

*The Men Who Lost*  
*America*

British Command During the Revolutionary War  
and the  
Preservation of the Empire

ANDREW O'SHAUGHNESSY



ONE WORLD

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*To my parents, John and Marjorie, and my brother Nicholas*



Your failure is, I am persuaded, as certain as fate.  
America is above your reach . . . her independence neither rests upon  
your consent, nor can it be prevented by your arms. In short, you  
spend your substance in vain, and impoverish yourself without hope.

Thomas Paine, "To the People of England," 1774



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These personal connections influenced my decision to adopt a biographical approach, although the argument of this book is a product of my earlier study of the British Caribbean during the Revolutionary War: *An Empire Divided: The American Revolution and the British Caribbean* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000). The writing of the book made me acutely aware of the global dimensions of British military commitments during the American Revolution. Although Piers Mackesy had previously explored this dimension in *The War for America, 1775–1783* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1964), he nevertheless concluded that defeat was due to poor leadership, while shifting the onus of responsibility from the politicians to the generals. Unlike many other historians, he was careful to show the underlying rationale for the behavior of the commanders, but he believed that the war was winnable and he implied that the outcome might have been different if Britain had appointed Sir Guy Carleton earlier to be commander in chief in America. His interpretation was contested by John Shy, who was influenced by the American experience in Vietnam. Nevertheless, the old shibboleths of blaming the leadership continue to hold sway. The case against this claim deserves further elaboration, and can be more effectively argued by viewing the war through the lens of the British.

I began work for this book in September 2001, thanks to a full year sabbatical leave from the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh and a Barra Senior Research Fellowship at The

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It was indeed a bonus to be able to write this book at Monticello in an office at Kenwood used by President Franklin Roosevelt in the four days leading up to D-Day. There was the constant stimulation of visiting fellows and speakers, together with the regular

meetings of the University of Virginia Early American Studies Seminar at the Jefferson Library. My office is adjacent to the Jefferson Library with its impressive digital collections and the able assistance of Jack Robertson, the Foundation Librarian, and his colleagues Anna Berkes and Endrina Tay. It was also helpful to have access to Jeff Looney and the staff of *The Thomas Jefferson Papers* (Retirement Series) at the Jefferson Library, as well as Ed Lengel and the staff of *The Papers of George Washington* at the Alderman Library. As president of the Thomas Jefferson Foundation, Leslie Greene Bowman enthusiastically supported this project and granted me invaluable release time from my administrative duties to enable me to write. It is as well a pleasure to acknowledge the vision and encouragement of her predecessor, Dan Jordan, together with the senior curator of Monticello, Susan Stein. Gaye Wilson kindly assumed the role of director in my absence, despite working on her own book, with additional assistance from Mary Scott-Fleming and Christa Dierksheide. Liz Blaine and Lindsay Mericli arranged a manuscript forum chaired by Peter Onuf as the opening event of the Smith Education Center on Montalto, with its magnificent panoramic views of the Blue Ridge Mountains and Monticello. Leah Stearns and Margaret Huckaby kindly helped with illustrations. The Board of Trustees of the Thomas Jefferson Foundation has shown a remarkable dedication to research as an essential part of its mission of preservation and education. I am grateful for the support of Donald A. King, the chairman of the board, and his wife Janemarie, together with his predecessor H. Eugene Lockhart, and the respective chairs of the Scholarly Activities Committee, Charles Cullen and Jeffrey C. Walker. It is similarly a pleasure to record my thanks to former trustee A. D. Hart and his wife Margaret, who held a lunch party for me to speak about the book at their Jefferson-era home, and who represent much that is finest about Virginia.

Finally this book is dedicated to my parents and my brother. My parents read and edited the first draft of each chapter of this book. Their emigration to America, when my father John began teaching at Columbia University's Graduate School of Business, was the source of my youthful interest in the interplay of the histories of the United States and Britain. It was all the more enticing because American history was not generally part of the school history syllabus in England. My mother Marjorie took us to museums and historical sites in New York, which made me yet more curious about the historical relationship with Britain. My brother Nicholas discussed the concept of this book with me over twenty-five years ago in Oxford. My parents and brother championed my pursuing this topic and have been a constant source of support. It is with love, esteem, and gratitude that I dedicate this book to them.

## Introduction

**A**t about ten o'clock in the morning of October 17, 1781, outside the small tobacco port of Yorktown in Virginia, a lone drummer mounted the parapet of the besieged British lines, beating the call for a parley. The sound of his drum was inaudible against the background of constant firing. If it had not been for the visibility of his redcoat, “he might have beat away until doomsday.” He was followed by an officer holding up a white handkerchief and carrying a message proposing negotiations for surrender. The roar of American and French cannon suddenly ceased. Ebenezer Denny, a junior officer in the Pennsylvania Line of the Continental Army, described how “when the firing ceased, I . . . had never heard a drum equal to it—the most delightful music to us all.” The troops on either side stared in silence at one another from a distance of less than two hundred yards. While the drummer was sent back, the British officer was blindfolded and taken to the headquarters of General George Washington, where he delivered a message from General Charles, Earl Cornwallis proposing a cessation of hostilities for twenty-four hours to allow two officers to meet “at Mr. Moore’s house to settle terms for the Surrender of the Posts of York & Gloucester.” The request was refused pending the submission of more detailed terms of surrender in writing. The opposing artillery resumed firing throughout the afternoon, but the battle was really over. The guns once again fell silent throughout the night and the negotiations continued throughout the next day.<sup>1</sup>

