

BRITISH INTELLIGENCE OPERATIONS AS THEY RELATE TO BRITAIN'S
DEFEAT AT YORKTOWN, 1781

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ABSTRACT

BRITISH INTELLIGENCE OPERATIONS AS THEY RELATE TO BRITAIN'S DEFEAT AT YORKTOWN, 1781, by MAJ Scott E. Conley, 98 pages.

This paper examines the role of British intelligence operations during the American Revolutionary War as they apply to the British defeat at Yorktown. It begins with a brief history of British intelligence prior to the war, discusses strategic collection against the burgeoning French-American alliance, examines preconceptions during the planning of the southern campaign, and analyses the tactical intelligence operations of Lord Charles Cornwallis' army from the British victory at Charleston in 1780, through the defeat at Yorktown in 1781. It concludes that at the strategic level British intelligence accurately monitored French assistance to the Americans but had difficulty using the information to effect meaningful action on the American continent. At the operational level, General Sir Henry Clinton developed an accurate, reliable intelligence system in the northern colonies but was unable to transfer those successes to the southern theater. At the tactical level, General Cornwallis suffered from initial misconception about the degree of loyalist support in the South, lacked a general knowledge of the physical terrain in the southern colonies and failed to conduct proactive, deep reconnaissance during operations.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

On 17 October 1777, British General John Burgoyne surrendered the remnants of his command to General Horatio Gates following the Battles of Saratoga, New York.¹ Britain's last attempt to sever the patriot hotbed of New England from the rest of the colonies marked the first defeat and surrender of a significant British force since the American Revolution began and effectively ended major British offensive operations in the northern colonies. Henceforth, the British shifted their attention to the south, believing an outpouring of Loyalist support would reinvigorate the war effort and overextend George Washington's relatively meager army in the North. Four years later to the day, another celebrated British commander would surrender a second major army, ending Britain's attempts to subjugate the American south and effectively retain her colonies in America. This thesis will investigate British intelligence operations during the time period between these two events to discover what intelligence factors, at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels, led to the defeat of the last significant British fighting force in the American colonies. It seems impossible that the preeminent army in the world could commit such a grievous error and effectively sacrifice its last chance of success in retaining one of its most important colonies given timely and accurate intelligence. After an examination of the evidence, however, and given the limitations of the time period, British intelligence appears to have done a good job deciphering the enemy's actions throughout the campaign. Though there were still weaknesses in the

¹Christopher Hibbert, *Redcoats and Rebels: The American Revolution through British Eyes* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company Inc., 2002), 196.

analysis of the facts at hand, the defeat at Yorktown cannot be attributed to a lack of intelligence, but a lack of political will and unity of command, a failure to understand the conflict they were fighting, and a changing global situation which the British were unprepared to oppose. In order to understand the dynamics of intelligence operations during the American Revolution it is important to first understand the history and functionality of British intelligence, as well as the state of it at the outset of the war.

Unlike many modern governments, English, and later British monarchs did not inherit an established intelligence system loyal to the country and monarchy. Instead, intelligence operations were generally rooted in personal relationships between agents and a specific ruler and when the ruler died or fell out of favor, the system collapsed. As such, the development of British intelligence as an independent entity was a long, inconsistent process, and to isolate a specific date for its creation is impossible. Nevertheless, to understand the situation King George III inherited in 1760 it is critical to understand British intelligence theory and practice in the preceding centuries.

Across Europe, intelligence activities at the national level developed first during the middle-ages in diplomatic circles, with espionage being one of the fundamental duties of ambassadors and envoys. As Richard Deacon puts it, “Diplomacy and theft were almost synonymous.”² Modern diplomacy dates back to thirteenth-century Venice and the Venetians were particularly adept at employing their representatives as information collectors. The English, however, took some time to realize the importance of these activities and spent most of these early years as victims rather than practitioners of the art.

²Richard Deacon, *A History of the British Secret Service* (London: Frederick Muller Limited, 1969), 3.

Although they eventually caught on, their efforts varied widely in effectiveness, as did the attention and finances paid to them in subsequent centuries.³

The first monarch known to place a heavy emphasis on espionage was Henry VII, who in the latter fifteenth century employed agents to track the activities of his enemies both domestically and abroad. In the years before he took the throne it was only through the skilled employment of personal agents Henry avoided being killed or captured by his rival, Richard III. During his reign, he remained vigilant and kept to a small group of trusted advisors for security and information. Henry's "system," however, was much more a personal spy ring than a national asset and his chief agent, Christopher Urswick, Recorder of London, did not direct intelligence operations for the king.⁴

His son and successor Henry VIII was less concerned about his own safety and pursued a more isolationist policy for England. Consequently, he took little personal interest in matters of state espionage, leaving these duties to his ministers of state Thomas Wolsey, and later, Thomas Cromwell. Cromwell in particular made great strides in coordinating the various espionage entities in existence at the time, driven mostly by his personal agenda, and used the results primarily as an internal security force to root out opposition and combat the Catholic Church's influence in England.⁵ In 1533 Cromwell

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid., 4, 6; John Cannon, and Ralph Griffiths, *The Oxford Illustrated History of the British Monarchy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 295.

⁵Deacon, 4-5. Despite the emphasis on domestic vs. foreign intelligence, there was still some interest in external communiqués as evidenced by the correspondence of the Venetian Ambassador in London, Giustiniani. In 1515, he reported to the Doge in Venice that, "The letters received by me from your Sublimity had been taken out of the hands of the courier at Canterbury by the royal officials and opened and read: the like

did attempt to gather foreign intelligence when he dispatched two operatives to Germany. Their mission was to report back on the political and religious climate of the country in regards to a possible future alliance with England, but little came of the mission.⁶

During the early 1560s, Sir Nicholas Throgmorton, the English ambassador to France under Queen Elizabeth I, began to seriously organize the intelligence operations of England's foreign ambassadors, albeit on a limited scale, and his information was extensive and useful. In the end though, Throgmorton's downfall would be the same as all early Tudor intelligence organizers: pursuing personal ambitions and foreign policies that were not necessarily in line with those of their sovereign.⁷ His successor was the first to break this mold.

Most historians consider Sir Francis Walsingham the founder of the British Secret Service. Coming to favor in Elizabeth's court after writing a letter for the ailing Throgmorton, he eventually replaced him as ambassador to France in 1570. Walsingham had many of the qualities associated with a professional intelligence officer. His reporting was mostly limited to the facts at hand, with limited personal opinions and biases. He devoted his time almost solely to gathering intelligence in support of the queen, keeping his personal feelings and ambitions in check, and pursuing what he perceived as good for

being done by private letters from the most noble, the ambassador Badoer of France and others.”

⁶Ibid., 6.

⁷Ibid., 8-9. Another issue with these early attempts at organizing intelligence systems was that, because they were so covert and dependent on personal relationships, they inevitably dissolved when the organizer was dismissed, executed, or died.

the country and the queen. In 1573, Elizabeth rewarded Walsingham's loyalty and hard work by appointing him her principal secretary, a post he would retain until his death.⁸

Although Walsingham uncovered a variety of internal and external plots against the Queen and provided the evidence which sent Mary Queen of Scots to the gallows, his most important contribution to the security of the nation was his detailed reporting on the preparations of the Spanish Armada for the invasion of England, including its disposition, tonnage, munitions, and manning.⁹ Throughout the Spanish preparations of the attack force Walsingham kept close tabs on their progress through a small but effective network of agents across Europe, and particularly in Italy where information about Spain could most easily be elicited. In 1587, Walsingham was even able to stall the Spanish attack for a year by influencing bankers in Genoa to deny or delay loans to Spain's King Phillip.¹⁰ Though circumstances would eventually defeat the Spanish fleet, Walsingham's intelligence work was certainly key to this happy result for the English.

Perhaps the greatest testament to Walsingham's loyalty and professionalism was that he achieved such success with relatively meager financial support from the English government. England spent far less than any other major power on foreign intelligence and Walsingham financed many of his operations out of his own pocket or by borrowing

⁸Ibid., 6; Conyers Read, "Walsingham and Burghley in Queen Elizabeth's Privy Council," *English Historical Review* 28, no. 109 (January 1913): 34.

⁹Christopher M. Andrew, *Her Majesty's Secret Service* (New York: Elisabeth Sifton Books, 1985), 1; Deacon, 31; Read, 47.

¹⁰Read, 42; Deacon, 20-23.

money against his own modest estates. He would eventually die leaving huge personal debts because of it.¹¹

For the remainder of his career Walsingham continued to develop the English intelligence system, particularly in the field of cryptography. Because paper messages dispatched by courier were relatively easy to intercept, all major European powers, particularly the Venetians, developed varying degrees of encryption to conceal sensitive information. Walsingham took the encryption and decryption of ciphers to a new level in England by establishing a code breaking section in his own home.¹²

Upon his death in 1590, Walsingham left a void not readily filled. The center of intelligence collection for the English was still Venice, and Sir Henry Wotton led this effort. Wotton, who once characterized ambassadors as honest men sent abroad to lie for their country, understood the system but his patron, James I, did little to support his efforts.¹³ James I was infamous for his complete inability to keep a secret, not only within his own court, but when dealing with foreign ambassadors as well. He also spent a great deal of his intelligence services' time and energy pursuing witches and warlocks, leaving a sizable gap in their collection of foreign intelligence.¹⁴

¹¹F. M. Greir Evans, "Emoluments of the Principal Secretaries of State in the Seventeenth Century," *English Historical Review* 35, no. 140 (October 1920): 515; Andrew, 1; Deacon, 15.

¹²Deacon, 25.

¹³Johns Hopkins University Press, *Modern Language Notes* 64, no. 4 (April 1949): 288.

¹⁴Deacon, 38, 41-44. The one interesting development during James' reign was the relatively new pursuit of industrial intelligence. Richard Foley recognized that the process of "splitting" developed in Sweden threatened him and other English iron

During the English Civil Wars, the English intelligence system declined, particularly in the collection of foreign intelligence from the Continent. However, upon consolidating power Oliver Cromwell quickly recognized this weakness and, according to Samuel Pepys, increased the intelligence budget to £70,000 a year, twenty times what Elizabeth had allotted Walsingham. He also installed John Thurloe, an Essex lawyer, as his Secret Service chief. Unlike Walsingham, Thurloe had no interest in spending his own money conducting intelligence and was even suspected of making a personal profit from it.¹⁵ Nevertheless, he did reinvigorate the intelligence service to a level rivaling Walsingham.¹⁶ As with all English spymasters, Thurloe was given a different priority for his activities and not surprisingly spent most of his time and energy monitoring the activities of Royalists and Royalist sympathizers, both domestically and abroad. He was particularly successful because, like Walsingham, he was disciplined, loyal, and meticulous. He also reinvigorated the pursuit and perfection of cryptography and reinstated the practice of using agents abroad, recognizing diplomats were generally too high profile and assumed to be spies.¹⁷

The English Restoration and the crowning of Charles II marked yet another serious decline in English intelligence, particularly financially. In 1668, Pepys' diary

manufacturers. After two covert trips to the continent, Foley managed to learn the process and bring it home to England, making himself a very rich man.

¹⁵Andrew, 1.

¹⁶Deacon, 47-48.

¹⁷Ibid., 48, 50; Jason T. Peacey, "Order and Disorder in Europe: Parliamentary Agents and Royalist Thugs 1649-1650," *Historical Journal* 40, no. 4 (December 1997): 959.

reported the English government allotted £750 to intelligence, about 10 percent of the budget under Oliver Cromwell. Also, probably because of years spent in exile, Charles tended to be suspicious of strangers and friends alike. Consequently he decentralized the Secret Service into separate entities to ensure no individual, including his intelligence chief Morris, could consolidate enough power to threaten the monarchy. Inevitably, these entities tended to duplicate efforts and accomplish very little in the process, and Charles often ran his own personal intelligence activities independent of the government system.¹⁸

Another consequence of this decentralized system was the lack of independent oversight of activities and finances. Though the Secret Service Fund was formally established during this time Parliament would not vote on it annually until 1797.¹⁹ Charles was critically short of money from the start of his reign and France's Louis XIV was more than happy to come to his aid. This created a breach in Charles' court which Louis used as a conduit for spies. In particular, Charles shared Louis' penchant for the company of mistresses. While the official intelligence budget remained £750, between 1666 and 1667, Parliament paid out over £24,000 for "Secret Service," some of which may have been for legitimate information, but much of which went to pay off royal courtesans. Naturally this situation also created a huge security gap; many of the mistresses in Charles' court were spying for Louis.²⁰

¹⁸Deacon, 56-57.

¹⁹Andrew, 1-2.

²⁰Clyde L. Grose, "Louis XIV's Financial Relations with Charles II and the English Parliament," *Journal of Modern History* 1, no. 2 (June 1929): 203; Deacon, 58.

By the time Charles came to power the English government had become highly adept at intercepting messages, particularly through the postal system, and decrypting them. The French ambassador Comignes warned his government the English had “tricks to open letters more skillfully than anywhere in the world.” But because Charles was mostly concerned with internal threats, he virtually abandoned the use of the postal system as a source of intelligence and the English pursuit of ciphers and their solutions fell into stagnation as well.²¹ Upon Charles’ death, this stagnation almost changed history. The Duke of Monmouth, an illegitimate son of Charles exiled in Holland, and the Earl of Argyle planned a revolt against Charles’ successor, James, Duke of York. The English Secret Service intercepted one of Argyle’s encrypted messages detailing the planned invasion but had no trained cryptographers to decipher it. It was only through chance they managed to break the code and prevent the attack. Even after this seemingly obvious warning of a shortfall in the intelligence system, the current regime did little to repair it.²²

William III and his Secretary of War William Blathwayte, however, were quick to notice the obvious deficiencies in the system and immediately set about rectifying them. As with other monarchs the focus for intelligence collection once again shifted, this time to the House of Stuart (James II), exiled in France, and his active supporters the Jacobites. William and Blathwayte successfully reformed many aspects of the intelligence system but the Secret Service’s focus on the Jacobites dominated their

²¹Deacon, 60-61.

²²Ibid., 60-62; W. C. Abbott, “English Conspiracy and Dissent, 1660-1674, II,” *American Historical Review* 14, no. 4 (July 1909): 721-722.

activities, as well as those of Queen Anne and her Hanoverian successors, through the first half of the eighteenth century at the expense of foreign intelligence. Corruption and inefficiency also began to cripple the system during this period, as the British government dispensed huge sums of money for intelligence purposes with few apparent results.²³

The Jacobites' defeat in 1746 at the Battle of Culloden allowed the British Secret Service to refocus its efforts on more external threats, first to the War of Austrian Succession and subsequently to the Seven Years War.²⁴ This time the epicenter of espionage between Britain and France was in the court of the Grand Duchess Catherine, in Russia. The recent rise of Russia and Prussia as significant strategic forces on the European continent forced King George II to shift his diplomatic efforts to St. Petersburg. George feared the Prussians and French were plotting to take over his native Hanover and sought Catherine's support as a counterbalance. It was here the British fought their most successful intelligence campaign against the French during the Seven Years War. Although the alliance with Catherine quickly went sour Russian contacts continued to supply British agents with at least twenty-seven volumes of intercepted dispatches throughout the course of the war.²⁵

²³Andrew, 3. One notable exception was the 'Decyphering Branch,' created in 1703 from the Secret Service Fund. By 1750, the Reverend Edward Willes, former Oxford don, now Bishop of Bath and Wells, had turned the venture into a part-time family business and the Willes' cryptanalysis activities lasted until 1844, when the branch was formally dissolved.; Deacon., 62-63, 75-77; Stephen Saunders Webb, "William Blathwayt, Imperial Fixer: Muddling Through to Empire, 1689-1717," *William and Mary Quarterly, Third Series* 26, no. 3 (July 1969): 380.

