

# The Guns of October

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‘At daybreak the enemy bombardment resumed, more terribly strong than ever before. They fired from all positions without let-up. Our command, which was in the hornwork, could hardly tolerate the enemy [mortar] bombs, howitzer-, and cannon-balls any longer. There was nothing to be seen but bombs and cannon-balls raining down on our entire line.’

Two days after Johann Conrad Döhla, a member of the Ansbach-Bayreuth units in the British force recorded this, that force surrendered at Yorktown, Virginia.

This key stage in the winning of independence for the Thirteen Colonies is a reminder that crucial developments in global history have often entailed conflict. It also serves thereby to underline the absence of inevitability in human events. The indolent complacency of hindsight can provide a comforting teleology, but that was a self-satisfied luxury denied to contemporaries.

The British had seen a force surrender before, at Saratoga in 1777, but, although that ended advances south into the Hudson corridor, it did not end the war. Moreover, in 1778, the British had withdrawn from Philadelphia across New Jersey, but far from being trapped in a vulnerable coastal position prefiguring Yorktown, they had been transported by sea back to New York.

Why was Yorktown different? Was it the French fleet blocking naval relief crucial, such that France ‘gave independence to the United States,’ as I heard a French scholar disclaim at a conference? Having failed successfully to help the Irish in the 1690s (as they were again to do in the 1790s) and the Scots in 1745-6, was 1781 the decisive French success in the longlasting struggle between France and Britain, a success more significant than the fate of both at Trafalgar? Was this also the triumph for the indirect blow? Joined with a Spanish fleet, the French invasion directed at Portsmouth in 1779 failed, but was it more appropriate to undermine, dismantle, the British world, as the Germans were to try by backing Irish nationalists in 1916?

The outcome in 1781 was certainly uncertain. Indeed, there was risk for the French in letting their fleet be potentially bottled-up in the defence of the Chesapeake. Better command by Thomas Graves might well have enabled him to defeat the French off the Virginia Capes on 5 September 1781. While it was true that the larger fleet, in this case the French, usually won, as with Rodney’s victory in the Battle of the Saints in the Caribbean the following April, Nelson was a keen demonstrator that equations of strength had to be handled with care.

Cornwallis had marched from North Carolina to Yorktown because he saw a Chesapeake base as permitting the British to challenge the Patriot position in Virginia. However, once he established

himself there, Cornwallis lost the initiative. He had already warned on 8 July that such a base was ‘forever liable to become a prey to a foreign enemy with a temporary superiority at sea’ and that was indeed to be the case. Yorktown had an anchorage suitable for ships of the line, a key point for amphibious operations, but it was unfortified, low-lying and commanded no ground. Moreover, lacking heavy artillery, Cornwallis was unable to remedy the situation. Beginning to fortify the position on 2 August, he wrote twenty days later:

‘My experience ... of the fatigue and difficulty of constructing works in this warm season convinced me that all the labour that the troops here will be capable of, without ruining their health, will be required at least for six weeks to put the intended works at this place in a tolerable state of defence.’

Washington had been looking in a different direction, planning to co-operate with the French to attack New York, the most important British position in the Thirteen Colonies. Crucially, he displayed the flexibility to go for the easier target. Indeed, New York, still too strong to attack in 1782, was never to be captured, the British in the end withdrawing as part of the peace settlement. Similarly, in Vietnam, with the successive French and American pull-outs while still in control of the major cities.

The French had other goals in 1781, notably in the Caribbean and Newfoundland. They decided, however, to focus on the Chesapeake, and not New York. Washington learned this on 14 August, and at once began to move his forces to co-operate. In contrast, British concerns about both New York and the Caribbean delayed a matching concentration of forces to support Cornwallis.

On 2 September, the trap was closing. Cornwallis reported the arrival of French forces in the Chesapeake, although Washington was not to arrive until later in September, much to the French annoyance. Once Washington had deployed his forces, Cornwallis was outnumbered although the besiegers were unable to take the initiative until their artillery arrived. The outgunned British provided a clear target, which hit their morale. On 11 October, Cornwallis reported that only:

‘a successful naval action can save me. The enemy made their first parallel on the night of the 6<sup>th</sup> at the distance of 600 yards, and have perfected it, and constructed places of arms and batteries, with great regularity and caution. On the evening of the 9<sup>th</sup> their batteries opened and have since continued firing, without intermission with about 40 pieces of cannon, mostly heavy, and 16 mortars ... many of our works are considerably damaged; with such works on disadvantageous ground. Against so powerful an attack we cannot hope to make a very long resistance.’

On the 12<sup>th</sup>, he added a postscript: ‘last night the enemy made their second parallel at the distance of 300 yards. We continued to lose men very fast.’

Cornwallis had been misled as to the likelihood of a French force both appearing and remaining in the Chesapeake, but the history of the last few years should have warned him that naval operations were unpredictable. The relief fleet did not sail from New York until 19 September, the day

on which Cornwallis surrendered. That did not itself mean the end of the war, but Yorktown helped sap parliamentary confidence, rather as Byng's defeat at Minorca had done in 1756, and as the Norway failure in 1940 was to do. Lord North was deserted by independent MPs and in February 1782, his Commons' majority went. George III had wanted to fight on in order to save the empire. Unwilling to accept that peace could be obtained only by accepting American independence, George thought the latter would spell the end of empire, writing accordingly to North on 21 January 1782:

'I shall never lose an opportunity of declaring that no consideration shall ever make me in the smallest degree an instrument in a measure that would annihilate the rank in which this British Empire stands among the European states, and would render my situation in this country unsuitable.'

Pressed, instead, by North to sway to the views of the Commons, George sought to create a new ministry. He wanted to retain the positions Britain still held in the Thirteen Colonies – Charleston, New York, and Savannah – and, by agreements, with individual American states, to detach the Americans from France. This policy was not viable in terms of British or American politics, so George had to turn to the Rockinghamite opposition and accept that peace would entail the abandonment of the colonies.

Yorktown had been crucial. Had the key battle of 1781 been a British naval triumph comparable to Rodney's victory at the Saints south of Guadeloupe over the French on 12 April 1782, then the trajectory of developments would have been very different, not least in terms of attitudes within France. There, as in Spain, war was being waged in order to weaken Britain, and defeat would have led to the peace that was already in consideration. Isolated, the war would have been far harder for the Patriots, as the British could have focused their forces while the Americans would have suffered from the withdrawal of French troops, supplies, and financial backing. It was the interrelationship of struggles that was so important and that made Yorktown such an emblematic battle. It was the major one of the War of Independence involving the French as well as the Americans, and naval as well as land units. A narrative of the war focused on 'national liberation' does not capture this clash of empires.

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