At noon on October 19, the British army lowered the Union Jack. The victors were forced to wait for the pleasure of seeing their humiliated foe parade before them. Although Washington had specified that the surrender ceremony would take place at two o'clock precisely, the British and German troops did not appear for another hour. Dressed in smart new uniforms, they formed two columns more than a mile long. Their path was bordered on one side by American troops and on the other by French. There were numerous spectators from the surrounding countryside, beaming with satisfaction and joy. The onlookers eagerly awaited the appearance of Cornwallis. He was “the object of peculiar interest.” A surgeon in the Continental Army, James Thacher, described how every eye was ready to gaze on the humiliated commander, but Cornwallis disappointed their eager expectations

by pleading illness or “pretending indisposition.” He instead sent his second in command, a ruddy-faced Irishman and “plausible talker,” Brigadier General Charles O’Hara of the Brigade of Guards, who had been bayoneted at the battle of Guilford Court House and who had long believed that Britain was engaged in an unwinnable war in America.<sup>2</sup>

After some two hours of hushed anticipation, the vanquished British army began to advance along the Hampton Road, marching at a slow and solemn step, with shouldered arms, colors cased, drums beating, and fifes playing patriotic marches of Britain and the German states. As the captive army approached the opposing trenches, the “elegantly mounted” General O’Hara asked to be directed to the French commander, General Jean Baptiste Donatien de Vimeur, comte de Rochambeau. O’Hara removed his hat and apologized for the absence of his commanding officer. According to French accounts, he then attempted to surrender Cornwallis’s sword to Rochambeau, who refused and deferred to General George Washington. An American officer added that O’Hara was mistaken: “the Commander-in-Chief of our army is to the right.” It was not an error. The British preferred to surrender to the French rather than acknowledge the ignominy of defeat by the Americans. O’Hara reluctantly tried to present the sword to Washington, but was referred by Washington to General Benjamin Lincoln, who had earlier been snubbed by the British when they refused him the usual courtesies of surrender at Charleston in South Carolina in 1780. Lincoln merely returned the sword to O’Hara and gave him directions to take his troops to a spacious field to lay down their arms.<sup>3</sup>

As they neared the field of surrender, the royal troops became disorderly and exhibited “unsoldierly conduct,” their step irregular and their ranks frequently broken. Some of them seemed to be “in liquor.” When they entered the surrender field, with their spirit and pride put to the severest test, the last act of the drama was played out. They were unable to conceal their mortification. Their platoon officers appeared to be exceedingly chagrined when giving the order to ground arms. According to a New Jersey officer, the British officers in general “behaved like boys who had been whipped at school,” with some biting their lips and pouting while others cried. They beat their drums “as if they did not care how.” Many of the soldiers showed a sullen temper, violently throwing down their arms into a single pile, as if determined to render them useless. After an intense siege following a march of fifteen hundred miles through the south, a corporal of the 76th Foot threw down his weapon with such violence that it broke, as he shouted “May you never get so good a Master!” The round, broad-brimmed hats of the soldiers enabled them to hide their faces out of shame. It was indeed a humiliation for an army that had begun the war with an assumption of its own superior military prowess. When he beheld the soldiers so reduced from their former glory to such a miserable plight, Aedenus Burke of South Carolina reflected that he forgot for a moment their “insolence, their depredations and cruelty.”<sup>4</sup>

Throughout much of November 1781, there was still no certain news in London of the outcome of the battle of Yorktown. As accounts of the strength of the enemy positions arrived, the mood of the government grew more anxious each day. George III and Lord

George Germain, the Cabinet minister most responsible for the conduct of the war, had been so confident of victory that the draft of the king's speech for the state opening of Parliament predicted British success in America. Germain, in particular, was aware that the outcome of the battle would determine the fate of the war and probably the future of the government of Lord North. He began to confide uneasiness on the subject to his friends. At noon on Sunday, November 25, 1781, Germain was at his London residence next to Carlton House in Pall Mall, when he received official confirmation of the news that he had been dreading. Saying nothing to a guest, he immediately ordered his coach to drive to the residence of one of the other secretaries of state, Lord Stormont, in Portland Place. After Germain imparted the "disastrous information" of the surrender of Lord Cornwallis, he and Stormont instantly drove to see the lord chancellor, Lord Thurlow, in Great Ormond Street. Following a short conference, they collectively decided to summon their nerve and go in person to the prime minister, Lord North.<sup>5</sup>