²⁴Cannon, 478.

²⁵Deacon, 81-83.

At the ascension of George III in 1760, Britain's colonies in the Americas and particularly the Caribbean were its largest, most lucrative, and most strategically significant. George considered them a stable source of income and support for the crown and consequently paid little attention to developing an intelligence and counter-espionage system to monitor them.²⁶ Thus, when a decade of American discontent and perceived oppression culminated in violence in 1775, and the colonies openly revolted and officially declared independence from the crown in 1776, George and his government were ill-prepared.

Throughout the early history of the British Secret Service several patterns emerge. First, succeeding monarchs placed widely varying levels of emphasis on the national intelligence service and resourced it according to their own agendas, levels of personal security, and prejudices. They also exhibited varying degrees of personal interest in its daily activities. This often led to intelligence chiefs having to reinvent the wheel every time the crown changed heads. Second, depending on the political environment, monarchs who were more politically vulnerable tended to use the Secret Service for regime protection and internal security at the expense of foreign intelligence and the development of encryption and cipher breakers. Finally, outstanding, motivated individuals contributed far more to the success of the service than any *system* ever did. In general, however, despite some drawbacks the British government continued to improve its intelligence operations and by 1778 the Secret Service would prove highly effective at monitoring and reporting on activities in the capitals of Europe.

²⁶Thomas Flemming, *Liberty!: The American Revolution* (New York: Penguin Putnam Inc., 1997), 41.

During the early years of the American Revolution prior to the defeat at Saratoga, Britain had little reason for serious concern about the American's ability to wage a significant conventional military resistance, or of a serious threat of external support to its American colonies. But they had overestimated the king's authority and loyalist influence on the common American and the colonies' dependence on the mother country after years of geographical separation and relative independence. On the American side, the first three years of the war had done little to embolden them militarily or give them confidence that victory and an independent America were even a possibility. Following the initial American engagements at Lexington, Concord, and Breed's Hill, Washington took command of the Continental Army, laid siege to Boston, and managed to force General Sir William Howe to retreat his forces to Halifax, Nova Scotia, in March 1776. Howe's departure was, however, temporary and when he met Washington again at New York he quickly routed and nearly destroyed the patriots. Only Howe's failure to aggressively pursue his initial success against Washington's retreating army and some measure of good luck allowed the Americans to escape, leaving New York under British control for the rest of the war.²⁷

Washington spent the remainder of the year withdrawing across New Jersey, pursued by General Lord Cornwallis. By December, the British had forced Washington back across the Delaware River into Pennsylvania and the outlook for his army appeared bleak, but the Americans had one card left to play. Thinking the campaign over for the winter, British and Hessian forces moved into winter quarters. On Christmas night 1776, Washington's army re-crossed the Delaware and successfully attacked the unsuspecting

²⁷David McCullough, *1776* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2005).

Hessian garrison at Trenton, New Jersey. British troops under Cornwallis attempted to counterattack but Washington outflanked them at Princeton. These two engagements marked the end of fighting in 1776 and were the first American victories since the siege of Boston, though they were primarily psychological, not operational victories. The British remained firmly in control, and Washington's beleaguered force settled into winter quarters at Morristown, New Jersey.²⁸

Campaigning resumed in 1777, and the British conducted two major operations. General Howe would move from his garrison in New York to take Philadelphia, the seat of the American government. General John Burgoyne would simultaneously spearhead the invasion of two armies into the Hudson River valley to capture Albany, New York, and secure the critical Hudson River valley for the British. Howe succeeded; Burgoyne failed.

The surrender of Burgoyne and his army marked the final battle of the year and a major turning point in British strategic thinking about the war in America. More importantly, it shifted the British focus to the southern colonies and prompted the French government to enter into the Treaty of Alliance with the American government, formalizing and bolstering the covert support they had been providing for several years.

²⁸Ibid.

CHAPTER 2

FRENCH INTERVENTION

It would be impossible to overestimate the impact of French assistance to the American victory at Yorktown. This intervention, however, was not an isolated event but a culmination of years of covert and eventually open assistance to the American rebels. It was neither French altruism nor a particular love of liberty that drove support to the cause in America. Though some individuals did endure great personal peril and financial sacrifice in support of the cause of American freedom, at the national level French motivations were purely self-centered, aimed at overextending Britain militarily, marginalizing its allies, and attacking its trade.²⁹ In particular, the French had their sights set on the British islands in the West Indies which were even more lucrative than the American mainland and also offered a sanctuary for harsh winter storms along America's Atlantic coast.³⁰

French hatred of the British was centuries old and deep-seated. At the onset of the American Revolution French memories of the Seven Years War and its American component, the French and Indian War, were still fresh, and the French government was smarting from the results of their recent defeat. In addition to weakening France militarily and financially, France's defeat in the Seven Years War altered the balance of power in Europe. Although still a formidable force France was less of a threat to her neighbors,

²⁹Edward S. Corwin, "The French Objective in the American Revolution," *American Historical Review* 21, no.1 (October 1915): 42.

³⁰Antony Preston, David Lyon, and John Batchelor, *Navies of the American Revolution* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1975), 8.

particularly Austria and the burgeoning powers in Prussia and Russia. As a result, France's enemies, once quick to form alliances with Britain as a buffer against French expansion, became less inclined to do so without concrete benefits. This had the effect of isolating Britain from potential allies and encouraging new partnerships.³¹ Thus, after 1763 a cold war between Britain and France began, dominated by political and economic intrigue with diplomacy and intelligence the primary weapons.

Though unwilling and unable to plunge into another all-out conflict with Britain, Louis XV was still determined to weaken it.³² Duc Étienne François de Choiseul, France's foreign minister and a favorite of Louis' mistress Madame de Pompadour, was one of the first to perceive Britain's colonies in America as a useful tool of revenge for France. His successor, Charles Gravier, Comte de Vergennes, who took over upon the coronation of Louis XVI, agreed.³³ He also understood the British victory in the French and Indian War had removed the primary external threat to British settlements in America and consequently negated the main reason the colonies depended on the mother country.³⁴ Though an indigenous threat remained, the colonists likely considered this menace manageable. This new sense of security and deepening dissatisfaction with British policies in America was creating a rift which would provide a perfect opportunity

³¹Page Talbott, ed., *Benjamin Franklin: In Search of a Better World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 218-219.

³²*Ibid.*, 220.

³³Central Intelligence Agency, "Beaumarchais and the American Revolution," https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/kent-csi/vol14no1/html/v14i1a01p_0001.htm (accessed 30 January 2010), 1-2.

³⁴Richard M. Ketchum, *Victory at Yorktown: The Campaign that Won the Revolution* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, LLC, 2004), 15.

for France to strike at its former enemy. These actions would have to be measured and covert, however, to avoid restarting an all-out war.

In order to exploit this growing rift, the French government first needed to understand the political situation in London. They understood the opposition to George III's policies and the mounting pressure developing over the issues in the American colonies. Their traditional source for intelligence on the situation at Whitehall should have been the French ambassador, but Adrien-Louis de Bonnières, duc de Guînes, had failed to take much initiative, reporting only the official information provided by the British government and ignoring his implied task of reporting British intensions, divisions, and weaknesses to the French king. Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais, author of the French play *The Barber of Seville* and part-time spy, began to fill this information void.³⁵

In 1775, Beaumarchais, operating as an agent of the French crown and reporting intelligence back to Versailles, began to perceive the division in the British government over the situation in the American colonies. After hearing a vicious, though typical, verbal attack against George III by one of his staunchest opponents, the Lord Mayor of London John Wilkes, Beaumarchais began to understand the potential for exploiting Britain's divisiveness to France's advantage.³⁶ He conveyed this to Versailles in the

³⁵John T. Meng, "A Footnote to Secret Aid in the American Revolution," *American Historical Review* 43, no.4 (July 1938): 791; CIA, *Beaumarchais*, 2.

³⁶CIA, *Beaumarchais*, 1-2.

memoir “Peace or War” in February 1776, which laid out the plan to provide the colonists with covert French aid.³⁷

At about this same time, Beaumarchais met Arthur Lee, then Massachusetts’ representative in London and future American envoy to France.³⁸ Lee began to tell Beaumarchais about the desperate situation in America brought on by the Coercive Acts, and the two men started to discuss the idea of France covertly supplying arms and other war materials to the rebels.³⁹ More importantly, Beaumarchais’ association with Lee solidified his personal commitment to the American cause. This personal aspect would prove critical.

Despite Beaumarchais’ newfound individual dedication, Louis XVI remained reluctant to overtly provoke the British. France was still in no position to challenge Britain militarily and Louis seems to have had some personal aversion to utilizing what he probably considered underhanded tactics against his former enemy. Vergennes, on the other hand, saw this situation as a perfect opportunity and was determined to advance the policy. A savvy politician, Vergennes was careful not to challenge Louis’ position directly. Instead, he used Beaumarchais’ reports in his “*Considérations*”⁴⁰ to indirectly

³⁷Meng, 791.

³⁸American Revolution.org., “France in the Revolution, Chapter V: Beaumarchais,” <http://www.americanrevolution.org/frconfiles/fr5.html> (accessed 21 February 2010); CIA, *Beaumarchais*, 1-2.

³⁹Ketchum, 16.

⁴⁰Corwin, 34.

convince Louis to exploit the developing state of affairs in America as a tool against the British without assuming the responsibility of defying the French monarch.⁴¹

By May of 1776, Louis had come around to the idea and directed Vergennes to set up a mechanism to provide covert aid to the American rebels. In turn, Vergennes instructed Beaumarchais to form a proprietary company to supply the Americans with one million livres worth of surplus French munitions and equipment while maintaining the necessary deniability the crown insisted upon.⁴² This operation took the form of a front company called *Hortales et Cie*. Beaumarchais would send supplies to French possessions in the West Indies where American agents would then repack and ship them to the American continent. In an attempt to help finance this new operation Vergennes also approached the Spanish foreign minister in an effort to convince another long-time British enemy that providing combined aid to the rebels and supporting a larger conflict would effectively weaken both the British and Americans, leaving the spoils for France and Spain.⁴³

In late 1775, Congress had created the Committee of Secret Correspondence “for the sole purpose of Corresponding with our friends in Great Britain, Ireland, and other parts of the world,”⁴⁴ primarily through Arthur Lee and Charles Dumas, a friend of

⁴¹CIA, *Beaumarchais*, 3.

⁴²Thomas B. Allen, *George Washington, Spymaster: How the Americans Outspied the British and Won the Revolutionary War* (Washington, DC: National Geographic Society, 2004), 87.

⁴³American Revolution.org. France in the Revolution; Ketchum, 16-17.

⁴⁴Allen, 77.

Benjamin Franklin's in The Hague.⁴⁵ In March 1776, the committee appointed Silas Deane as Congress' agent in Paris, and Deane began to work closely with Beaumarchais to develop this support network. By July, Deane and Beaumarchais agreed on initial terms for the delivery of French aid to the Americans.⁴⁶

Through a variety of sources, British intelligence was well aware of this developing situation in France. Agents were tracking the not-so-subtle movements of large quantities of martial supplies to the ports of France ostensibly bound for the West Indies, but there was little the British government could do about it without solid evidence the supplies would eventually reach rebel hands. Still, these shipments were obviously far beyond the requirements of the islands and British Ambassador Lord Stormont addressed the issue to Vergennes. A devout royalist, Vergennes countered Stormont's accusations with the perfectly reasonable argument that supporting a rebellion against the crown in America by its very nature undermined the authority of his own sovereign. This placated Stormont for a time, but as his agents continued to report large movements of supplies his inquiries and protests became more vehement to the point the French government eventually issued formal ordinances against smuggling war supplies to the Americans. When Beaumarchais protested these restrictions, Vergennes simply instructed him to continue his operations, but with increased discretion.⁴⁷

This turned out to be increasingly difficult. By the end of 1776, Beaumarchais had three ships loaded in Le Havre full of supplies for the Americans, and he and Deane had

⁴⁵Ketchum, 17.

⁴⁶American Revolution.org. France in the Revolution; CIA, *Beaumarchais*, 3-5.

⁴⁷CIA, *Beaumarchais*, 5.

also been enlisting young French officers eager to join the American cause. However, these young adventure seekers awaiting transport to America began to become a serious security issue for Beaumarchais' operation. Though the supply ships were officially bound for the West Indies, the young recruits were bragging about their future exploits in America, further confirming what British agents already suspected. Throughout his establishment of *Hortales et Cie*, Beaumarchais had been meticulous about maintaining the secrecy of the operation, and he acted quickly to contain the latest problem and preserve the security of his mission.⁴⁸

Ironically, in the end, his personal vanity did more to reveal the true face of *Hortales et Cie* to the British than anything else. By involving himself unnecessarily in a local production of *The Barber of Seville*, he blew his long-term cover and provided the direct correlation British intelligence had been looking for between these mysterious shipments and Beaumarchais, a known agent of the French government. When confronted with this evidence, Vergennes had little choice but to delay the sailing of the three supply ships for several months to preserve increasingly tenuous relations between France and Britain.⁴⁹

As it turns out, mistakes in operations security committed by the members of *Hortales et Cie* simply confirmed what British intelligence had already discovered from their most important source of intelligence during negotiations between the Americans

⁴⁸Christopher Hibbert, *Redcoats and Rebels: The American Revolution Through British Eyes* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company Inc., 2002), 5.

⁴⁹Eventually the three ships Beaumarchais filled sailed directly to the northern colonies, and provided critical supplies to General Horatio Gates' Army, likely facilitating his victory at Saratoga. American Revolution.org. France in the Revolution.Talbott, 224; CIA, *Beaumarchais*, 5.

and the French, a covert double-agent at the heart of the American effort to arrange for and facilitate French aid to the colonies. Edward Bancroft, a Massachusetts born scientist, author, and former student of Silas Deane, first became acquainted with Benjamin Franklin during Franklin's time in London in the early 1770s. Franklin knew Bancroft supported American rights and eventually recruited him as a spy against the British. When Deane arrived in France in 1776, Franklin instructed him to contact Bancroft, his trusted associate in London, and solicit his help during negotiations with the French. Bancroft arrived in Paris in July to begin work with the commission. Unbeknownst to Franklin or Deane, Bancroft had already agreed to work as an agent for the British.⁵⁰

While Bancroft supported the rights of his countrymen and had even published an essay on that point, he did not support separation from England, preferring instead to resolve the issues within the empire.⁵¹ He was also uncomfortable with any actions that would strengthen the power of the mother country's old enemy, France. Finally, like many agents, he probably needed the money. When his friend Paul Wentworth, an American loyalist, long-time British agent, and member of Commons, approached him to spy for the crown, he accepted.⁵² In return, the British government eventually provided Bancroft a salary of £400-£500 per year and promised him a pension of £200 per year, a

⁵⁰Central Intelligence Agency. "Edward Bancroft, Estimable Spy," https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/kentcsi/vol5no1/html/v05i1a07p_0001.htm (accessed 30 January 2010); Allen, 83; Ketchum, 22; Don Cook, *The Long Fuse: How England Lost the American Colonies* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1995), 284.

