that he could expect little or no aid from Howe or Clinton to the southward, and that the expedition of Barry St. Leger in the Mohawk Valley seemed to offer him no prospect of succor. Yet he chose to advance, knowing full well how losses at Bennington and the detachment of troops to protect supply lines into Canada had weakened his army. Although military logic dictated a withdrawal, Burgoyne refused such a course of action because he was "a proud man to whom honor meant more than public approbation," and Lunt might have added, than common sense.

A general who never failed as spectacularly as Burgoyne, but who nonetheless contributed just as importantly in more gradual ways to British defeat in America, was Clinton. Alone among high-ranking English generals in authoring a full account of his services, and prolific in letter writing, the general still was neglected for many years by biographers. Not until Willcox, in collaboration with psychologist Frederick Wyatt, turned his attention to the man was this scholarly deficiency met by insightful and pathbreaking essays and a model psychological biography: "Sir Henry Clinton: A Psychological Exploration in History"; *Portrait of a General: Sir Henry Clinton in the War of Independence*; and "Sir Henry Clinton: Paralysis of Command."]

Willcox and Wyatt contended that Clinton failed both himself and the cause of Britain because he could not use or share power. When exercising command, Clinton unconsciously felt that he was impinging

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on parental authority and drew back. Yet he would not allow anyone else to make decisions for him, a situation that ultimately resulted in an inability of the army high command to function at all. As long as he was a subordinate officer, Clinton’s strategic intelligence showed through; but with the single exception of William Howe’s acceptance of his views at Long Island in 1776, no commanding officer would listen to him. Howe especially shrugged off his entreaties to bring Washington to a decisive battle.

When Clinton became commander-in-chief, however, he turned from boldness in strategy to caution in execution. He planned much and did little, with the exception of carrying off a fine stroke against Charleston in 1780. But this action itself was a great strategic blunder, in that it divided the British army and forced Clinton to put his trust in naval power at a time when he and Vice Admiral Marriot Arbuthnot were not even speaking to each other, much less cooperating. Besides, the French fleet was an ever potent danger to British naval communications. Even in South Carolina, Clinton did not follow through with his plans, but instead turned the army in that colony over to Cornwallis and went back to New York. After that, he and Cornwallis either never understood, or chose to ignore, each other’s intentions; yet he hesitated to bring Cornwallis to heel regarding his plans. “The long-run effect of this imbroglio was disastrous,” for from it in part resulted the surrender at Yorktown. But if Clinton was to some degree responsible for Britain’s calamitous position, Cornwallis’ share of liability was greater. Cornwallis marched into Virginia completely on his own initiative and without first securing North Carolina. When he arrived, he wasted time before settling on Yorktown as a base, and even after he had chosen this position, he fortified it with no sense of urgency. When the French arrived, he merely sat and watched while the enemy’s trap closed on him. In assessing Clinton’s overall command, Willcox noted that critics had been unfair to him, “for in considerable measure he was the victim of circumstance.” He was especially hampered by a dearth of resources and the inability of his colleagues, Arbuthnot and Cornwallis, to cooperate with him. Still, he might have better used what resources he had to achieve maximum results with minimum aids. He did not act, even “at moments when he himself recognized the opportunity to act,” and this, ultimately, was the principal charge against him.56