Between one and two o'clock in the afternoon, the three Cabinet ministers arrived at the official residence of the prime minister in Downing Street. Although he had long despaired of the war and had many times attempted to resign, Lord North reacted to the news with shock. Germain described how the prime minister responded "As he would have taken a ball in his breast." Pacing up and down his rooms for several minutes, North suddenly opened his arms, exclaiming wildly, "O God! It is all over!" North repeated the words many times in a state of consternation and distress. After North had calmed down, the ministers discussed whether to postpone the state opening of Parliament, which was due to occur in less than forty-eight hours. With many members having already arrived in the capital and others on their way, they decided against a change. They then spent several hours rewriting the king's speech, which was to be delivered from the throne in the House of Lords. The speech had originally predicted victory but was altered to make a token reference to the events at Yorktown. Germain then sent word of the "melancholy termination of Lord Cornwallis's expedition" to King George III, who was at Kew Palace on the outskirts of London. Germain then returned to his office in Whitehall, where he found additional confirmation of Cornwallis's defeat at Yorktown in a French account.<sup>6</sup>

As a supporter of the government and a member of Parliament, the memoirist Nathaniel Wraxall attended a dinner party with nine other guests that evening at Lord George Germain's home in Pall Mall. Apart from Thomas de Grey, Lord Walsingham, who had formerly served as an under secretary to Germain, the guests were unaware of the fateful news that Germain had received from America. Before the dinner was finished, one of the servants delivered an urgent message from the king. Looking and directing his remarks exclusively at Lord Walsingham, Germain said: "The King writes just as he always does, except that I observe he has omitted to mark the hour and the minute of his writing." George III always wrote the precise time to the last minute in his letters. Although Germain's remark was calculated to awaken interest around the table, the guests made no comment and repressed their curiosity, owing to the presence of his three daughters.<sup>7</sup>

The moment that his daughters left the room, Germain told the dinner party guests of his just having heard that the comte de Maurepas, the first minister of France, was “lying at the point of death.” Wraxall replied that if he were the first minister of France, it would grieve him to die without knowing the outcome of the great contest between England and America. Germain responded that the French minister had survived long enough to witness the result. Wraxall thought Germain was alluding to an indecisive naval action off the Chesapeake Capes, between the fleets of Britain and France. Wraxall then explained he had meant to say that it was a shame that the dying French minister would never know the final result of the war in Virginia. Germain repeated that the French minister had survived to witness it completely: “The army has surrendered, and you may peruse the particulars of the capitulation in that paper.” Without any visible emotion, Germain removed the paper from his pocket and gave it to Wraxall, who read it aloud while the other guests sat in stunned silence. The news cast a gloom over the rest of the evening as the party pondered the political fallout.<sup>8</sup>

The guests really wanted to know how George III had reacted to the news. They were well aware that the king would find it especially painful, as it was the most humiliating event of his reign. George III had become the driving force behind the war and had threatened to abdicate rather than accept defeat. Germain gratified the wishes of his guests by reading aloud the letter from the king, while remarking that the letter was a testimony to the king’s fortitude, firmness, and consistency of character. Wraxall recalled thirty years later that the lapse of time had not erased the deep impression that the reading of the letter had made on him that evening. It contained not a word of despondency or despair, while the handwriting indicated complete composure of mind. The king wrote defiantly that the news did not make the smallest change in his views and that he was ready to continue the war. He would not admit defeat.<sup>9</sup>

## I

The British loss of America is a subject of perennial interest, not least because it gave birth to two powerful modern nations: the United States and Canada. It was a war Britain seemingly should have won. It had spent eight years waging what the staunchest supporters regarded as a “holy war” against “dangerous” revolutionary principles, “which threaten[ed] a general subversion of every system, religious or civil, hitherto respected by mankind.” Even moderates believed the retention of America was essential to the survival of Britain as a great power within Europe. According to Adam Smith, the author of *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), the “expectation of a rupture with the colonies . . . has struck the people of Great Britain with more terror than they have ever felt for a Spanish armada, or a French invasion.” Britain had the advantage of a professional army, the largest navy in the world, officers who were veterans of many campaigns, the availability of military supplies, and ready access to credit. Britain had a vibrant economy, which was leading the way in agricul-

tural innovation, commerce, banking, credit, and canal building, and was fast becoming the first industrial nation in history. It is little wonder that many contemporaries imagined that the war would be an easy triumph for Britain. When events turned out otherwise, it is equally understandable that the failure was attributed to poor leadership.<sup>10</sup>

The ten biographical subjects of this book were the key British decisionmakers who oversaw the conduct of the war for America. They include George III, who was portrayed in the Declaration of Independence as the tyrant responsible for the American Revolution; Lord North, the prime minister regarded as having triggered the war with his fateful decision to punish the people of Massachusetts for the Boston Tea Party through the Coercive Acts of 1774; General Sir William Howe and Admiral Lord Richard Howe, the brothers commanding the British army and navy in America during the first half of the war who are regarded as having missed the best opportunity to defeat the Continental Army in 1776; John Burgoyne, the general who surrendered at Saratoga (1777); Lord George Germain, the secretary of state for America and the chief architect of the American War in Britain; Sir Henry Clinton, commander of the British army in America during the second half of the war when he was accused by critics of inactivity; Lord Cornwallis, whose surrender at Yorktown effectively ended the British war for America; Admiral Sir George Rodney, one of the few commanders to emerge with his reputation enhanced from the war but who failed to prevent the French fleet of Admiral François-Joseph Paul, comte de Grasse from entrapping Lord Cornwallis's army at Yorktown; and John Montague, earl of Sandwich, the first lord of the Admiralty, whom critics held responsible for the inadequacy of the Royal Navy.