⁵¹Samuel Flagg Bemis, "British Secret Service and the French-American Alliance," *American Historical Review* 29, no.3 (April 1924): 475.

⁵²Cook, 283.

seat in Commons, and a baronetcy when hostilities were resolved.⁵³ Because of Franklin's endorsement and Bancroft's affable personality he quickly became Deane's confidant, privy to all the guidance Deane received from Congress and Franklin, and even accompanied the commissioner to his meetings with Vergennes, Beaumarchais, and other French officials, acting as his translator. Eventually, in early 1777, Bancroft became secretary to the commission and took up residence with them as one of their few trusted confidants. During this entire time, he was sending detailed reports back to Lord Suffolk, Colonial Secretary for Secret Service operations in the American colonies, on every detail of the negotiations including the activities of Beaumarchais and *Hortales et Cie*.⁵⁴

Bancroft provided the bulk of his information about the ongoing negotiations and the specifics of French support to the British via timed dead-drops to the embassy and occasional personal trips to London.⁵⁵ The fact he was able to do this so successfully in an environment rife with agents from all camps while remaining undetected is not only a testament to his own abilities and intelligence, but also to the apparent credulity of Deane and Franklin and the weakness of French counterintelligence in its own capital.⁵⁶

⁵³CIA. *Edward Bancroft, Estimable Spy*; Allen, 89.

⁵⁴Richard Deacon, *A History of the British Secret Service* (London: Frederick Muller Limited, 1969), 91; CIA. *Edward Bancroft, Estimable Spy*; Allen, 88.

⁵⁵Every Tuesday night after 09:30, Bancroft would leave a message in a bottle at a specific, hidden spot in the Jardin desTuileries. The British would retrieve the message and leave further instructions, which Bancroft would later retrieve. By utilizing this system, agents never met, and unless counterintelligence agents discovered and conducted surveillance on the drop site, the operatives could not be connected. This method was simple, effective, and is still in use today. Aldrich Ames and Robert Hanssen both used dead-drops to communicate with their KGB handlers. Allen, 90.

⁵⁶Ketchum, 14.

Inevitably, the commissioners and the French government became aware that many of their secrets were reaching the British government, particularly when Lord Stormont used the information as a basis to challenge French neutrality in the American question.⁵⁷ Bancroft successfully deflected suspicion from himself by accusing others, most of whom were completely innocent or minor players, and inventing harrowing tales of near capture while in London. Whitehall assisted him in his ruse by providing what appeared to be important British military information to feed his American counterparts, and in one case even arranged for a temporary arrest during a trip to London to bolster his cover.⁵⁸ With one exception, however, the commission appears to have maintained complete confidence in his loyalty throughout the negotiations, and indeed their lives.⁵⁹

Arthur Lee was that exception, and he seems to have been the only member who saw through Bancroft's treachery. Unfortunately, Lee was by nature proud, jealous, and quarrelsome, which detracted from the fact that he was actually correct.⁶⁰ On two occasions Lee presented compelling evidence to the commission that Bancroft was in league with the British, but Franklin flatly refused to believe or support his allegations. Whether Franklin's reaction was part of a conscious counterintelligence effort, based on

⁵⁷Bemis, 478.

⁵⁸Deacon, 93.

⁵⁹CIA. *Edward Bancroft, Estimable Spy*; Allen, 91; Deacon, 93.

⁶⁰Bemis, 475-476. Ironically, Bancroft was so successful, he was appointed as secretary to the American Peace Commission negotiating the final settlement with the British at the end of the war. Ketchum, 22.

an old personal feud between Franklin and Lee, sheer gullibility, or more sinister reasons remains unclear.⁶¹

At this point, William Eden (later Lord Auckland during the Napoleonic Wars) was chief of the British Secret Service, and monitoring or preventing the American-French alliance was high on his list of priorities.⁶² In December 1777, he dispatched Wentworth to Paris to monitor the growing relationship between France and America. Wentworth acted as Bancroft's handler and began to send detailed intelligence reports back to London. Through meetings with members of the commission, particularly Franklin and Bancroft, Wentworth had correctly concluded the issue of American independence was not negotiable; that an alliance between America, France, and Spain was imminent; and that if England sought an end to hostilities (which following Saratoga, it did), it needed to act immediately.⁶³ Unfortunately, Prime Minister Lord North, and more critically George III, never one to place much faith in agents, took little interest in these reports.⁶⁴

One operation that boosted the King's confidence in his agents was what Eden termed in his papers the "Hynson business." Eden devised a plan to intercept a large quantity of original dispatches from the American Commission in Paris in an effort to

⁶¹Ironically, Lee's own personal Secretary was also supplying information to British Secret Service, but because of Lee's temperament and subsequent lack of access, his information was less damaging than Bancroft's. CIA, *Edward Bancroft, Estimable Spy*; Allen, 91; Deacon, 93; Bemis, 483.

⁶²Bemis, 47; Deacon, 91.

⁶³Though Spain eventually declined to offer formal recognition and did not enter the war until 1779. Cook, 286-287; Talbott, 226.

⁶⁴Ketchum, 23; Allen, 88; Cook, 286.

compare Bancroft's reporting with the original source. The Commission in Paris had determined it needed a dedicated, swift, and secure means to transmit messages back to the Continental Congress. Deane's secretary, William Carmichael, had contacts in the seedier side of Britain's dockyards and recruited his friend Joseph Hynson for the task. Hynson's lack of discretion brought his mission to the attention of Eden's agent, Reverend John Verdill, who successfully turned Hynson.⁶⁵

The plan was simple. Hynson would sail from Havre with the dispatches but intentionally sail into an ambush where the British would confiscate the documents. For reasons unrelated to Hynson's activities, Franklin and Deane decided to send the documents on a different ship but entrusted Hynson to deliver them to the port. Hynson delivered the dispatches to the British, and the Americans were none the wiser until the pouch filled with blank pages reached America.⁶⁶

On 6 February 1778, the covert nature of French supplies to the American rebels became a moot point when Louis XVI signed two treaties. One officially acknowledged the United States of America and established favored trading status between France and the new nation. The other, reflecting France's long-time fear of a separate Anglo-American treaty, established a defensive alliance whereby France would fight side by side with America against Britain, and neither would negotiate a separate treaty with Britain without the consent of the other.⁶⁷ France immediately dispatched a copy of the

⁶⁵Bemis, 480.

⁶⁶Ibid.

⁶⁷Cook, 287.

first treaty to London but attempted to keep the second secret, not realizing Bancroft had already provided the British with a copy of both.⁶⁸

Though Britain was unsuccessful in preventing a Franco-American alliance, it was not due to a lack of timely and accurate intelligence. Bancroft and other agents did an excellent job of keeping Whitehall informed throughout the negotiations, but for political and financial reasons the British were unable to derail the process. With the official announcement of the alliance, British intelligence shifted its emphasis from determining *if* the French were assisting the Americans, to *where* and *when* the shipments were departing and arriving. While agents in Europe could monitor and report departures from European ports with ease, once French ships crossed the horizon, Britain was reliant on the only real strategic reconnaissance asset in its inventory: the Royal Navy.

The maritime aspect of Britain's final defeat cannot be understated, and this was an exclusively French operation. French land forces, with American assistance, proved to be the deciding factor in the victory at Yorktown but it was the French navy that made Cornwallis' situation completely untenable. Even faced with Franco-American land-based siege forces, Cornwallis could have escaped relatively easily by sea or been resupplied for an indefinite period had the British navy been able to reach him. Consequently, it is important to address French maritime support leading up to the final defeat, particularly the British inability to track French naval movements and the effect this had on their decision-making.

⁶⁸Henry Lumpkin, *From Savannah to Yorktown: The American Revolution in the South* (Lincoln, NE: toExcel Press, 1987), 8; Ketchum, 21; Allen, 93.

The basis for British world power in the eighteenth century was its colonial holdings and its naval power, with the former being completely dependent on the latter.⁶⁹ But by 1770 the British navy's untouchable status was beginning to wane. Between the end of the Seven Years War and 1782, France increased its naval budget from 30 million to 200 million livres per year. By 1780, France had sixty-six ships of the line and its allies Spain and Holland had 58 and 20 respectively, meaning Britain's enemies collectively outnumbered it at sea. Though the French navy was numerically and tactically weaker than the British, the French had few colonial holdings to defend, giving them and their allies the ability to attack an overextended British navy where and when they chose.⁷⁰ Britain, on the other hand, had to spread its warships throughout the globe to guard assets across the Atlantic and Indian oceans, and the Baltic and Mediterranean seas.⁷¹ This overextension also led to vulnerability in the defense of the homeland.⁷² Attacks against the British mainland were a constant source of concern for the First Lord of the Admiralty, Lord John Montagu, Earl of Sandwich, and limited the forces they were willing to commit against French naval forces in the Americas.

⁶⁹Corwin, 43.

⁷⁰Preston, 8.

⁷¹Ketchum, 43.

⁷²Preston, 9. In 1779, a combination of French and Spanish ships caught the British by surprise when they attempted to land forces near the critical British naval dockyards at Plymouth and Portsmouth on the southern British coast. British coastal defense was not in a position to oppose them and it was only through delay and incompetence on the part of the attackers the destruction of one of Britain's most crucial war assets was averted.

In the western Atlantic, in addition to sheer firepower and force projection, the navy provided Britain with an excellent form of intelligence gathering and dissemination when utilized effectively. In these days of limited collection capability, naval assets were an invaluable source of strategic reconnaissance, particularly for a land commander deployed far from London. Messages from Whitehall about events in Paris and elsewhere could take two or three months to reach Clinton's headquarters in New York, and any reply would take four to six weeks to return to England.⁷³ Enemy communications were equally time-consuming but naval assets were in a unique position to monitor both French naval activity and, to a lesser degree, American ground activities along the coast.

With the exception of the Battle of the Capes (discussed in a later chapter), French naval forces in American waters primarily acted in a supporting role to ground forces. Throughout the war, the British intention was always to defeat the French in a decisive naval battle, but because they failed to commit sufficient force this did not occur until 1782, at the Battle of the Saintes, at which point the war was lost.⁷⁴ Nevertheless, by their mere presence French naval forces had a profound effect on British policy in America.

The French navy affected British land commanders in America in two ways. In several critical and decisive instances, the French provided direct firepower, supplies, and materiel support to the American forces; but throughout the conflict, and particularly after 1777, the French navy performed the more useful tasks of distracting and confusing

⁷³Ketchum, 43.

⁷⁴Preston, 8.

British commanders, eliciting unwarranted action or forcing caution when boldness might otherwise have been the path to victory.

The first significant overt intervention in the war occurred shortly after the signing of the Treaty of Alliance in April 1778. British intelligence received reports of a French fleet preparing to sail from Toulon under the command of Jean Baptiste Charles Henri Hector, Comte d'Estaing. The fleet sailed on 13 April with twelve ships of the line and five frigates, immediately causing concern in London. The British dispatched the frigate *Proserpine* to the Strait of Gibraltar where it observed the French fleet clearing the Mediterranean and sailing west. However, even when *Proserpine* returned with the news on 2 June, Lord Sandwich was still reluctant to detach a portion of the Home Fleet to pursue the French or bolster British naval forces in America, fearful of leaving the homeland vulnerable. Though the British were convinced the French were bound for America, they had no way of confirming this or tracking French naval movements on the high seas and thus hesitated.⁷⁵ Though these weaknesses were true of all maritime combatants in the eighteenth century, during the American Revolution it was generally the British looking for the French and not the other way around.

As it turned out, the French were indeed bound for the east coast of America and arrived in July, but Comte d'Estaing's initial operations off the American coast were generally ineffective. In fact, these operations actually proved detrimental to Franco-American relations, raising an issue that would affect operations during the months leading up to the siege of Yorktown. After initially reconnoitering and rejecting a potential attack against Admiral Howe's forces at New York, the French fleet sailed to

⁷⁵Hibbert, 227-230.

Newport, Rhode Island, to support American operations against the British garrison there.⁷⁶ But after two days engaged with Admiral Lord Richard Howe's forces, d'Estaing determined his ships were too badly damaged to continue and withdrew to Boston to make repairs. This left land forces to contend with a British force fully supported by Howe, ending the American assault. The French decision brought into question their reliability as an ally to the point that there were demonstrations and even riots in New York, Charleston, and Boston.⁷⁷ In the long term, this lack of confidence would prompt General Washington to hesitate until the last moment to move his forces south to Yorktown until the French promise of maritime support was a virtual certainty.

Poor coordination and cooperation with his naval counterparts always exacerbated General Clinton's inability to track the movement of French ships along the American coast and the West Indies. Though their personal relationship was problematic, Clinton had a great deal of respect for Admiral Howe as an officer. When Howe resigned in 1778, the Admiralty replaced him with Admiral Marriot Arbuthnot.⁷⁸ Arbuthnot was by all accounts a disastrous officer with a personality to match, and Clinton's ability to gain useful intelligence from his naval forces disintegrated even further. The 60-year-old Arbuthnot, nicknamed "the old woman," was by nature lazy, quarrelsome, and somewhat cowardly, and as such, resistant to aggressively seeking out enemy dispositions,

⁷⁶Thomas Flemming, *Liberty!: The American Revolution* (New York: Penguin Putnam Inc., 1997), 283.

⁷⁷Cook, 312; Hibbert, 231-233; Flemming, 284.

⁷⁸Hibbert, 250-251.

particularly if it involved putting his ships into anything resembling danger.⁷⁹ These characteristics, mated with a personal dislike for General Clinton, meant one of Clinton's most comprehensive and timely sources of information along the entire eastern seaboard was rendered almost useless and in some cases even hindered his war effort by providing untimely or inaccurate information.

Throughout 1779, the movements and intentions of the French navy continued to keep General Clinton off balance and distracted him from the situation at hand. In addition to his responsibilities on the North American mainland, Clinton was also responsible for the security of the lucrative British West Indian sugar islands.⁸⁰ Since June, the French had overrun the British Caribbean possessions on St. Vincent, Grenada, and Dominica, and appeared to be threatening Britain's most important economic possession, Jamaica. In response, Clinton rapidly dispatched General Cornwallis with about 2,000 troops to the Caribbean. Soon after, however, Clinton received word from his own navy that Admiral d'Estaing's fleet was bound for the American mainland. Though d'Estaing was actually headed for an ill-conceived campaign off the coast of Savannah, this information prompted Clinton to recall Cornwallis and, more critically, withdraw his 3,500 troops from Newport in order to strengthen his position in New York. The long-term consequences of his decision were twofold; it opened up Newport as a future staging

⁷⁹Ketchum, 35; Arbuthnot pursued a successful but mostly undistinguished career. His advanced age seems to have been the major contributing factor to his lack of aggressiveness and initiative.

⁸⁰Hibbert, 209.

point for French forces, and it left loyalists in the area without British support and subject to maltreatment and patriot influence.⁸¹

By 1780, France had determined to increase its commitment to the American cause and in the spring, the Marquis de Lafayette returned from Versailles bearing news that seven ships of the line, 10,000-12,000 troops, and six million livres were bound for Rhode Island, scheduled to arrive in June.⁸² British intelligence was well aware of the departure of the fleet from Brest under Admiral Charles-Henri-Louis d'Arzac, the Chevalier de Ternay and relayed the information to General Clinton, recently returned from Charleston.⁸³

In fact, Clinton actually found out about the imminent French arrival in Newport on 12 June 1780 from Major General Benedict Arnold, who received information from Washington directly. In response, Clinton alerted his naval forces and initiated preparations for a response. Clinton intended to reoccupy Newport prior to their arrival and deal the French yet another embarrassing defeat, but his contentious relationship with Arbuthnot, and Arbuthnot's personal incompetence, proved fatal to his plans.⁸⁴

Arbuthnot never had any confidence in the intelligence reports about the incoming French fleet and consequently placed little emphasis on locating them. This became evident when his own ships sighted Admiral Ternay's fleet off the coast of

⁸¹Cook, 318.

