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Revolutionary War Strategy

I'll rely on the text for a description of war tactics and maneuvering.

Attitudes –

The English military believed that the Americans couldn't withstand trained British troops.

They believed that the war would be "European" style – in other words, two armies facing off on a battlefield and slugging it out.

War would be short.

A few English victories would result in an end of the revolt and restoration of the colonies.

The British underestimated American resolve and the commitment to independence. American military difficulties and defeats would not undermine American political goals.

Loyalists –

In spite of the various British policies, there still were a significant number of colonists who remained loyal to the crown. The odds of victory didn't seem very good and pre-Revolutionary tension and conflict often determined which side a person chose. For example, think about the lower level merchants who severed their ties with the wealthy colonial importers in favor of dealing direct with British distributors. Many were likely to remain loyal because of those commercial ties and because of the way the wealthy American merchant had treated them. On the other hand, the wealthy merchant, isolated by the British, was likely to favor revolt so they could re-establish their commercial position in the independent nation.

John Adams estimated that $1/3^{\text{rd}}$ of the colonists were loyalists. This probably is an overestimation. Boston had about 15,000 inhabitants. When the British evacuated the city, 1000 left with them. By the end of the war, 100,000 people, or one out of thirty, had moved to Canada, the West Indies or back to England. Many, though, remained behind and faced a variety of abuse, and land and property confiscation.

Army and Navy-

Initially, the Americans depended on the militia to fight the war. Generally, the militia was made up of farm boys, apprentices and other laborers led by elected officers. They were often poorly equipped and trained and their enlistments were very short. They lived by the agricultural cycle and were inclined to defend their locality, rather than go off and fight far away.

Washington, who held a high opinion of the militia during the French and Indian War changed his tune during the Revolution. He complained that militia troops, “come in – you can not tell how. Go, you can not tell when. And act, you can not tell where. They consume your provisions, exhaust your stores, and leave you at last at a critical moment.”

Eventually, the Continental Congress created a regular army and offered a bounty of land or cash to recruit soldiers. These troops had longer terms of service and were usually young, single males, immigrants, indentured servants released to fight, and even some African –Americans, both free and slave. In exchange for their service, the slaves were freed. Perhaps 5000 eventually joined, but were relegated to menial tasks.

Though Congress authorized 18,500 troops, Washington rarely had more than 5000 under his command. Disease, equipment and desertion reduced his army significantly.

The Navy was worse off! Congress authorized 13 frigates, of these 11 were built. The English destroyed 1 in battle and captured 7. To avoid capture, 2 crews scuttled their ship. Another crew set the lone survivor on fire.

British Strategy –

The goal was to capture and hold populated urban areas. These cities were nearly always coastal so that the British navy could resupply and move troops quickly. Unfortunately for them, most colonists were rural and so holding cities failed to compel an American surrender. When the British and American fought standard “European” style battles, the British usually won.

George Washington and American Strategy –

Washington’s main goal was to avoid costly battles. He didn’t need to win; though an occasional moral victory was necessary. Otherwise, he needed to avoid being badly beaten. Washington realized that war weariness would eventually set in. After all, the British had been fighting France on and off for all of the 18th Century.

Additionally, recognition from other European countries would strengthen American claims to independence and direct support and intervention would tip the balance for the Americans.

In 1777 and 1778, the United States and France signed two treaties that provided commerce and an official alliance against England. Spain joined the alliance and other major powers declared neutrality, which effectively recognized the US as an independent nation.

In truth, Washington was not the boldest commander. Some thought him dull and boring. But that fit well with his strategy of avoiding major losses.

The alliance with France and British weariness combined to end the war at Yorktown, Virginia. Washington surrounded a British army there and an English relied fleet was forced away by the French navy. Though the British were not completely defeated, they were sick of the war.

In 1783, The Treaty of Paris ended the war, though not all the issues were resolved.

The Americans now had to implement the “new” republican government that they had fought for.

When the British left Yorktown after their defeat their military band played a popular tune called “The World Turned Upside Down.” It was appropriate!



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