These political and military leaders became the object of satire, emanating from critics who ranged from writers like Philip Freneau, Thomas Paine, Mercy Otis Warren, and Francis Hopkinson in America, to the poet Robert Burns in Scotland and the caricaturist James Gillray in England. They continue to be ridiculed in fiction, popular history, and movies. Although less crudely presented, such caricatures permeate even scholarly literature. It is glibly assumed that failure must have been a consequence of incompetent and mediocre leadership. The men who lost America were on the wrong side of history. They were associated with opposition to progress and with attempting to introduce an authoritarian style of government. They were the enemy in an event that has become part of an American national mythology wherein Britain represented antiquated aristocratic attitudes that must inevitably fail against the meritocratic and republican virtues of America. It is like a story. The end of the war is a foregone conclusion, as history progresses toward modernity.<sup>11</sup>

The men who lost America were able and substantial individuals who nevertheless failed. This book takes a "warts and all" approach that will consider their defects and their roles in contributing to the defeat, but it will also take issue with the popular misconception that they were simply incompetent and hidebound. The difference between success and failure is often a fine line. Horatio Gates, the American general who won the battle of Saratoga (1777), was himself defeated by Lord Cornwallis at the battle of Camden (1780),

who in turn surrendered at Yorktown. Admiral de Grasse played a major role in the victory at Yorktown after winning a naval victory against Rear Admiral Thomas Graves at the battle of the Chesapeake Capes (1781) but de Grasse was defeated and captured at the battle of the Saintes by Admiral Rodney (1782). This book is an account of capable men who fought a closely contested war, but whose critics and victorious opponents are treated as giants in their respective national histories, such as Edmund Burke, Charles James Fox, and William Pitt in Britain, and Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, John Adams, and Benjamin Franklin in America.

The British generals in America were not the stuff of parody, but had much in common with modern-day military career professionals in their dedication and commitment. A career in the military was a life service. Many of the commanders were born into families with strong military traditions and associations. They joined their regiments and ships when they were little more than children. George III and his Cabinet ignored seniority to select the ablest generals in the army for command in America. The men they chose went to great lengths to improve their military skills and knowledge of warfare. They studied strategy and tactics by visiting the locations of battles, by reading the latest theories, and by training abroad. In a profession where experience counted, they were seasoned veterans who had served in junior commands in Europe and America. They had served under some of the most distinguished commanders of the age and improved their skills by leading military maneuvers during the large-scale summer exercises conducted annually by the army. They demonstrated great personal courage in action. With long absences from their families and the possibility of losing their lives for their country, their military careers required great sacrifices.<sup>12</sup>

The military leaders were members of an oligarchy, but they competed within that oligarchy and were fiercely ambitious. Owing to the practice of primogeniture, in which the eldest son inherited most of a family's wealth, younger sons had to seek successful careers. It was possible to buy army commissions, but the practice was not permitted for senior appointments, and at least a third of the junior appointments were not purchased. After 1760, the purchase and promotion system was subject to greater regulation. The army was even quite cosmopolitan, with many continental European officers, such as the Swiss-born generals Frederick Haldimand and Augustine Prevost, who both served in the British army in America during the Revolutionary War. The Royal Navy was more open than the army to talent and social mobility and was regarded as the best in Europe. This was a period in which success in public service could earn a fortune equal to that of a successful merchant or businessman. The officers in both services had the added incentive that success would be rewarded by governorships and sinecures. There was also the luster of national acclaim and the almost obsessive cult of heroism. The high social status of the officers of the armed services made military service a desirable occupation. Moreover, the social structure of the British military was unchanged when it defeated Napoleon. The purchase of army commissions was not abolished until 1871 at the height of the British Empire.<sup>13</sup>

The perception of the British leadership as incompetent has disguised the extent to which the outcome of the war was in doubt until the very end. It diminishes the achievements of American generals like George Washington and Nathanael Greene, who won against enormous odds and able opponents in a bitterly contested war; their letters were full of despair for reasons that modern readers find difficult to understand because we are conditioned to thinking that the successful outcome of the Revolution was inevitable. The British were in reality sufficiently formidable to force George Washington to spend much of the war evading battle. They inflicted major defeats on Washington at the battles of Long Island (1776), Manhattan (1776), Brandywine (1777), and Germantown (1777). The British commanders were not totally beholden to conventional European tactics of “a war of posts,” in which the main aim was to preserve an army, to avoid the casualties of battle, and succeed by an emphasis on maneuver. Indeed, European warfare was not exclusively confined to such limited tactics, while many British officers had previously served in America during the French and Indian War (1756–63). The British army had more experience of frontier warfare and suppressing rebellions than any contemporary army in Europe.