⁸²Flemming, 308; Ketchum, 10.

⁸³Cook, 326-327.

⁸⁴Alexander Rose, *Washington's Spies: The Story of America's First Spy Ring* (New York: Bantam Dell, 2006), 190.

Virginia on 5 July but inexplicably failed to engage them or even track their movements, outraging Clinton.⁸⁵ Consequently, the French sailed unopposed and unobserved past New York and began disembarking and reinforcing the former British defenses at Newport on 11 July, before Clinton was even aware of their arrival. It was, in fact, only through another message from Arnold that Clinton knew of the French arrival in Newport.⁸⁶

At this point, Clinton was determined to attack Lieutenant General Jean-Baptiste Donatien de Vimeur, comte de Rochambeau's forces while they were still disembarking and relatively vulnerable. Since the landing, a British agent in Rhode Island had sent Clinton detailed information on the composition, disposition, and activities of the newly arrived French force. However, by this time Clinton had lost the element of surprise and his intentions soon became clear to the Americans. General Washington received a report from Robert Townsend via the Culper network that the British were embarking for an attack on Newport.⁸⁷

Washington realized he had to act quickly to head off the potential destruction of his relief force, so he arranged for some "secret" American plans for an attack on New York to be captured by the British. A patriot agent, posing as a Tory farmer and claiming he had found the bag lying in the road, delivered Washington's phony plans for a major

⁸⁵Ketchum, 33-35.

⁸⁶Preston, 138; John Bakeless, *Turncoats, Traitors & Heroes: Espionage in the American Revolution* (New York: J.B. Lippincott, 1959. Reprint, Da Capo Press, 1998), 235; Cook, 326-327.

⁸⁷Rose, 190; Allen, 135.

attack against New York to a British intelligence officer.⁸⁸ Already wary of an attack, Clinton immediately ceased his operation, allowing Rochambeau ample time to consolidate his position in Newport.⁸⁹ Though the British should probably have seen through this relatively simple ruse, Washington wisely played on Clinton's terminal (and mostly correct) tendency to believe New York was Washington's primary objective.

In August, Clinton received another message from Arbuthnot that the French fleet had put to sea again from Newport and that he intended to pursue and engage them. The report of the French sailing turned out to be false, and though Arbuthnot spent the next two weeks cruising off the Rhode Island coast, he gathered no useful intelligence on the disposition or intent of the French force.⁹⁰ Clinton's small window of opportunity to find and engage his latest enemy when relatively vulnerable had closed. The failure of the British to actively prevent the French from occupying Newport had two major effects on the British campaign in the south. Firstly, Clinton would repeatedly deny Cornwallis' pleas for reinforcements because he feared any weakening of his garrison at New York would prompt an attack from Rhode Island. Secondly, he allowed a significant portion of the eventual siege force at Yorktown to establish a secure base within his area of operations.⁹¹

The most significant maritime contribution to the American War of Independence would not be put into place until the next year. On 22 March 1781, François-Joseph-Paul,

⁸⁸Allen, 137.

⁸⁹Bakeless, 236.

⁹⁰Ketchum, 34-35.

⁹¹Ibid., 36-37.

Comte de Grasse, sailed from Brest with twenty ships of the line, three frigates, two cutters, and several heavy freighters bound for the West Indies. De Grasse was a veteran of action around the globe, including previous experience in the West Indies and action off the coast of Savannah.⁹² On 28 April, he sighted Martinique, but once again, British intelligence had tracked the fleet's departure and correctly predicted his destination. Consequently, British Admiral Sir Samuel Hood had been blockading Port Royal with eighteen ships of the line in anticipation of his arrival. After two days of heavy fighting, and despite out-sailing the French vessels, Hood withdrew and de Grasse anchored in Port Royal on 1 May.⁹³ Though the French did not yet realize it, with the arrival of de Grasse in the Caribbean and Rochambeau firmly entrenched at Newport, they had put in place the forces which in subsequent months would seal the fate of the British army in the South, effectively ending the war.

There had been several opportunities for Clinton to change the course of events, most notably when he failed to deny Newport to the French. Clearly, command issues with Arbuthnot had been the overwhelming factor throughout, but these led to a serious gap in Clinton's grasp of the enemy situation, particularly from the maritime perspective. As the year progressed the trap began to close on Cornwallis. Despite the replacement of Arbuthnot, ineffective naval reconnaissance and the failure of British naval commanders to pursue the enemy when they had located them would continue to plague Clinton and Cornwallis, leaving both commanders in the dark screaming for reinforcements from

⁹²American Revolution.org., "Francois Joseph Paul Compte de Grasse, the Battle off the Virginia Capes, and the American Victory at Yorktown," <http://www.americanrevolution.org/degrasse.html> (accessed 6 March 2010).

⁹³Ketchum, 173-174.

each other until there was nothing they could do but stand by and watch the demise of the war.

CHAPTER 3
BRITISH INTELLIGENCE AND THE DECISION TO MOVE THE WAR
TO THE SOUTHERN COLONIES

As two years of war, primarily in the northern colonies, ground to a stalemate, it became clear to British leadership on both sides of the Atlantic that a fundamental change in British military policy in America was vital to the future success of the war.

Burgoyne's surrender at Saratoga in October 1778 dashed any hopes for success of the British strategy of dividing New England from the remainder of the colonies, and support for the already unpopular war fell to an all-time low, particularly in London. King George III, Lord Frederick North, and Lord George Germain were facing unprecedented pressure from the opposition to negotiate a settlement with the Americans. Some, like Charles James Fox, advocated independence, but most were looking for a peace treaty albeit with heavy British concessions. Some argued the administration had gotten the entire strategy wrong from the beginning and that the South should have been the objective all along.

American Department Under-Secretary William Knox charged that the British had attacked the rebels where they were strongest and advocated abandoning the fight for New England in favor of a campaign in the South.⁹⁴ Charles Jenkinson of the Treasury concurred, but for economic reasons. Jenkinson argued that New England would always be dependent on Britain as a source of cheap woolen goods and hardware regardless of the political situation and that, with the exception of the great masts of New Hampshire,

⁹⁴Piers Mackesy, *The War for America 1775-1783* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), 44, 158. Knox owned property in Georgia and was an agent for the colony, so his motivation is somewhat transparent.

most of New England's exports could be acquired elsewhere. Only the tobacco of the South was worth monopolizing.⁹⁵

The British public, already weary of the war and wary of the French, resolved after Saratoga that a negotiated settlement or even independence was likely the best Britain could expect from the conflict in America. Even Loyalist British newspapers began to change their tone to one of reconciliation, and when the Earl of Carlisle and his peace commission set sail for America in April 1778, the news was met with nearly universal excitement.⁹⁶ If George III, North and Germain hoped to salvage continued support for the conflict, they needed a decisive result quickly. Consequently, they turned their attention to the southern colonies.⁹⁷

In the spring of 1778, George III instructed the commander of British land forces, General Sir Henry Clinton, to attack the southern colonies to reestablish royal control in Georgia and South Carolina. Many believed that following their reintegration, North Carolina and Virginia would be isolated from the port city of Charleston, trapped between two strong British forces with Indians in the West and the Royal Navy along the coast, and easily subdued. On the surface, this strategy seemed sound, but British

⁹⁵Ibid., 158.

⁹⁶Solomon Lutnick, *The American Revolution and the British Press 1775-1783* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1967), 121-123, 126-127. The commission turned out to be a total failure. The Franco-American alliance was firmly in place and the Carlisle had not even been authorized to discuss independence.

⁹⁷William B. Willcox, "British Strategy in America, 1778," *Journal of Modern History* 19, no. 2 (June 1947): 97-98.

leadership at all levels failed to fully comprehend the unique challenges of the southern American battlefield.⁹⁸

Clinton had attempted to take the strategic port of Charleston in 1776, but failed, mostly due to an inaccurate reconnaissance and assessment of the objective. Clinton's plan was tactically sound. He intended to attack the rebel fort on Sullivan's Island at the entrance to Charleston harbor to assure access for his warships to support land operations against the main part of the city. The rear of the fort was unfinished and thus vulnerable and his sources had assured him the ford between Long Island where he intended to disembark his assault force and the fort was easily crossed at low tide. Unfortunately for Clinton the water he assumed would be about eighteen inches deep turned out to be seven and eight feet deep on the day of the assault. The inability to envelop the fort led to a British defeat, and Charleston remained under American control for the next two years.⁹⁹

Two other early military engagements in the South, however, served to reinforce the idea the British could succeed there. Though not particularly strategically significant, Lieutenant Colonel Archibald Campbell's relatively easy conquest of the small, poorly trained garrison at Savannah in 1778 and the subsequent reinstatement of the deposed royal governor, Sir James Wright, provided those in London pursuing the idea of a

⁹⁸Alan S. Brown, "James Simpson's Reports on the Carolina Loyalists, 1779-1780," *Journal of Southern History* 21, no. 4 (November 1955): 513-514; Willcox, *British* 97-98; Cook, 280-281, 291.

⁹⁹Henry Lumpkin, *From Savannah to Yorktown: The American Revolution in the South* (Lincoln, NE: toExcel Press, 1987), 11; Christopher Hibbert, *Redcoats and Rebels: The American Revolution Through British Eyes* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company Inc., 2002), 106-107.

southern strategy with unjustified confidence in an easy success.¹⁰⁰ It must be noted, however, of all the southern colonies Georgia had been the most staunchly loyal.¹⁰¹ Consequently, using Campbell's victory as a benchmark for future operations in the region was somewhat unrealistic. The disastrous failure to retake Savannah by American and French forces in 1779 also bolstered British confidence in a southern campaign, though the defeat was based more on poor coordination and decision-making by the allies than the invincibility of the British army or significant local support for the garrison. Finally, throughout the conflict in general, with Boston being the major exception, the British ability to occupy coastal cities was rarely in question. Their real problems inevitably began as they moved inland, and this would hold true in the South as well.

At the strategic level the shift in British strategy toward the South was not completely ill-conceived. The British had secured their holdings in Canada, and although General Clinton could not effectively attack Washington's army outside his base in New York City, Clinton's strong, well dug-in garrison there effectively fixed Washington in the north. Even with French assistance, Washington never even attempted to retake it by military force. British leadership viewed this standoff as an opportunity to shift to a southern campaign, particularly if their efforts were significantly bolstered by southern loyalist militia and recruits. The idea that pro-British sentiment ran higher in the southern

¹⁰⁰Don Cook, *The Long Fuse: How England Lost the American Colonies* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1995), 313.

¹⁰¹Moses C. Tyler, "The Party of the Loyalists in the American Revolution," *American Historical Review* 1, no.1 (October 1895): 28.

colonies was not incorrect, and a British conquest there should effectively trap Washington's army and isolate it from significant domestic and foreign support.¹⁰²

Though, as already discussed in chapter two, British naval forces were beginning to lose their complete dominance of the seas, in 1778, Britain's enemies had not yet committed an unstoppable naval force to American waters and the Royal Navy could still effectively blockade the major sea ports along the northern and middle colonies. British commanders could not have predicted the rapid change in this situation with any certainty, but probably could have analyzed the conditions within the colonies more thoroughly. Inexplicably, British leadership failed to conduct, or at least account for the features of, sound intelligence preparation of the battlefield of both the social and the physical characteristics of the southern colonies, and this failure ultimately led to their defeat.

Their inability to accurately ascertain the social aspect was the most critical, and stemmed from what John Shy termed, "an erroneous conception of the civilian environment within which military operations were to be conducted."¹⁰³ In a global environment rapidly shifting against Britain, British forces were stretched thin, making the recruitment of southern loyalists critical to the success of the strategy. Throughout the early years of the war, particularly in London, there was a general belief that loyalist sentiment in the South ran high and that there were thousands of the king's subjects just waiting for the British army to show up, at which point they would rally en masse to the

¹⁰²Lumpkin, 9.

¹⁰³John Shy, "The Military Conflict Considered as a Revolutionary War," in Department of Military History, H300, *Roots of Today's Operational Environment* (Ft Leavenworth, KS: Government Printing Office, 2009), H301RA-31.

crown to free themselves from their rebel oppressors and restore royal control.¹⁰⁴ When planning for the attack on Savannah, George III stated his belief that “large number[s] of the inhabitants would flock to the king’s standard.”¹⁰⁵ As one British General put it, the key to success in the South was to find “good Americans to subdue the bad ones.”¹⁰⁶ This general philosophy was widely held among British leadership and emanated from a variety of sources, some valid and some not.

In 1780, the bulk of the southern population which maintained loyalty to the crown did so passively and the British failed to recognize the critical difference between a citizen willing to support the crown in sentiment, and those willing to bear arms and possibly die for it.¹⁰⁷ Of the latter group, only a limited number were male, army aged, physically able to fight in combat, and not bound to their homes and farms in this primarily agrarian society. Lastly, of these, fewer still would endure the wrath of the rebel mobs prevalent in the isolated southern colonies, without staunch and consistent support from the King’s army. British leadership failed to delve into the details of the loyalist fervor, examine the complicated social issues underpinning it, and conduct a realistic assessment of the numbers of loyalists from which they could draw young fighting men.

¹⁰⁴Robert Stansbury Lambert, *South Carolina Loyalists in the American Revolution* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1987), 94.

¹⁰⁵Richard M.Ketchum, *Victory at Yorktown: The Campaign that Won the Revolution* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, LLC, 2004), 170-171.

¹⁰⁶Bart McDowell, *The Revolutionary War: America’s Fight for Freedom* (Washington, DC: National Geographic Society, 1967), 142.

¹⁰⁷Hibbert, 63, 179.

At the other end of the economic spectrum, many of the social elite in the South were men who had made small fortunes, primarily in the rice business.¹⁰⁸ While they were heavily dependent on Britain as a trading partner, they had not achieved their fortunes through the peerage system so familiar to the English elite, so remaining in the King's favor was preferable but not a social and economic imperative. After all, the king needed the rice to feed the lucrative West Indies.¹⁰⁹ Consequently, the assumption they would remain steadfastly loyal when things got tough was likely more wishful thinking than based in fact.

One contention some historians have made is that uprooted Tories in London painted an unrealistic picture of the loyalist fervor in the southern theater in order to encourage an attack to regain their lost fortunes. While in some isolated cases this was probably true, the level of influence they had remains a topic of debate. As late as the autumn of 1778, 49 loyalist expatriates in London wrote a petition to Lord Germain, pledging their continued loyalty and stating they were "Ready to be Employed in any Manner which his Majesty may think, will best Answer the Purposes of our Engagement," and asking Germain "to communicate to his Majesty our Desires to serve him and Readiness to Sacrifice our Lives in Defence of his Person and Government."¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸John Buchanan, *The Road to Guildford Courthouse: The American Revolution in the Carolinas* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1997), 21.