56 Ibid., 92–95. R. Arthur Bowler, “Sir Henry Clinton and Army Profiteering: A Neglected Aspect of the Clinton-Cornwallis Controversy,” William and Mary Quarterly, 3rd Ser., XXXI (Jan. 1974), 110–22, argued that army profiteering also played a part in the quarrel of these two generals; “Clinton’s almost hysterical attack against Cornwallis,” Bowler said, was due to his looking for a scapegoat because of his own guilt at not controlling the problem.
What of Cornwallis' career? Was he as involved in Britain's final disaster at Yorktown, as Willcox said, or was he merely caught up in events of other people's making? These and other questions have been asked of Cornwallis' military activities in the South, during the denouement of Britain's war effort in America. Strangely enough, this important general's career was not examined in detailed biographical studies until quite recently. In 1969, Hugh F. Rankin wrote an excellent essay, "Charles Lord Cornwallis: Study in Frustration." From Rankin's pages emerged a sulking, backbiting officer who blamed Clinton for his own failings. Nor did military ability redeem his other faults; in his southern campaign he was a lackluster tactician, too impetuous, and lax in enforcing discipline. Moreover, he failed to take advantage of the support of loyalists because of his contempt for them and for one of their leaders, Patrick Ferguson. Acting as though he were operating as an independent commander, he attempted in his dispatches to Germain, and in his actions, to make himself look good at Clinton's expense. At Yorktown, he was responsible for his army's weak fortifications because of his leisurely approach to their construction. Rankin concluded that ultimately Cornwallis must bear the greatest blame for the surrender at Yorktown, for his rash decisions up to October 1781 had been the cause of the disaster.

Another study, Cornwallis: The American Adventure by Franklin Wickwire and Mary Wickwire, presents a more positive picture of the general without ignoring his failings. Even though rather ineffective while serving under William Howe in the North, Cornwallis was "the most active and aggressive general that the British had sent to America." In the South, he emerged as a good administrator and a bold commander, who attempted to bring the enemy to a decisive action in order to destroy their will to resist. As a traditional officer, he was a bold tactician who "had no superior on either side of the Revolution," and he achieved a number of successes on the battlefield. But he could not bring the southerners to heel because of his dislike for the irregular warfare that characterized much of the fighting in this theater; "Cornwallis had no place in a civil war," concluded the Wickwires. As for his part in the debacle at Yorktown, the authors absolved him of most blame. Clinton's dispatches were so muddled that Cornwallis could not have known the commander-in-chief's thinking until he received a positive order not to abandon Virginia and to build a base on the coast.

In any case, perhaps Cornwallis was right in believing that he should depart the state. Moreover, since Clinton had information that Cornwallis did not, it was incumbent upon the former to respond to the threat of the enemy’s evolving trap. When Clinton did not follow Washington southward, the fate of Cornwallis was sealed, especially after Clinton began an attempt at rescue by sea only after it was too late to help. If Cornwallis made a mistake, perhaps it was in expecting Clinton to follow through on his promise of immediate assistance in an emergency.58

The controversy about responsibility for Yorktown is the last major issue in the historical scholarship on British conduct of the Revolutionary War. No more appropriate words of conclusion can be offered than those of Willcox, written in an essay in celebration of the bicentennial, "British Contributions to American Independence." To understand the problem of British defeat, Willcox maintained, one must recognize a "common characteristic in [Britain's] leaders, intellectual mediocrity." Before 1775, these leaders gave no indication of understanding the problems involved in raising a revenue in the colonies; hence, they blundered into a war "that was sure to be costly and not sure to be won." After hostilities commenced, policy makers in both government and the military formulated no clear goals for achieving colonial submission. William Howe only occupied territory; Burgoyne had the "murky" objective, but not the means, of cutting the rebellion in two; Clinton attempted to conquer the South rather than holding on until the French and Spanish could be dealt with; the Admiralty, instead of trying to contain enemy sea power, gave entirely too much attention to defense of home waters, and the Royal Navy "behaved like a sick whale."59

Perhaps as Willcox suggested, "Britain could not have avoided the war. Probably she could not have won it." But had her leaders been more conscientious, "they might have added a cubit to her stature." Instead, they bungled along and lost an empire, "because they were what they were, pedestrian men with no touch of the grandeur of the elder Pitt a few years before, or even of his son a few years later."60 From Willcox's comments it appears that Ramsay was not far wrong.

58 Franklin Wickwire and Mary Wickwire, Cornwallis: The American Adventure (Boston, 1970), 2, 173, 341.
60 Ibid., 8.
when he argued in 1789 that Britain’s greatest problem during the Revolutionary War was overweening pride and arrogance. Or perhaps Robson’s point is more apt: “The American colonies were certainly lost through absence of mind.”61 As the great bulk of scholarship on British conduct of the war seems to attest, both statements are correct.

61 Robson, American Revolution, 151.