British commanders adjusted their tactics to be more flexible in unconventional warfare by adapting uniforms to better suit the environment, by using light infantry, and by breaking with strict linear formations. Departing from the tradition of the infantry acting in three parallel lines, the commanders adopted loose formations of two extended lines which were not required to fire in regular volleys. Far from being hidebound, they broke with European practice by placing greater reliance on mobility and the terror of bayonet charges. During the Revolutionary War, the British infantry often fired only a single general volley before rushing the enemy with their three-sided, fifteen-inch bayonets fixed to the muzzles of their guns. The British generals additionally appreciated the psychological dimensions of the war and the importance of winning popular support. If we take seriously the capabilities of the British leadership, the achievements of the American commanders appear much greater.<sup>14</sup>

The political leaders in Britain were also more talented than is often appreciated. A British prime minister is admired in the United States today for facing an avalanche of hostile questions for an hour a week during Prime Minister’s Question Time in Parliament. Lord North had to face such a challenge for an average of three days a week during the parliamentary sessions. The political system was never so corrupt that governments were able to assume support through patronage, and there was no equivalent of a disciplined political party to sustain them. The prime ministers of this period had to win the confidence of the House of Commons by being persuasive. Lord North was a particularly skilled public speaker who successfully defended the government and sustained majorities in the House of Commons. He was equally gifted in supervising the public accounts as first lord of the Treasury and chancellor of the Exchequer. The earl of Sandwich, as first lord of the Admiralty, and Lord George Germain, as secretary of state for America, were both able bureaucrats. They were surprisingly effective in tackling the logistical problem of amassing

the largest number of troops ever sent such a distance. The majority of Cabinet members had long experience of military affairs. They were not novices.

## II

The mutual recriminations within the British leadership contributed to the image of a war lost by incompetence. Lord George Germain had acrimonious relations with the successive commanders in chief in America, Sir William Howe, Sir Henry Clinton, and Sir Guy Carleton. General Clinton quarreled with Admiral Sir Peter Parker and Admiral Marriot Arbuthnot. The commanders fell out with their subordinates: Howe with Clinton; Clinton with Cornwallis, and Rodney with Rear Admiral Sir Samuel Hood. Before the advent of a more fully developed sense of nationalism in the nineteenth century, these quarrels were endemic in an era when the defense of private honor often triumphed over public service. However, such disputes were too pervasive to explain solely in terms of personalities. They were also present in other theaters of the war including Jamaica, where differences between Governor John Dalling and Admiral Parker had much the same sclerotic effect that they had between Clinton and Arbuthnot in New York. Similarly in Britain, differences between Admirals Viscount Augustus Keppel and Sir Hugh Palliser divided the Channel Fleet. The sheer multiplicity of these debilitating arguments suggests broader causes, beyond merely the indulgence of personal piques. They rather reflected competition for limited resources and a weak command structure. Furthermore, they were mirrored by similar divisions among the American revolutionaries.

The British commanders and politicians were discredited not least because their enemies triumphed and their opponents wrote the histories. This was equally true in Britain, where the view that America was lost by incompetent leadership began during the war and became the popular orthodoxy in the immediate aftermath. When in 1792 one of the earliest British consuls to the United States met President George Washington, he reported home that Washington was “a great man . . . but I cannot help thinking, that the misconduct of our commanders has given him the principle part of that greatness.” Until well into the twentieth century, British historians portrayed George III and Lord North as enemies of progress who secretly conspired to introduce an unconstitutional despotic form of government in both Britain and America. This version of events was central to Whig history, which was the orthodoxy on both sides of the Atlantic. It was a view espoused by the British politician and historian, Sir George Otto Trevelyan, in his influential six-volume *History of the American Revolution* (1899–1905). In his *History of the English-Speaking Peoples* (1956–58), Sir Winston Churchill condemned the British conduct of the Revolutionary War as unequalled in the history of the country for “the multitude of errors. . . . Every maxim and principle of war was either violated or disregarded.” Churchill described Lord North’s government as composed of ministers “of poor quality.”<sup>15</sup>

Surprisingly, American rather than British authors have written the most sympathetic accounts of the British side of the Revolutionary War. This was particularly true of

the imperial school of history which flourished in the United States in the early twentieth century and culminated in the work of Lawrence Henry Gipson. In the anglophile wartime atmosphere of America in 1917, a film producer was even imprisoned for three years for his negative portrayal of the British in a movie about the American Revolution, called the *Spirit of '76*, following a court case entitled *United States v. The Spirit of '76*. Because the Revolutionary War was a national disgrace, British historians tended to ignore the subject. The first full-length biography of Lord North did not appear until 1913; the only scholarly biography of Sir Henry Clinton was published in 1962; and the only full-length biography of Lord Cornwallis in 1971. The American Revolution has never loomed large in British history syllabi. The major scholarly biographies of the British commanders are written primarily by Americans.<sup>16</sup>