¹⁰⁹Selwyn H. H. Carrington, "The American Revolution and the British West Indies' Economy," *Selwyn H. H. Carrington Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 17, no. 4, Caribbean Slavery and British Capitalism (Spring 1987): 823-824.

¹¹⁰John Randolph, "Petition of American Loyalists, 1778," *William and Mary Quarterly, Second Series* 1, no.1 (January 1921): 70; Lambert, 65.

However, by the time the British government was seriously considering a campaign in the southern colonies, many of the early loyalist refugees to the mother country had become disillusioned with, and more importantly, detached from the leadership in Whitehall. This detachment was rooted in a variety of factors, but in general the expatriates seem to have felt rejected by the British government they had formerly supported. Believing their exile to be a temporary situation many did little to establish themselves in British society, so as the war drug on they lost whatever influence their previous positions in America, and initial novelty, had afforded them. Most were completely dependent on the British government for support, and some even considered the government liable for their current predicament and sought compensation for their fortunes lost in America.¹¹¹ As such, they may have been viewed by some in the British hierarchy as a microcosm of the larger colonial problem, and more of a burden than an ally. Regardless, this diaspora, with different backgrounds and agendas, likely never formed enough of a coalition or wielded enough influence to significantly affect the decision to invade southern America.

In addition to the loyalists in England, there were exiles closer to America supporting the idea of a British invasion of the American South. As early as January 1776, the former Governors of North Carolina and Virginia, both driven into exile aboard ships off the coast, claimed there were thousands of loyalists waiting to join forces

¹¹¹Mary B. Norton, "The Loyalists' Image of England. Ideal and Reality," *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies* 3, no.2 (Summer 1971): 65-68; Charles R. Ritcheson, "'Loyalist Influence' on British Policy Toward the United States After the American Revolution," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 7, no.1 (Autumn 1973): 3-6; Lambert, 64, 276.

against the rebels if only supported by the crown.¹¹² North Carolina governor Josiah Martin assured London that “the rebels on his territories were only a small and tiresome minority,” and claimed that if provided arms and supported by a contingent of regular troops he could bring the state back into the King’s fold.¹¹³ The Virginia governor John Murray, 4th Earl of Dunmore, insisted the current problems in Virginia would be short-lived, were being perpetrated by a small, misguided portion of the population, and claimed he could “recover his province with a mere 300 men.”¹¹⁴ These sentiments were echoed by Lord William Campbell, governor of South Carolina.¹¹⁵ As Clinton put it:

It seems that the governors of those provinces had sent home such sanguine and favorable accounts of the loyal disposition of numbers of their inhabitants, especially in the backcountry, that the administration was induced to believe “that nothing was wanting but the appearance of a respectable force there to encourage the King’s friends to show themselves, when it was expected they would soon be able to prevail over” the rebels.¹¹⁶

Again, these reports would not likely have sparked the idea for an invasion, but certainly would have encouraged plans for one which was already in the works.

Interestingly, the commander of British forces in America had a different picture of the situation and in April 1779 Clinton wrote to Germain about his lack of confidence in the level of loyalist support in the South:

¹¹²Mackesy, 43; Hibbert, 63.

¹¹³ Buchanan, 4; Mackesy, 43; Hibbert, 80.

¹¹⁴Hibbert, 80, 101.

¹¹⁵Mackesy, 43.

¹¹⁶Sir Henry Clinton, *The American Rebellion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1954), 23; Buchanan, 4.

I have as yet received no assurances of any favorable temper in the province of South Carolina to encourage me as to an undertaking where we must expect so much difficulty. . . . The small force which the present weakness of General Washington's army would enable me to detach might possibly get possession of Charleston . . . but I doubt whether they could keep it. The move would reduce me to the strictest defense in this country [New York].¹¹⁷

Despite the opinion of a senior British officer, with years of experience in America, leadership in London went ahead with a strategy which was strongly dependent on loyalist support in the South.

In mid 1779, Lord Germain dispatched James Simpson, the former royal attorney general for South Carolina to the southern colonies to gather intelligence on the population's attitude toward a British invasion. In August, Simpson reported back to Germain and Clinton, "I am of the opinion whenever the King's Troops move to Carolina they will be assisted by very considerable numbers of the inhabitants...If the terror [the Whigs] have excited was once removed, a few months would restore this country to its former good government."¹¹⁸ Although this was a logical and an active measure to gather intelligence on the attitudes of the populace, Simpson circulated primarily among loyalists during his enquiries. In his report to Germain in August 1779 he stated, "As most of the persons who were sent were my former acquaintances, and desirous to see me on that account, as well as to inquire after connections in Europe, my opportunities to

¹¹⁷Cook, 314.

¹¹⁸Steven J. Rauch, "Southern (Dis)Comfort: British Phase IV Operations in South Carolina and Georgia, May-September 1780," in Department of Military History, H300, *Roots of Today's Operational Environment* (Ft Leavenworth, KS: Government Printing Office, 2009), H301RB-45.

gain the intelligence I wanted were much better than I could have expected.”¹¹⁹ It is only logical to assume these people would do their best to encourage British intervention, and there are no indications in his correspondence that he was able to obtain objective data on the situation.

From an intelligence perspective, the British failed in the most fundamental task of human intelligence, the objective evaluation of source credibility. The majority of the information they were receiving originated with loyalists. Both expatriate and local loyalists had one thing in common: they were generally in a position of relative wealth and power, supported the crown, associated primarily with other loyalists, and their fortunes were tied to British success in the South. Had the British spent more time and energy soliciting information from the rank-and-file of backwoods southern society, their primary recruiting pool, they might have gleaned a different picture, but this capability did not exist and the British did little to remedy this shortfall. As author Piers Mackesy put it, “It is true that the information came from interested parties; but disinterested intelligence was unobtainable.”¹²⁰ As such, their picture of the social battlefield was inevitably skewed toward success. Consequently, as the British considered a southern strategy they fell prey to many of the same problems of soldiers throughout time. They tended to believe sources which supported the course of action they were already committed to while disregarding information to the contrary. Whether the fact their

¹¹⁹Simpson to Germain, Alan S. Brown, “James Simpson's Reports on the Carolina Loyalists, 1779-1780,” *Journal of Southern History* 21, no. 4 (November 1955): 515-516.

¹²⁰Mackesy, 43.

sources were, in most cases, completely biased occurred to them remains unknown, but in the end it didn't matter. British leadership had made its decision.

The second critical weakness the British had was a complete inability to evaluate the physical terrain in the American South. Even in a modern conflict, conducting a successful counterinsurgency on foreign soil without even a rudimentary knowledge of the terrain characteristics would be nearly impossible. During the planning process for a southern attack, this shortfall manifested itself mostly in a complete lack of reliable (or for that matter, unreliable) maps, particularly beyond the built-up coastal areas.¹²¹

This problem was more pronounced in, but not limited to the South. The British had struggled with this issue while trying to conduct operations into the interior during the French and Indian War.¹²² Lord Howe encountered similar problems early in the Revolution. Testifying before Parliament on his experiences prior to his resignation in 1777, Howe recalled:

With regard to the knowledge of the country, so necessary to be obtained previous to . . . movement. . . . I beg leave to mention the difficulties we labored under in that respect throughout the war. The country is so covered with wood, swamps and creeks, that it is not open in the least degree to be known, but from post to post, or from accounts to be collected from the inhabitants entirely ignorant of military description. These circumstances were therefore the cause of some unavoidable delay in our movements . . . I assert it with firmness, that almost every movement of the war in North America was an act of enterprise, clogged with innumerable difficulties. A knowledge of the country, intersected, as it everywhere is, by woods, mountains, waters, or morasses, cannot be obtained

¹²¹Matthew H. Spring, *With Zeal and With Bayonets Only: The British Army on Campaign in North America, 1775-1783* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2008), 44.

¹²²Joseph R. Fischer, *A Well Executed Failure: The Sullivan Campaign against the Iroquois, July-September 1779* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press), 1997, 36.

with any degree of precision necessary to foresee, and guard against, the obstructions that may occur.¹²³

This situation was not limited to the British. The Hessians had the same issue. Reporting three days after their landing at Head of Elk in August 1777, the journalist for the Hessian *Feldjagerkorps* reported, “We had no reports about the enemy, and no maps of the interior of this land, and no-one in the army was familiar with this area. After we had passed the city, no-one knew which way to go. Therefore, men were sent out in all directions until finally a Negro was found, and the army had to march according to his directions.”¹²⁴

The lack of knowledge the British had of the terrain in the southern colonies was even more pronounced. After being ordered to lead the expedition against Savannah in December 1778, Lieutenant Colonel Campbell wrote in his diary:

It was a matter of great concern, that there was not a chart of Georgia in the possession of any officer in this army nor any information of the roads, swamps, creeks, which could be depended upon, for directing our operations into the interior parts of the province. . . . The only resources therefore left me, was such information as I could procure from the people of the country for 20 miles in front, before the troops were ordered to march; from which information I was enabled to make a rough sketch of the road . . . [that] was corrected from my own observations the day thereafter.¹²⁵

Even after conducting operation for months in the South Carolina backcountry Colonel Lord Francis Rawdon reported to Tarleton, “I am very much obliged to you . . . for the pains which you have taken in looking out for a position for us. All the maps of the country which I have are so very inaccurate, that I must depend totally on your

¹²³Ibid., 45.

¹²⁴Ibid., 45-46.

¹²⁵Ibid., 44-45.

judgement. . . . But I must repeat, that I speak from maps, in which I suspect the relative positions to be ill laid down.”¹²⁶

The British and their allies were not alone. American commanders suffered from the same issue, but in many cases were fighting on familiar terrain and sometimes received more plentiful and reliable information from the local populace. That being said, “Light Horse” Henry Lee later recalled:

There was throughout our war, a lamentable ignorance of the topography of the country in which we fought, imposing upon our generals serious disadvantages. They had to ascertain the nature of the ground by reconnoitering, or by inquiry among the inhabitants. The first was not always practicable; and the results of the last was generally defective.¹²⁷

The British also failed to adequately account for something well known to them, the incredible heat and humidity in the South during much of the year. In addition to making operations extremely difficult for the men and horses, this environment provided an ideal breeding ground for the well-known smallpox and diphtheria, as well as malaria and yellow fever.¹²⁸ Despite this, there is little evidence to suggest the soldiers were prepared for this environment through modified training, tactics, or equipment. Though this was the norm of the time it still had a profound effect on their operations and was within their capabilities to influence.

Regardless of the shortfalls in planning and the apprehensions of the commander in New York, ultimately, the decision to take the war to the South was made by the

¹²⁶Rawdon to Tarleton, 23 October 1781, Banestre Tarleton, *A History of the Campaigns of 1780 and 1781 in the Southern Provinces of North America* (New York: Arno Press, 1968), 197.

¹²⁷Spring, 44.

¹²⁸Buchanan, 18-19.

highest levels of leadership in London, a body far removed from the realities of the social and physical characteristics of America's South. The determination was certainly influenced by slanted or blatantly false reports from biased sources, but these reports were exactly what the King and his ministers wanted to hear. Clinton and his advisors in America probably had a more realistic assessment of the conditions they would face in a southern invasion, but still failed to consider the second and third order effects and consequences of their planned counterinsurgency. They also failed to prepare for the specific, commonly known challenges of weather and terrain in the American South. Given the limited resources available to Clinton, the vast size of the southern theater, and London's desire to break the stalemate quickly, a detailed reconnaissance of the South was not practical. It remains likely, however, that had Clinton directed significantly more effort at these aspects of the campaign it could have had a profound, likely positive, effect on its outcome.

CHAPTER 4
THE ROAD TO YORKTOWN

In the fall of 1779, General Sir Henry Clinton and his staff were contemplating the upcoming invasion of Charleston, South Carolina. The British had secured Savannah, Georgia, two years earlier, and had recently withstood a significant, though poorly executed, combined attack by American and French forces. Now the southern strategy would begin in earnest, first with the capture of Charleston, the largest and most important port in the South, and then with a push into the South Carolina backcountry to reclaim the colony for the crown. The idea of conducting operations in the American South must have been a truly daunting one. Clinton had no established spy networks in the South and his knowledge of the sparsely populated southern terrain was extremely limited.

Clinton had learned early on that venturing outside the New York area presented unique challenges to his intelligence capabilities. The British had well established, productive spy networks in and around New York, but following his capture of Philadelphia in September 1777 General Sir William Howe had failed to organize espionage networks in the area, relying instead on his own forces to conduct reconnaissance. Because of their limitations, Howe was never able to get an accurate picture of the rebel's strength or disposition and thus failed to capitalize on his victory at Brandywine or predict the American attack at Germantown.¹²⁹

¹²⁹Rodger Kaplan, "The Hidden War: British Intelligence Operations during the American Revolution," *The William and Mary Quarterly, Third Series* 47, no.1 (January 1990): 122.

Upon Howe's departure in March of 1778 Clinton had inherited these northeastern networks and made great improvements to them. Most of the credit for these developments went to his able, hard working adjutant and intelligence chief, Major John André, who was running agents throughout the northern and middle colonies long before being appointed to the position as Clinton's adjutant. As was standard practice during the time period the commander's adjutant doubled as his chief intelligence officer, but the business of intelligence analysis still fell mostly on the commander. André had recently replaced Lieutenant Colonel Stephen Kemble, who had served as adjutant and chief intelligence officer since the beginning of the war.¹³⁰

When Clinton arrived in Philadelphia in spring 1778 to assume command, Howe informed him he had no agents and no idea of the location of Washington's army. During his subsequent withdrawal to New York in June, Clinton had only enough cavalry to cover his advance guard and, to a limited degree, his flanks. Consequently, Clinton was completely unprepared for Washington's attack at Monmouth, and immediately lost the rebel force following the inconclusive fighting. Though Clinton may have learned some important lessons on the criticality of intelligence operations from these experiences, his comprehensive documentation of all events during the war fail to confirm it.¹³¹

Upon his return to New York, however, it is clear Clinton began to be more successful in his intelligence operations. This was largely because of the long-term presence of British forces in the city, and the fact that loyalists with contacts throughout

¹³⁰John Bakeless, *Turncoats, Traitors and Heroes: Espionage in the American Revolution* (1959: repr., New York: Da Capo Press, 1998), 28.

¹³¹Kaplan, 123.

the region gravitated there. In 1779, Clinton first began to organize his intelligence operations. This move was likely prompted by the enormity of his responsibilities: military governor, peace commissioner, and military commander of every British land unit in America. This, coupled with the mass of information coming into his New York headquarters, made it almost inevitable that he would pass the daily responsibilities of collecting, recording, deciphering, and organizing his intelligence reporting to André.¹³²

Though André is best known for his involvement, and subsequent demise, in the Benedict Arnold affair, he was singularly critical to the development of a British intelligence system in America. Most important was his introduction of an “intelligence book,” an organized, chronological ledger of intelligence reports separated for the first time from other correspondence. As time went on the book recorded increasing reports directly from deserters and escaped prisoners of war, versus reports from subordinate units on the results of their debriefings. This indicated that André understood the value of formal interrogations to answer specific questions for the commander-in-chief.¹³³

André also developed his own spy network, which ranged much farther than most New York Tories, partly as a result of personal contacts established during the occupation of Philadelphia. He also developed several ciphers to encode messages over these increased distances and was able to begin soliciting specific, critical military information instead of simply receiving generally random reports.¹³⁴

¹³²Ibid.

¹³³Ibid., 123-124.