The British dimension of the war remains undeveloped in most histories of the American Revolution. In contrast to the rich historiography about the Confederacy during the American Civil War, there is no equivalent literature on the British during the Revolutionary War. This is a loss for our understanding of the American Revolution. The paucity of studies is particularly remarkable when we reflect that the revolutionaries were largely reacting to British policy initiatives in the preliminaries to the war and acting defensively against British offensives during it. The British perspective is essential for making the war intelligible.<sup>17</sup>

### III

The men who lost America were not opponents of liberty and representative government. Far from conspiring to establish tyranny in America, they regarded themselves as defending liberty and the rule of law which they believed could be safeguarded only by upholding the supreme authority of Parliament. They described themselves as Whigs and subscribed to the principles of parliamentary government established by the constitutional arrangements of the Glorious Revolution of 1688. On the eve of the American Revolution, there were popular conspiracy theories on both sides of the Atlantic. Just as colonial radicals believed that the king and a government cabal were scheming to destroy liberty in America, the British government attributed the revolution to the machinations of a small minority of rebels who wanted to seize power and declare independence. The government regarded the revolutionaries as establishing tyranny with their suppression of all dissent and their use of coercion to enforce compliance. During the first year of the war, there was the anomaly that both sides claimed to be fighting to defend the British Constitution. Both the Howes as well as Cornwallis had actually opposed the policies that led to the American Revolution.<sup>18</sup>

The British politicians and commanders were not ignorant bigots. They were conversant with the Enlightenment emphasis on rational thought in an era that prided itself on being an "Age of Enlightenment." George III created an outstanding library, which became the foundation of the British Museum. He made the most significant additions to the royal art collection since Charles I and founded the Royal Academy of Arts. He had a deep interest in music, architecture, astronomy, science, and agriculture. Educated at Eton

and Cambridge, the earl of Sandwich was the first nobleman to participate in the public declamation of classical authors at Trinity College. He was an able linguist, classicist, and scholar of the Orient. A poet and musician, he was a patron of the theater and the opera. He had a keen interest in history, astronomy, and numismatics. In the period of the American Revolution, he supported voyages of exploration, including Captain James Cook's voyage to Australia. His name is commemorated in the Sandwich Islands in the Pacific.

John Burgoyne was a successful playwright, who was a friend of the actor David Garrick and the artist Sir Joshua Reynolds. Lord North was chancellor of Oxford University. He was described as having a lively mind, broad knowledge, and a versatile intellect by both the historian Edward Gibbon and the philosopher-politician Edmund Burke. He supported one of the earliest petitions against the slave trade and was the principal benefactor of Eleazar Wheelock's school for Indians, which became Dartmouth College. A graduate of Trinity College Dublin, Lord George Germain was a friend and chief patron of the American-born scientist Benjamin Thompson and the playwright Richard Cumberland. Sir Henry Clinton was an accomplished violin player and a serious classicist. Like Lord North, he was a friend of Edward Gibbon. Admiral Rodney was a patron of Sir Gilbert Blane, who was to become a major influence on naval medicine and the modern science of epidemiology. The program of imperial reforms that ignited the American Revolution was itself the product of an emphasis on rational thinking that we associate with the eighteenth-century Enlightenment.

The careers of some of the men portrayed in this book were revived after the war. Cornwallis achieved the most spectacular recovery when he was appointed to the highest military and civil commands in Ireland and in India. Sir William Howe, John Burgoyne, Sir Henry Clinton, and Lord Cornwallis were all promoted to the rank of full general. Burgoyne became a successful playwright. Rodney was given a peerage and emerged from the war with a reputation that was actually enhanced. Admiral Howe became a national hero with his defense of the Channel during the French Revolutionary Wars. Sir Henry Clinton was appointed governor of Gibraltar. Lord North briefly returned to power in coalition with his former opponent, the most outspoken critic of the British war for America, Charles James Fox. In the wake of the Napoleonic Wars, George III's image was transformed from that of a despot to that of a symbol of stability and a bulwark of patriotism, as Farmer George and John Bull. His popularity grew as his mental faculties and his powers diminished. Burgoyne was buried among the national heroes at Westminster Abbey. Admiral Howe, Admiral Rodney, and Lord Cornwallis were all commemorated with monuments at St. Paul's Cathedral.

## IV

The biographical subjects of this book confronted obstacles of such magnitude as almost to preclude the chances of victory in America. Their greatest challenge was the popularity of the revolutionary movement and the difficulty of waging a war of counterinsurgency.

Between 1774 and 1776, the revolutionaries successfully took over control of the apparatus of government, including the assemblies, councils, court system, and local authorities, as well as the press. They ousted imperial officials. They gained ascendancy in the militias, which proved crucial in enforcing compliance, punishing loyalists, attacking supply lines, and conducting unconventional warfare against the British. The transition was relatively smooth because they already had a large measure of experience in self-government and they were able to adapt existing representative institutions. Although the Revolution was a civil war as well as a rebellion, in which families and communities were divided, the loyalists were slow to emerge as a party and failed to gain the initiative. Following the withdrawal from Boston in March 1776, Britain was not only evicted from the colonies in rebellion but threatened with an American invasion of Canada. The British leadership was thereafter confronted with the task of conquering and occupying America. When the British army was most victorious in 1776 and again in 1780, their success only served to reinvigorate and rally the militias and the Continental Army.<sup>19</sup>

The British commanders understood that they needed to win popular support, but this objective was often in conflict with the use of force and the imperative to win battles. Sir Henry Clinton, the British commander in chief in America between 1778 and 1782, wrote of the need “to gain the hearts and subdue the minds of America.” However, the very presence of the British army helped alienate opinion in America. The British necessarily resorted to the recruitment of German mercenaries to bolster the small size of their army. Often known as Hessians, the mercenaries were recruited from a variety of different German principalities, including Hesse-Hanau, Brunswick, Anspach-Bayreuth, and Anhalt-Zerbst, and about two-thirds came from Hesse-Kassel (hence the name Hessians). Some eighteen thousand German mercenaries served in the war, during which they made up an average of a third of the total British troops in North America and 37 percent by 1781. The British similarly attempted to compensate for the size of their army by appealing to those on the margins of American society, including the slaves of rebel masters and Native Americans, but the policy helped alienate white Americans whose support Britain needed to win the war. The stories of plunder and rapes committed by the army similarly caused a backlash against the British.<sup>20</sup>

The men who lost America had to contend with a political system in Britain that frustrated the formulation of clear strategic priorities. The king was the nominal head of government and the army, but the powers of the monarchy were circumscribed by the political settlement between the monarch and Parliament that followed the deposition of James II in 1688. The king could not dictate strategy and policy, but rather had to obtain the agreement of government ministers and majorities of both houses of Parliament. Although he appointed the prime minister, the king had to choose a candidate who had the support of the majority of the elected members of the House of Commons. The party system was still very weak, which meant that governments were often coalitions of various factions, diluting unity of purpose. The concept of collective Cabinet responsibility, in which ministers united behind an agreed policy, had yet to evolve fully.

The British leadership was additionally impeded by the absence of a central command system to provide essential coordination between the various departments of government responsible for the war effort. The army lacked an equivalent of a general staff and had no direct control over the transportation of troops. At the outset of the war, there were a dozen different departments that administered the army. The War Office was the only department specifically responsible for the army, but its role was confined to the administrative affairs of the regiments and it was led by a civilian, the secretary at war, who did not have Cabinet rank. Until 1779, three different departments were responsible for transporting soldiers, ordnance, provisions, camp equipment, hospital stores, horses, and clothing. The different departments competed for the hiring of ships and paid different rates for freight. After 1779, the Navy Board undertook the business of transportation, which was an improvement but still involved an elaborate system by which orders for the board had to be relayed through the Admiralty. When Lord George Germain became secretary of state for the American Department in 1775, he was essentially the chief director in Britain of the war, but he had no direct control of the navy, the army transports, or the provisions. It was a fractured system of command. George Washington and the Continental Army faced similar administrative problems, but with the crucial difference that their government and army were not separated by a distance of three thousand miles.<sup>21</sup>

The shortcomings of the administrative system were compounded by the logistical problems of fighting a war across the Atlantic Ocean. The voyage took at least two months and sometimes three to four months in either direction. The government initially assumed that the army would become relatively self-sufficient in feeding itself from territory repossessed in America. In reality, the army and navy continued to rely on provisions and supplies from Britain. The army was larger than most cities in America, with an average of 34,000 men and 4,000 horses who daily consumed 37 tons of food and 38 tons of hay and oats. According to one estimate in April 1778, the army required 127,400 pounds of candles to light 4,900 rooms. Accompanying the troops were women and children who were fed respectively on half-rations and quarter-rations. The proportion of women to soldiers doubled during the war. The government also had to feed and clothe a growing number of loyalist refugees, runaway slaves, prisoners of war, and Native Americans. There were insufficient warehouses and docking facilities in America. The supply ships were often detained and used as floating warehouses, making them unavailable for the return trip. The geographical expanse and the difficult terrain complicated logistics and diffused British forces in America.<sup>22</sup>

There were so many uncertainties and difficulties in providing transportation and supplies that precise timing and smooth implementation of military operations were virtually impossible. Owing to adverse winds and storms, supplies and troops frequently arrived late. The time spent assembling, loading, and unloading cargoes added further delays. The provision ships and army transports required naval convoys, which restricted the frequency and flexibility of their sailing dates. Although the amount of baggage carried

by the army is often cited as an example of a hidebound European approach to warfare, the British army had little choice but to carry its provisions and camp equipment on long campaigns while moving among a generally hostile population. It did not have much opportunity to improvise for supplying its needs without alienating the local population.<sup>23</sup>