¹³⁴Ibid., 124.

Though this system represented a significant leap forward in organization and decentralization of intelligence information and functions, it was not without limitations. André haphazardly recorded reports from spies outside his network and in general, entered the information but did not necessarily evaluate, corroborate, or, most critically, analyze it. There is also no indication how André conveyed this information to Clinton. The process of synthesizing reports from various sources into a coherent picture for the commander was still not in place. Another key weakness was that intelligence was still a secondary duty for André, and for each intelligence message he received there were approximately 20 correspondences on other matters which demanded his attention.¹³⁵

Following the British defeat at Stony Point, (an attack which was predicted in André's book), Major General and former New York Governor William Tryon suggested that Clinton establish a separate intelligence division, staffed by four personnel. This department would not only collect intelligence reports, but analyze the data, advise Clinton, and coordinate their information with the New York police for counterintelligence purposes. Though Clinton did eventually augment André's activities with additional personnel, Clinton's papers contain no response to Tryon's suggestion of integrating military intelligence with civilian police operations and it may have come and gone without action.¹³⁶

The details of the Arnold affair and André's role in it are mostly inconsequential, though one detail does bear mentioning. Arnold did not commit treason for ideological, political, or moral reasons. He did it for the same reason most traitors do to this day: cash.

¹³⁵Ibid., 124,126.

¹³⁶Ibid., 126.

Soon after the Americans occupied Philadelphia, American Major Allan McLane warned General Washington of Arnold's dubious business enterprises.¹³⁷ Arnold had expensive tastes, and in an effort to impress his Tory wife, Margaret Shippen, Arnold bought her a large house in Philadelphia, something far beyond his means.¹³⁸ Subsequently, in May 1779, Arnold offered his services to the British in New York in return for what would eventually amount to about £6,315.¹³⁹ Interestingly, even today unexplained affluence is still the primary red-flag for counterintelligence agents, yet there seemed to be no question at the time about Arnold's lifestyle or finances. Arnold's status as a heroic patriot and the lack of public records of personal finance were likely the reason for the oversight, but it is still interesting to note that in today's counterintelligence environment where individuals in a position of trust are investigated thoroughly, without regard to rank or position, Arnold might well have been discovered sooner.

André was apprehended on 23 September 1780.¹⁴⁰ The loss of André as Clinton's aid de camp probably had minor implications, but his absence undoubtedly had a profound effect on intelligence operations. Men of André's vision, ability and energy in the conduct of intelligence operations were few and far between and it is in this role he would be missed the most. Major Oliver De Lancey replaced André and with his aides Captain George Beckwith and Colonel Beverly Robinson immediately increased

¹³⁷Bakeless, 288.

¹³⁸Bart McDowell, *The Revolutionary War: America's Fight for Freedom* (Washington, DC: National Geographic Society, 1967), 145.

¹³⁹*Ibid.*, 157.

¹⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 155.

emphasis on tactical and political intelligence. He also ensured his handlers rotated and shared sources and standardized codes. This meant no one manager was indispensable to the network, but degraded the personal relationships between the participants, making it more difficult to spot irregularities in reporting. He retained the chronological recording of intelligence reports in an intelligence book from André's system, which, while a vast improvement over previous systems, still lacked a method of integrated analysis. Personally, De Lancey was a capable and intelligent officer, but seemed to have lacked the naturally suspicious mind critical for detecting double and triple agents.¹⁴¹

What is most important is that André and De Lancey had created a system which could be passed along from officer to officer and from commander to commander, possibly the first of its kind. André's death was a blow to the system, but the system he created continued. There does not even seem to be a significant lag in information coming into the New York headquarters during the transition. Only by removing the commander as the primary intelligence officer and spreading the responsibilities among several people could this sort of continuity be achieved. But for all the developments of this system in New York, it had one critical weakness: it was stationary. Consequently, as the British launched their campaign in the American South, virtually none of the advancements made in New York would easily be recreated in the South.

While the decision to invade the South divided the British army in America and lead to their eventual defeat at Yorktown, the specific details of the intermittent battles from Charleston to Guilford have limited bearing on this thesis. Yorktown was not the

¹⁴¹Alexander Rose, *Washington's Spies: The Story of America's First Spy Ring* (New York: Bantam Dell, 2006), 243-244.

object of the southern campaign, but a result of its failure. Consequently, a brief narrative of the event in North and South Carolina will be provided for the sake of continuity, but an in-depth analysis of intelligence operations during seventeen months of fighting in the Carolina backcountry is best saved for another work.

The first step in the British attempt to recapture the American South was to retake Charleston, South Carolina, the most important port and the center of commerce in the southern colonies. As soon as Clinton confirmed through intelligence the French fleet, which had assisted in the failed attempt to recapture Savannah, had returned to the West Indies, he sailed for Charleston on 26 December 1779, with a mix of British, Hessian and loyalist forces totaling about 8,500, including 250 cavalry.¹⁴² Despite a difficult sea voyage, Clinton landed his force successfully and advanced on the city with little resistance.

Clinton's cavalry commander was Lieutenant Colonel Banastre Tarleton. In addition to being an excellent and aggressive tactical commander, Tarleton would prove to be one of Clinton's, and later Cornwallis,' most reliable and continuous source of intelligence throughout the southern campaign. In late April and early May Tarleton moved north to cut off the city from resupply and reinforcement and quickly defeated American forces at Monk's Corner and Lenud's ferry. Clinton subsequently began the siege of the town, and on 12 May, Major General Benjamin Lincoln surrendered the bulk

¹⁴²Banestre Tarleton, *A History of the Campaigns of 1780 and 1781 in the Southern Provinces of North America* (New York: Arno Press, 1968), 3; Henry Lumpkin, *From Savannah to Yorktown: The American Revolution in the South* (Lincoln, NE: toExcel Press, 1987), 42.

of the allied force, about 6,000 men, and the most important city in the South, to the British.¹⁴³

The remainder of the southern Continental army withdrew to the north but was pursued by Tarleton and defeated at Waxhaw Creek. After the battle American survivors claimed Tarleton's men slaughtered surrendering patriots while he watched, earning him the infamous nickname, "Bloody Ban." Among southern patriots he would quickly become one of the most hated British commanders in the South, the ramifications of which would be felt without quarter at King's Mountain. Tarleton downplayed any wrongdoing at Waxhaws in his memoir.¹⁴⁴

On 12 May 1780, the siege off Charleston ended, and the real work of pacifying the South began in earnest. On 1 June, four days before he departed for New York, Clinton announced what was essentially a full pardon for rebels for all but the most severe crimes. This decision enraged local loyalists and in an effort to placate them, Clinton revised his decree two days later. His new order was that all former rebels must take up arms against their former colleagues to prove their loyalty to the crown.¹⁴⁵ While this probably seemed like a reasonable demand at the time, Clinton failed to think through the effects this demand would have on the social battlefield. By placing former

¹⁴³Clinton to Germain, 13 May 1780, K.G. Davies, ed, *Documents of the American Revolution 1780* (Dublin, Ireland: Irish Achedemic Press Ltd., 1979), 88-89.

¹⁴⁴Tarleton, 30-31.

¹⁴⁵Steven J. Rauch, "Southern (Dis)Comfort: British Phase IV Operations in South Carolina and Georgia, May-September 1780," in Department of Military History, H300, *Roots of Today's Operational Environment* (Ft Leavenworth, KS: Government Printing Office, 2009), H301RB-48; Robert Stansbury Lambert, *South Carolina Loyalists in the American Revolution* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1987), 97-98.

rebels in this position, he actually drove up recruiting for his enemy instead of allowing the bulk of Whig fighters to simply return to their daily, and generally neutral, lives. On 5 June, Clinton sailed for New York not realizing that upon his arrival he would be faced with a new nightmare: the French contingent at Newport.¹⁴⁶

Following the fall of Charleston, Clinton turned over control of the southern campaign to his second in command, General Lord Charles Cornwallis. The British had defeated most organized patriot resistance in South Carolina, and the local militias were its only remaining defense. In response, the Continental Congress dispatched the hero of Saratoga, General Horatio Gates, to meet the new British threat but Cornwallis soundly defeated Gates at the Battle of Camden in August 1780. This reduced continental forces in the region to no more than 1,200 men.¹⁴⁷ Consequently, Cornwallis considered Charleston secure from remaining American forces in the South Carolina backcountry and determined to move his forces north.

This significant British victory lent credence to the concept of the southern strategy. The subsequent failure to enlist loyalist support and the crushing defeat of Major Patrick Ferguson's loyalist force at Kings Mountain on 7 October by an unanticipated patriot force from the Blue Ridge Mountains quickly stalled Cornwallis' momentum. Following Kings Mountain, loyalists in the area were too discouraged to support Cornwallis. The same situation existed around the British fort at Ninety-Six where they were "so totally disheartened by the defeat of Ferguson that, of the whole district, we

¹⁴⁶Don Cook, *The Long Fuse: How England Lost the American Colonies* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1995), 326.

¹⁴⁷Richard M. Ketchum, *Victory at Yorktown: The Campaign that Won the Revolution* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, LLC, 2004), 96, 98.

could with difficulty assemble 100[men].”¹⁴⁸ Clinton would later say, “Kings Mountain was the first link in a chain of evil events that followed each other in regular succession until they at last ended in the total loss of America.”¹⁴⁹

Cornwallis now found himself isolated, and retired for the winter to Winnsboro, South Carolina. While at Winnsboro in mid December, Cornwallis revealed the problematic nature of intelligence gathering in the South when he humorously complained to Lieutenant Colonel Francis Lord Rawdon, “All my accounts about [Major General] Smallwood agree with yours, but mine are: ‘I went as far as Fishing Creek, and there Billy McDaniel’s wife told me that she saw Dicky Thomson, who said he saw young Tommy Rigdom that just came from camps, etc.etc.’ No offer can prevail upon any man I can find to go & see . . . with his own eyes.”¹⁵⁰

Meanwhile, Washington replaced Gates, under allegations of cowardice after the Battle of Camden, with General Nathaniel Greene. Greene promptly split his force, allocating about 1,000 men to General Daniel Morgan who subsequently destroyed Tarleton’s force at the battle of Cowpens in January 1781. Prior to the battle Tarleton had excellent tactical intelligence on the composition and disposition of Morgan’s forces but a sudden counterattack by the Americans sent Tarleton’s force into disarray and defeat.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁸Ibid., 104-105.

¹⁴⁹James K. Swisher, *The Revolutionary War in the Southern Back Country* (Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing Company, 2008), 203.

¹⁵⁰Franklin and Mary Wickwire, *Cornwallis: The American Adventure* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1970), 243.

¹⁵¹Tarleton, 214-216.

Greene then proceeded north toward the Dan River, along the border of North Carolina and Virginia. Realizing the only way he could retain the initiative was to lighten his load, Cornwallis destroyed all equipment he considered unnecessary, including wagons, tents, medical supplies, salt, extra food, and rum. This move had a disastrous effect on the moral of his troops, and about 250 British and Hessian soldiers deserted immediately after. More critically, by failing to do this in secret, he revealed his intentions to the Americans, and Greene realized there was no need for a decisive engagement with the British. Greene took advantage of Cornwallis' isolation, and lack of supply and communications by attacking his forces when possible but disengaging when necessary, wearing him down along the way.¹⁵²

Greene reconstituted his force in Virginia and met Cornwallis at Guilford Courthouse in North Carolina. On 15 March, Cornwallis' force of about 2,000 drove Greene's 4,300 from the field but in the process Cornwallis lost about one quarter of his troops. He also found, as he had throughout the southern campaign, that his "victory" failed to inspire loyalist recruiting. Following the battle, Cornwallis reported to Clinton, "Many of the inhabitants rode into camp, shook me by the hand, said they were glad to see us and to hear that we had beat Greene, and then rode home again. I could not get 100 men in all the Regulators' country to stay with us even as militia."¹⁵³ To provide for his army Cornwallis began to pillage the countryside, further degrading loyalist support. Though a tactical victory, Cornwallis' beleaguered army was unable to pursue Greene's,

¹⁵²Jerome A. Greene, *The Guns of Independence: The Seige of Yorktown, 1781* (New York: Savas Beatie LLC, 2005), 6; Ketchum, 120.

¹⁵³Cornwallis to Clinton, 10 April 1781, Sir Henry Clinton, *The American Rebellion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1954), 508.

and withdrew to Wilmington, North Carolina to resupply and attempt to recruit loyalist support.¹⁵⁴

While at Wilmington, Cornwallis determined the source of support for Greene's army lay in Virginia and decided to move north to sever this source. Generals Benedict Arnold and William Phillips had been operating in Virginia for some time. Without Clinton's knowledge but with Lord George Germain's blessing Cornwallis moved north, arriving in late May.¹⁵⁵ Upon his arrival, Cornwallis took command of British forces in Virginia.

Marie-Joseph Paul Yves Roch Gilbert du Motier, Marquis de La Fayette had been engaging Arnold and Phillips since March, and continued to harass Cornwallis while avoiding a direct confrontation with his superior force.¹⁵⁶ In a 26 May letter to Clinton, Cornwallis summarized his situation and intentions in Virginia:

I shall now proceed to dislodge La Fayette from Richmond and . . . destroy any magazines or stores in the neighborhood. . . . From thence I purpose to move to the neck at Williamsburgh, which is represented as healthy and where some subsistence may be procured, and keep myself unengaged from operations which might interfere with your plan . . . I hope I shall then have an opportunity to receive better information than has hitherto been in my power to procure relative to a proper harbor and place of arms. At present I am inclined to think well of York . . . Wayne has not yet joined La Fayette nor can I positively learn where is

¹⁵⁴John Hairr, *Guilford Courthouse: Nathaniel Greene's Victory in Defeat March 15, 1781* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2002), 127-131.

¹⁵⁵Cornwallis to Germain, 23 April 1781, Clinton, 511; Germain to Clinton, 6 June 1781, Clinton, 527; Bryan Conrad, "Lafayette and Cornwallis in Virginia, 1781," *William and Mary Quarterly, Second Series* 14, no. 2 (April 1934): 101-102.

¹⁵⁶Conrad, 102-104.

or what is his force. Greene's cavalry are said to be coming this way but I have no certain accounts of it.¹⁵⁷

In June, Cornwallis received orders from Clinton to establish a fortified position on the Williamsburg Neck to support British naval forces, and after some deliberation, he selected York.¹⁵⁸

In reviewing the correspondence between Cornwallis and his subordinate commanders, particularly Tarleton, as well as reports to Germain, one thing is clear: intelligence was a priority. Throughout the campaign from the conquest of Charleston until his arrival in Virginia, Cornwallis was always seeking intelligence, and when he received good intelligence generally acted upon it effectively. However, three trends emerge which help to explain the limited usefulness of his intelligence operations. First, when asking for information from subordinates there are few specifics in the requests, and phrases like "take every opportunity of procuring intelligence" are common.¹⁵⁹ It is clear Cornwallis assumed his commanders understand what information he needed and felt no need to give specific guidance. Secondly, there was no reconnaissance *plan* at work. Reconnaissance was generally conducted at a local level and often simply in reaction to an event or a random piece of intelligence. Even when it was a proactive operation it appeared to be randomly executed without clear objectives. Source operations were generally chance and vetting of those sources was extremely limited. As was proven in New York, human intelligence networks take a great deal of time, care,

¹⁵⁷Charles Cornwallis, *Correspondence of Charles, First Marquis Cornwallis* (London: W. Clowes and Sons, 1859), 101.