The need for economy was a major restraint upon military operations. The government always had to consider the necessity of keeping down the cost of the war in order to maintain the support of domestic taxpayers. For much of the eighteenth century, there was a popular fear that the country might be unable to support the burden of the national debt. This was a major issue in British politics and was largely responsible for the fatal decision to tax America. Britain was among the most highly taxed nations in Europe. Between 1700 and 1783, the per capita rate of taxation doubled and the national debt rose fifteen-fold. Furthermore, the growth in the rate of taxation far outpaced the growth in the gross national product. The interest payments on the national debt accounted for about 43 percent of tax revenues in the decade before the American Revolution, and rose from £2,735,925 to £9,406,406 between 1757 and 1783. The payments on interest and on the military accounted for between 75 and 85 percent of government expenditure.<sup>24</sup>

From 1778, the obstacles to British success in America escalated with the transformation of the American Revolutionary War into a global war against France, which expanded to include Spain in 1779 and the Dutch Republic in 1781. Britain was more isolated than at any other time in its history, even more than in 1940. Far from being what television documentaries invariably call the most powerful force in the world, the army was relatively small owing to the long-standing British distrust of it as a potential instrument of tyranny. British military successes consequently depended on alliances with other powers in Europe. During the successful Seven Years' War (1756–63), the worldwide conflict in which the French and Indian War was the North American theater, Britain had been allied with Frederick the Great of Prussia. William Pitt the Elder later boasted that "America had been conquered in Germany" because Prussian troops had played a crucial role in tying down French troops, enabling Britain to concentrate upon the conquest of Canada. After 1763, however, the old system of alliances broke down. Britain alienated Frederick the Great and broke the Prussian alliance by negotiating a separate peace with France, as well as being a victim of its own success because of the sheer scale of its victories which became a source of hostility and distrust elsewhere in Europe. It stood aloof from the first partition of Poland in 1772, and the War of the Bavarian Succession between Austria and Prussia in 1778–79. In June 1773, negotiations collapsed for an alliance with Catherine the Great of Russia. By the time of the American Revolution, Frederick the Great was anxious to remain on peaceful terms with France, and the French foreign minister, the comte de Vergennes, was equally determined to avoid war in Europe in order to focus resources upon Britain. It was in vain that Britain belatedly tried to negotiate a triple alliance with Russia and Austria in 1780.<sup>25</sup>

Even before France declared war in 1778, Britain's relations with Europe affected the war effort in America. To allay French concerns that the war in America was merely a

prelude to a British attack on the French West Indies, and to appease domestic taxpayers, Britain only partially mobilized its military forces in 1775. The budget for the navy was actually cut so that the navy was too small to support the army, to suppress privateers, to provide convoys, and to blockade America. Furthermore, the navy was instructed not to intercept French ships carrying munitions and supplies to America in European waters, which precluded enforcing a meaningful blockade of America. From the beginning, France, Spain, and Holland supplied gunpowder, loans, and military equipment to America. The marquis de Lafayette was only the most famous of Europeans who voluntarily risked their lives in the early days of the struggle for American independence. They included men who played a critical role in the victory against Britain like Baron Friedrich Wilhelm Augustus von Steuben, Count Casimir Pulaski, and Thaddeus Kosciuszko.<sup>26</sup>

After 1778, the British army and navy were engaged not only in the war for America but in the protection of the British possessions in the West Indies, the Mediterranean, Africa, and India. The army was spread throughout the globe with garrisons in outposts of empire from Antigua, Jamaica, the Bahama Islands, Minorca, Gibraltar, and Gorée in West Africa, to Bombay in India. After 1779, the army's North American garrisons included Pensacola and St. Augustine, Augusta, Charleston, New York, Newport, and Quebec. There were inland strongholds at Forts Niagara, Detroit, and Mackinaw City in the upper midwest, and at Kaskaskia in Illinois, Manchac on the lower Mississippi, and Mobile. Exclusive of Canada, they amounted to some twenty-seven different garrisons to be supplied and supervised in America. The last battle of the American Revolutionary War was fought in India. Moreover, the defense of Britain became a primary objective with the threat of attack during the summers of 1778 through 1780. In 1779, the danger of invasion was greater than at any time since the Spanish Armada in 1588. There was simultaneous concern about the possibility of a revolution in Ireland. The American War of Independence was the only war in the eighteenth century in which Britain did not have naval supremacy and did not have a "two-power" navy that was able to match the combined fleets of France and Spain. After 1778, Britain was trying to win the war in America with fewer troops and a smaller navy than it had deployed in America in 1776.<sup>27</sup>

The biographical chapters of this book will evaluate their subjects in terms of the constraints and the obstacles that contributed to their failure. This multi-biographical approach will enable the reader to see the war from the perspective of several individuals rather than the partial views of one participant. The sections are arranged to emphasize both victory and defeat. It was partly because the war was never a linear series of defeats that the British government persevered in the belief that victory was possible in America.