¹⁵⁸Clinton to Cornwallis, 11 June 1781, Clinton, 529-531.

¹⁵⁹Cornwallis to Tarleton, 25 April 1780, Tarleton, 37.

and maintenance. They also require enough of a military presence to guarantee the security of the source and a relatively stationary headquarters staffed with dedicated individuals to administer, exploit, and utilize them. Because of the personal relationships, trust, and inherent risk involved in these operations they are very difficult to generate on the move, and even when successful, the results might often be too suspect to commit troops to with confidence. Lastly, there is no evidence to suggest any organization of Cornwallis' intelligence operations. There are no references to an intelligence officer, let alone staff, and Cornwallis appears to adhere to the eighteenth century model where the commander was his own intelligence officer.¹⁶⁰

Meanwhile, on 5 June 1781, as Cornwallis was terrorizing the Virginia countryside, a British patrol outside New York intercepted an American courier carrying letters from George Washington, Jean-Baptiste Donatien de Vimeur, comte de Rochambeau, commander of French land forces, and several other French officials detailing the results of a meeting between them at Weathersfield, Connecticut. The gist of the correspondence was that although they had considered a move against Cornwallis in the South they had decided without command of the sea this operation would be

¹⁶⁰Cornwallis to Tarleton, 25 April, 10 November, 4, 18, 26, 30 December 1780, Tarleton, 37, 205, 210, 242-244; Tarleton, 103,173,176,179; Cornwallis to Germain, 9 October 1780, Tarleton, 128-134; Cornwallis to Ferguson, 25 September 1780, Tarleton, 192; Ferguson to Cornwallis, October 1780, Tarleton, 193; Tarleton to Cornwallis, 4 January 1781, Tarleton, 246; Cornwallis to Tarleton, 24 February, 8, 25 May 1781, Tarleton, 257, 331, 342; Cornwallis to Germain, 17 March 1781, Tarleton, 263-265; Cornwallis to Phillips, 24 April 1781, Tarleton, 329.

impossible. Consequently, they would instead focus their efforts on an offensive against Clinton's garrison at New York.¹⁶¹

Clinton relayed the details of the interception to Germain in early June: "according to one of Mr. Washington's intercepted letters all land operations in the Chesapeake should stop." Clinton also informed Germain he would send copies of the intercepted letters to Sir George Rodney, the British naval commander in the West Indies. "He will of course watch Le Grasse and if he comes here will I hope follow him. For I must beg leave to repeat to your lordship that if the enemy remained only a few weeks superior at sea our insular and detached situation will become very critical."¹⁶²

There has been much debate over whether these correspondences were indeed intercepted or planted intentionally by George Washington. Rupert Hughes contends that the interception of the papers was conceived by Washington from the beginning.¹⁶³ A review of Washington's diary, however, mentions the correspondence but gives no indication they were intentionally betrayed to the British.¹⁶⁴ More important than their validity is the fact that Clinton believed them to be genuine until at least early September,

¹⁶¹Randolph G. Adams, "A View of Cornwallis's Surrender at Yorktown," *American Historical Review* 37, no. 1 (October 1931): 26-27; Clinton, 304.

¹⁶²Clinton to Germain, 9-12 June 1781, K.G. Davies, ed, *Documents of the American Revolution 1781* (Dublin, Ireland: Irish Academic Press Ltd., 1979), 155-156.

¹⁶³Rupert Hughes, *George Washington: The Savior of the States* (New York: William Morrow and Company), 1930, 645.

¹⁶⁴Library of Congress. The Diaries of George Washington. Vol. 3. Donald Jackson, ed.; Dorothy Twohig, assoc. ed. The Papers of George Washington, June 1781. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1978, http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/P?mgw:1.:/temp/~ammem_0XWU (accessed 16 May 2010), 377-378.

giving Washington the time he needed. Whether Clinton was always convinced of their validity or was attempting to divert blame for the defeat at Yorktown, he stated in his memoirs:

The letters we had so fortunately intercepted being written immediately after the conference held at Wethersfield between Generals Washington and Rochambeau on the operations of the approaching campaign, they had brought everything into one distinct point of view, and thereby clearly developed to us the enemy's distressed situation and prospects. It was consequently easy to discover from them that, our operations in the Chesapeake under Generals Phillips and Arnold (for Lord Cornwallis did not arrive until long after) having greatly alarmed Mr. Washington, his chief wish had been to induce the French army and navy to join him with their whole force in an attempt against our post there. But the consideration of their naval inferiority, the large body of troops at present in that quarter, and the approaching inaptitude of the time of year for military movements to the south of the Delaware were judged sufficient reasons for deferring that undertaking until a more convenient season.¹⁶⁵

Based on this information, on 8 June, Clinton wrote to Cornwallis asking him to send 2,000 troops to New York and advising him to move from Virginia to Baltimore or Delaware, and a few days later wrote to him once again asking him to embark the troops he had previously requested "beginning with the light infantry, and send them to me with all possible dispatch."¹⁶⁶

On 26 June, a long overdue packet of letters arrived from London. Among them was a letter from Germain which reinforced to Clinton the importance of the southern campaign and warned him not to pull troops from the South for the defense of New York or Clinton's latest plan, the conquest of Philadelphia:

Conceiving, therefore, so highly as I do of the importance of the southern provinces and of the vast advantages which must attend the prosecution of the war upon the present plan of extending our conquests from south to north, it was a

¹⁶⁵Clinton, 305.

¹⁶⁶Adams, 27; Clinton, 306.

great mortification to me to find by your instructions to Major-General Phillips that it appeared to be our intention that only a part of the troops he carried with him should remain in the Chesapeak and that both he and General Arnold should return to New York. . . . Your ideas . . . of the importance of recovering that province appearing to be so different than mine, I thought it proper to ask the advice of his Majesty's other servants upon the subject; and their opinion concurring entirely with mine, it has been submitted to the King and I am commanded by his Majesty to acquaint you that the recovery of the southern provinces. . . is to be considered as the chief and principal object for the employment of all the forces under your command.¹⁶⁷

Despite the emphasis Germain, and indeed the king himself, had placed on the subjugation of the South, Clinton continued to ask Cornwallis for reinforcements, and in a letter to Germain on 3 July, informed his Lordship he was indeed ordering troops from the Chesapeake for operations against the American seat of government and economic epicenter, Philadelphia.¹⁶⁸ It is curious that although Clinton seemed extremely concerned about the vulnerability of his position at New York, he was nonetheless planning a re-conquest of Philadelphia, a position he had abandoned in 1777 to ensure the defense of New York.¹⁶⁹

On 7 July, Admiral Sir George Rodney learned from an informant that François-Joseph Paul, comte de Grasse had left Martinique with 36 ships of the line, but his destination was unknown. He immediately dispatched a message to Admiral Thomas Graves stating de Grasse was bound for "America," but without further detail.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁷ Germain to Clinton, 2 May 1781, Davies, *1781*, 132.

¹⁶⁸ Clinton to Germain, 3 July 1781, *Ibid.*, 170.

¹⁶⁹ Clinton, 306-307.

¹⁷⁰ Interestingly, when defending his actions after the fact, Rodney claimed that he dispatched a message informing Graves in New York that de Grasse was eventually bound for the Chesapeake, but no such letter appears to exist. Adams, 33-34.

Unfortunately for Clinton, when the ship bearing Rodney's message arrived in New York, the Admiral had already put to sea. Instead of simply delivering it to Clinton's headquarters, the messenger went in search of Graves himself. His vessel was intercepted during the search and the captain destroyed the dispatches and beached the ship. Consequently, Graves did not receive word from Rodney until six weeks later.¹⁷¹ Either way, receipt of this information simply served to reinforce Clinton and Graves' assumption that New York was his destination.

In addition to the intercepted letters and reports on de Grasse, in late June and July Clinton received very accurate intelligence from various agents concerning the movements of the Continental army and specifically the location of George Washington. On 27 June, he was reportedly moving to Peekskill; 6 July he stayed at the house of Joseph Appleby; 8 July, Thomas Tompkins,' 14 July Edward Brown's. Rochambeau's location was likewise monitored closely. He was also receiving complete and accurate orders of battle of both armies.¹⁷²

As July gave way to August, Clinton's established agents continued to perform superbly. Agents in New Jersey relayed "Report strongly prevails in the Country of Raising Militia and laying Seige to New York." On 24 July, and agent reported, "If there is any Atempt Made you may depend on it will be made on the Island (Staten) that will be first place of the Atackt." There were also constant reports of the Americans procuring boats, and deserters and escaped prisoners corroborated most of them.¹⁷³

¹⁷¹Ketchum, 181; Adams, 34.

¹⁷²Bakeless, 335.

¹⁷³Ibid., 336.

In August another key clue to the intentions of the French and Americans was missed. On the third, Rodney received information that 30 pilots for the Delaware and Chesapeake had arrived in Cape François on Santo Domingo. Intelligence had named Cape François as a potential intermediate stop for de Grasse prior to his voyage north. Rodney was ill and preparing for a return trip to England, and seemed unconcerned by the report, but his replacement Admiral Hood immediately grasped its significance. He dispatched the sloop *Active* to inform Graves, but the ship was captured near Philadelphia and the information never got to him.¹⁷⁴

Rodney had also received intelligence from the Admiralty in London that de Grasse intended to divide his fleet in order to defend a large French convoy bound for France. He therefore assumed de Grasse would sail north with a relatively small contingent which would be incapable of conducting serious operations or offsetting British maritime domination along the American coast.¹⁷⁵ This assumption may have contributed to his lack of vigilance in monitoring de Grasse's activities.

After Rodney's departure Hood was unable to locate de Grasse so he sailed immediately for New York with fourteen warships to join forces with Graves and attempt to isolate either de Grasse or Admiral Comte de Barras before they could combine forces. Unfortunately, Hood sailed northwest along the American coastline while de Grasse sailed more slowly initially toward the Bahamas. In the process Hood passed de Grasse, and when he checked the Chesapeake, found no French vessels there.¹⁷⁶ Hood arrived in

¹⁷⁴Adams, 37.

¹⁷⁵Cook, 344.

¹⁷⁶Lumpkin, 42; Cook, 344.

New York on 28 August assuming he had beat de Grasse to his destination.¹⁷⁷ Hood's failure to actively monitor de Grasse's departure and pursue him diligently reduced his chances of tracking his movements and reporting them to Clinton to near zero.

Upon his arrival in New York, Hood discovered Graves was doing nothing to find de Grasse or to monitor and potentially block de Barras in Newport. Soon after, a messenger reported that de Barras was sailing to the south. Graves and Hood's combined fleet of nineteen ships sailed a few days later but failed to find de Barras' smaller and slower fleet.¹⁷⁸ While the odds of locating an enemy fleet on the open sea were negligible, the British had known the exact locations of both French fleets but had inexcusably failed to monitor or pursue them and track their movements.

The middle of August marked the turning point of the campaign. On the fourteenth, Rochambeau received a report from de Grasse that he was sailing for the Chesapeake, not New York, with about 3,000 troops.¹⁷⁹ Cornwallis was busy completing the evacuation of Portsmouth, Virginia, and consolidating his positions at Yorktown and Gloucester on the Williamsburg Neck. He was also continuing to advise Clinton he would send additional troops for the defense of New York as soon as the works at his present position were completed.¹⁸⁰ Though in hindsight this seems foolish, it is important to remember that up until this very point, Clinton's assumptions about New

¹⁷⁷Adams, 40-41.

¹⁷⁸Ketchum, 189.

¹⁷⁹Greene, 16.

¹⁸⁰Cornwallis to Clinton, 12 August 1781, Cornwallis, 113; Cornwallis to Clinton, 16 August 1781, Clinton, 557.

York being the allies' intended target were, indeed, correct. Upon the receipt of de Grasse's message, however, Washington and Rochambeau began to formulate a new strategy against Cornwallis' army in Virginia, a course of action Rochambeau had long advocated.

In an effort to mask his movement to the south and fix Clinton in New York, Washington began an elaborate deception plan, spreading rumors de Grasse was sailing against the city and feigning preparations for an attack near Knight's Bridge. This movement would have provided an excellent opportunity for Clinton to attack patriot forces and Clinton's inactivity confused the Americans. In reality, Clinton believed Washington had 12,000 troops at his disposal, whereas Clinton could only muster about 3,000 for an offensive. This may explain his reluctance to engage the allies.¹⁸¹

Throughout the remainder of August, Clinton continued to receive steady, though often conflicting, reporting regarding the allies' activities, but his lack of analytical capability began to show. On 16 August, scouts reported Rochambeau and Washington had received information that de Grasse had reached Newport. On 18 August, intelligence reported the American army was ready to march at a minute's notice, but indicated they would move north. Also on 18 August, Lieutenant Colonel Wurmb reported that "an American woman, who was the mistress of a French officer of distinction, had been instructed to go to Trenton." On 19 August, another scout reported "Colonel Rochambeau, Son of the Count, told his girl yesterday, that he had a horse ready for her..." On 20 August, Wurmb confirmed the Americans had crossed the Hudson, and a scout reported the American's baggage and artillery were crossing. On 23

¹⁸¹Adams, 40.

August, British headquarters received information the French were moving to Philadelphia, and the next day another source who overheard it from the French commissary general corroborated it.¹⁸²

On 21 August, Graves informed Clinton he had heard de Barras was preparing to leave Rhode Island.¹⁸³ Clinton responded that he had received information that de Grasse would be bringing only a few ships north to replace several de Barras was repairing.¹⁸⁴ Neither indicated an idea of where de Barras was headed, nor an inkling he was planning to link up with de Grasse.

It is difficult to pinpoint when Clinton began to understand that his situation had changed, but in the last days of August a letter to Cornwallis indicate Clinton was beginning to contemplate an attack in Virginia, but hedging his bet:

I cannot well ascertain Mr. Washington's real intentions by this move of his army. But it is possible he means . . . to suspend his offensive operations against this post and to take a defensive station at the old post of Morristown from whence he may detach to the southward. On this account, therefore . . . I request Your Lordship will be pleased to keep with you all the troops you have there. And I will send you such recruits . . . as can go by this sudden opportunity-which are all that I can at present spare, as this move of the enemy may be only a feint and they may return to their former position, which they certainly will do if de Grasse arrives.¹⁸⁵

The message makes clear that Clinton's intelligence system which had served him so ably was reaching its geographic limits.

¹⁸²Bakeless, 340; Adams, 38-40.

¹⁸³Graves to Clinton, 21 August 1781, Clinton, 560.

¹⁸⁴Clinton to Graves, 24 August 1781, Ibid., 561.

¹⁸⁵Clinton to Cornwallis, 27 August 1781, Ibid., 562.

About 29 August, De Lancey received a covert message from a scout named Ogden, concealed in a button which read: “The Chesapeake is the Object-all in motion-August 29th-Squib.” The same day Clinton received news from Philadelphia that loyalists had spotted ten French ships near the Chesapeake.¹⁸⁶ Two letters from Cornwallis at Yorktown confirmed the latter report a few days later. The first informed Clinton French warships had begun arriving near Yorktown and the second reported 40 French ships had entered the Chesapeake.¹⁸⁷

Meanwhile, in late August, Washington informed Lafayette of the plan to isolate Cornwallis and reiterated the criticality of preventing his movement from the peninsula. At this point Cornwallis could still easily have escaped his predicament. De Grasse had not yet disembarked troops and Washington was still several weeks away. Cornwallis also believed (correctly) Lafayette’s force was too weak to oppose him in open combat or prevent his movement.¹⁸⁸ Lafayette knew he had to do something to discourage him from taking either course.

Cornwallis’ best route of escape was to cross the James River and move north, away from de Grasse and closer to Clinton. To prevent this, Lafayette had to somehow convince Cornwallis he had sufficient boats to pursue the earl immediately should he attempt the move. Lafayette had at least one agent working as a servant for Cornwallis,

¹⁸⁶Adams, 41.

¹⁸⁷Cornwallis to Clinton, 31 August 1781, Clinton, 563; Cornwallis to Clinton, 2 September 1781, Clinton, 563.

¹⁸⁸Ketchum, 185, 204.

but needed a method to introduce disinformation to the earl.¹⁸⁹ To this end he enlisted the services of Private Charles Morgan, who, according to Lafayette, upon infiltration of the British lines was eventually taken to Cornwallis and Tarleton. There he repeated his well rehearsed report, apparently convincing both officers of Lafayette's ability to conduct operations across the river. The details of how Morgan was able to accomplish this remain unknown¹⁹⁰

At the same time, Washington was practicing some deception of his own for the benefit of British agents. As the armies moved south, they halted in New Jersey and began to construct what appeared to be a permanent encampment complete with provisions, forage, and even bake ovens, all in an attempt to reinforce the assumption that a campaign against New York was still the objective.¹⁹¹ This kept Clinton preoccupied for a few more critical days.

Despite these actions, by the beginning of September Clinton appeared convinced of a move against Cornwallis, and on 2 September he sent a message to him:

By intelligence which I have this day received, it would seem that Mr. Washington is moving with an army to the southward, with an appearance of haste, and gives out that he expects the cooperation of a considerable French armament. Your Lordship, however, may be assured that if this be the case, I shall endeavor to reinforce your command by all means within the compass of my power.¹⁹²

¹⁸⁹Hughes, 644.

¹⁹⁰Bakeless, 338, 393.

¹⁹¹Greene, 18.

¹⁹²Clinton to Cornwallis, 2 September 1781, Clinton, 170.

He also informed Cornwallis that Graves and Hood had combined forces and had left to confront the French, and assured Cornwallis, “I flatter myself Your Lordship will have little to apprehend from that of the French.”¹⁹³ Little more than six weeks before Cornwallis would surrender his army there still appears little alarm in the commander-in-chief’s tone. It is possible Clinton was more worried than he appeared and designed this letter to reassure Cornwallis, but Clinton’s actions do not yet seem to support this theory.

The naval engagement termed the Battle of the Capes off the coast of the Chesapeake was short-lived, but it set the stage for the final American victory at Yorktown. Graves’ fleet arrived at the Chesapeake on 5 September to find, to his surprise, de Grasse. De Barras had not yet arrived, but de Grasse had twenty-four ships with about 1,700 guns including his flagship *Ville de Paris*, the most powerful warship in the world. Graves had a total of nineteen ships carrying about 1,400 guns. Despite the odds, Graves elected to engage de Grasse. After two hours of mostly indecisive fighting, Graves had gotten the worst of it, and though the two fleets remained in sight of each other for several more days no further engagement took place and Graves eventually broke contact and sailed for New York.¹⁹⁴

On 9 September, while still at sea, Graves dispatched a message to Clinton telling him of the defeat. “I am sorry to inform you the enemy have so great a naval force in the Chesapeake that they are absolute masters of its navigation...Your Excellency will see the little probability of anything getting into York River but by night, and of the infinite

¹⁹³Ibid.

¹⁹⁴Antony Preston, David Lyon, and John Batchelor, *Navies of the American Revolution* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1975), 13; Greene, 21-22.

risk to any supplies sent by water.”¹⁹⁵ There is no indication anyone informed Cornwallis directly of the results of the battle or the seriousness of his current situation.

Even before receiving Graves’ message Clinton seems to have truly realized the seriousness of Cornwallis’ situation and his own relative safety. In a letter to Cornwallis on the 6 September Clinton appears intent on coming to the Earl’s aid. “I think the best way to relieve you is to join you as soon as possible with all the force that can be spared from hence, which is about 4,000 men. They are already embarked, and will proceed the instant I receive information from the Admiral that we may venture.” He also added that he expected a naval reinforcement from England commanded by Admiral Robert Digby to arrive “hourly on the coast.”¹⁹⁶ At this point, one has to wonder what Clinton planned to do with these 4,000 troops if he did manage to get them to the Chesapeake. He likely still assumed British naval domination as he had not heard from Graves and still anticipated Digby’s reinforcement. His 4,000, combined with the 8,000 already in Virginia would put him on even terms with Washington’s estimated 12,000, so he may have anticipated a fair fight. Clearly, the maritime piece was more critical than ever.

When Washington reached Head-of Elk, at the northern tip of the Chesapeake, on 6 September he found there were only sufficient boats to transport 2,000 troops by way of the Chesapeake, leaving the remainder to march through dry, unhealthy conditions to at

¹⁹⁵Graves to Clinton, 31 August 1781, Clinton, 563. Despite the fact the British loss at the Battle of the Capes sealed Cornwallis’ fate, the defeat may have a silver lining. If Graves had been able to fight his way into the Chesapeake, his 19 ships may have fallen victim to the same trap Cornwallis did, or at least sustained heavy losses. How long the British could have continued the war had Cornwallis escaped remains unknown but by preserving his fleet Graves set the stage for the eventual defeat of de Grasse at the Battle of the Saintes in 1782, an event with significant strategic implications.

¹⁹⁶Clinton to Cornwallis, 6 September 1781, Ibid., 564.

least Baltimore. Washington immediately set out to procure more, and Clinton's spies reported, "all the boats which could be procured in the Chesapeake were pressed, oyster boats and every kind of vessel capable of containing men."¹⁹⁷

On 7 September, Clinton reported the situation to Germain, and in typical Clinton style, took the opportunity to complain that he would not have been in this situation had London sent him the reinforcements he had asked for so many times.¹⁹⁸ At this point, it almost seemed Clinton was laying the groundwork for his future defense.

Throughout the remainder of September Cornwallis continued to improve his works in anticipation of immanent relief from Clinton, and allied forces consolidated their position around Williamsburg. On 8 September, Cornwallis reported to Clinton the French navy had disembarked 3,800 troops at Jamestown.¹⁹⁹ These forces, coupled with Lafayette and General Anthony Wayne's, were enough to prevent Cornwallis from escaping by land; the outcome became just a matter of time. When Washington and Rochambeau arrived on the fourteenth they brought the total allied force to almost 20,000, against Cornwallis' 7,000, effectively sealing his fate.²⁰⁰

Though likely futile, Cornwallis still seemed to consider going on the offensive if relief was not coming. He expressed this to Clinton in a letter on 16 September, but the next day added that if relief was not forthcoming Clinton must be prepared to "hear the

¹⁹⁷Bakeless, 343; Ketchum, 179.

¹⁹⁸Clinton to Germain, 7 September 1781, Clinton, 564-565.

¹⁹⁹Cornwallis to Clinton, 8 September 1781, *Ibid.*, 565.

²⁰⁰Cornwallis to Clinton, 16-17 September 1781, Clinton, 571; Lumpkin, 235.

worst.”²⁰¹ What Cornwallis did not know was that the same day during a council of war in New York, Clinton and his staff had determined Cornwallis had sufficient provisions to hold out till the end of the month and consequently they would delay any action until the fleet was more able to support the movement of a ground contingent from New York to Virginia.²⁰² During the next week, this same council met several more times and eventually determined “that above 5,000 men shall be embarked on board the King’s ships” and would start toward Virginia by the fifth of October.²⁰³

On 24 September Rear Admiral Robert Digby’s maritime “reinforcement” finally arrived, with three warships inconsequential to the situation underway at Yorktown.²⁰⁴ On 28 September the allied siege of Yorktown began, and intelligence for Clinton and Cornwallis became secondary as Clinton understood the situation and Cornwallis could see it over the walls.²⁰⁵ Though plans for a rescue continued in New York, over the next few weeks the allied siege guns crept steadily closer to Cornwallis’ works until, on 17 October 1781, Cornwallis offered terms for his surrender, and two days later his troops marched out of the town to stack their arms.

From the perspective of the land forces commander it is clear Clinton had a very accurate picture of where Washington and Rochambeau were and what their troop

²⁰¹Ibid.

²⁰²Extract of minutes of a council of war, New York, 17 September 1781, Clinton, 571-572.

²⁰³Extracts of minutes from councils of war, New York, 19, 23, and 24 September 1781, Clinton, 572-574.

²⁰⁴Ketchum, 207.

²⁰⁵Lumpkin, 236.

strength and order of battle were throughout their movement to the South. What he did not know until it was far too late was something even modern intelligence officers with a vast array of technology and human resources at their disposal often have a great deal of difficulty divining: their intent. This situation was due in no small part to Washington. Washington had a long history of practicing successful deception operations dating back to the French and Indian War.²⁰⁶ In addition, he was also mindful of operational security until his plan was too far along for Clinton to react. Though there were ample agents surrounding his encampment in New Jersey querying his men and most of his officers, it did them no good. They did not know where they were going either.²⁰⁷

From the maritime perspective, mistakes become clearer. Graves' failure to monitor and track de Barras at Newport and Hood's failure to do the same with de Grasse in the West Indies were crucial mistakes and pivotal to the outcome. Had Graves understood the situation he was sailing into in early September the Battle of the Capes could have turned out very differently. Without the siege equipment de Barras brought to the fight the allies might have spent months trying to dislodge Cornwallis and de Grasse would not likely have remained for the duration. Although there were a myriad of issues which lead to their defeat at Yorktown, when considering their intelligence operations the British failure to understand the development of the French maritime force was the most significant.

²⁰⁶Joseph R. Fischer, *A Well Executed Failure: The Sullivan Campaign against the Iroquois, July-September 1779* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press), 1997, 37.

²⁰⁷Bakeless, 341.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS

At a cursory glance it would appear the British defeat at Yorktown must have been the result of some serious failures in British intelligence. How could a large military force occupy an indefensible and isolated position and remain there despite opportunities to escape if they had a clear picture of the battlefield and the enemy situation? Yet an examination of the facts shows that in most cases, at the strategic and operational level, British intelligence developed substantially throughout the conflict and did an admirable job of informing the commanders of the *facts*. It was the analysis of those facts, coupled with political, logistical, and leadership failures that led to their defeat at Yorktown.

Strategically, the British were well aware of the burgeoning Franco-American alliance. Through their extensive and efficient spy network on the continent the British immediately recognized early covert French efforts to assist the Americans and tracked them, at least to the horizon of the eastern Atlantic. During the negotiations leading up to the alliance between France and America, Edward Bancroft and other British agents provided Whitehall with accurate, timely information on the developing situation in Paris. It was political factors and a general change in the world order of the time which prevented the British from stopping the fateful merger. Since the conclusion of the Seven Years War France was no longer forced to defend a large colonial empire and had invested heavily in its military, particularly its maritime, assets. Consequently, the detailed accounting of the events unfolding in Paris was not something the British government could effectively react to or prevent. Britain's changing position within the

scope of world politics and its waning dominance, not a lack of intelligence, was the shortfall.

Following the defeat of General Burgoyne at the Battles of Saratoga, the British government was under increasing pressure to produce a significant military victory in America or resolve the situation by negotiation. Consequently, the national strategy changed to a campaign in the American South, but the British failed to understanding the southern landscape, both socially and physically, which made comprehensive planning for the re-pacification of the region impossible. The assumption of general southern loyalty was probably correct, but seems to have been accepted at face value without taking into account the complex social dynamics at work. James Simpson's expedition to the southern colonies in 1779 did not objectively examine the general population's willingness to rise up in arms against their committed and often violent patriot neighbors, particularly without a significant and consistent British military presence to support and reinforce them. Clinton's perpetual lack of forces throughout the war made this impossible. Reports from ousted southern royal governors and expatriates in London were self serving, biased, and did not necessarily reflect the current situation in the southern colonies. Consequently, intelligence gathered on the level of the support the British could expect prior to the invasion was skewed, leading British leadership to falsely assume significant loyalist forces could be recruited with relative ease. The details of the physical landscape of the American South were equally illusive. Despite decades of continuous presence on the continent, both British and American commanders suffered from a deplorable lack of maps and comprehensive knowledge of the American terrain. This was even more pronounced in the sparsely populated southern colonies, and prior to

the invasion of Charleston in 1780 British planners had few references and had conducted very little effective reconnaissance of the South. The British conquest of Charleston was relatively easy, but as was true throughout the war, once the British ventured inland from the major coastal cities their ability to plan operations became increasingly difficult.

While in New York, Clinton, André, and DeLancy made major strides in developing an intelligence system by organizing intelligence reporting, establishing reliable source networks, and delegating intelligence responsibilities which effectively separated the commander from the mundane tasks of intelligence processing while enhancing his overall view of the battlefield. This success, however, could not be imported to the South and the mobile tactics Cornwallis employed during his southern campaign in the Carolina backcountry made the development of a reliable network of agents and other human sources extremely difficult. Consequently, his intelligence operations reverted to being reactionary, uncoordinated and commander-centric.

As Washington and Rochambeau began to move from their northern bases in the summer of 1781 Clinton's established network of agents provided him with detailed, accurate information on the strength and location of the allied forces. Washington's skillful use of deception, Clinton's perpetual concern with the security of his position in New York, and assurances he would be reinforced from mother England distracted Clinton. These factors and a general weakness in his staff's ability not to collect, but to analyze intelligence information meant they could not derive Washington's intent until it was too late to effect the situation.

More significant than the land campaign leading to the defeat at Yorktown was the maritime campaign. Given the limitations of the time it is understandable the Royal

Navy could not accurately track the activities of the French fleet on the open ocean. As a consequence it was critical to take full advantage of the opportunities when the British had the French located and could monitor their activities in port. British naval commanders squandered opportunities to track and assess French movements while their fleets were in the West Indies and Rhode Island. This failure allowed both De Grasse and De Barras to break away from British surveillance and conduct a rapid, coordinated buildup of forces in the Chesapeake, effectively isolating Cornwallis' army and making his salvation untenable. Had Graves and Hood been more proactive in monitoring and pursuing the French fleets, Clinton and Cornwallis would likely have had a better picture of the French proxy war which unfolded at Yorktown. Whether timely intelligence would have affected the outcome will remain a subject of debate.

In the final analysis, it was not a lack of intelligence, but indecisive leadership, the complete lack of unity of command, failure to commit sufficient forces, and spotty communications and logistics which were the primary reasons Cornwallis was forced to surrender his force at Yorktown. From the initiation of French assistance to the Americans early in the war as a means to punish and weaken the British government, through the final significant campaign of the war, British intelligence, particularly at the strategic and operational levels, performed as well or better than could be expected given the standards of the day. If they had one key weakness it was not in the collection of information but the analysis of it that hampered the commanders' ability to view the battlefield and understand the developing situation in a timely manner. Even had this weakness been remedied, however, it remains unlikely intelligence alone could have

overcome the other factors which hamstrung British commanders and lost the Battle of Yorktown.

ILLUSTRATION

ROUTES OF THE COMBATANTS IN 1781



Source: National Park Service, <http://www.nps.gov/boso/w-r/>, 13 April 2008.

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