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Yorktown is often seen as the key American victory in the War of Independence. But was it really a French triumph more significant than Nelson's at Trafalgar?

Clash of empires

'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, his force surrendered at Yorktown, Virginia. They marched out of their ruined positions on 19 October 1781.

About 7,500 men lay down their arms after a siege in which the American-French victors had suffered fewer than 400 casualties. Yet this key stage in the Thirteen Colonies' winning their independence underlines the absence of inevitability in human events. The indolent complacency of hindsight can provide a comforting teleology, but that self-satisfied luxury was denied to contemporaries who were anxious about outcomes throughout.

The British had surrendered before, at Saratoga in 1777, but although that defeat ended British advances south from Canada into the Hudson corridor, it did not end the war. Moreover, in 1778, the British had withdrawn from Philadelphia across New Jersey, fighting off the Americans in the battle of Monmouth Court House. But far from being trapped in a vulnerable coastal position, as at Yorktown, the force was transported by sea back to New York.

Why was Yorktown different? Was the French fleet blocking British naval relief crucial, so that France "gave independence to the United States," as I heard a French scholar declaim at a conference? Having failed successfully to help the Irish in the 1690s (and again in the 1790s) and the Scots in 1745-6, was the French success more significant than Nelson's at Trafalgar?

Just a few years earlier, in 1779, a Franco-Spanish invasion directed at the major British naval base at Portsmouth failed. So did Yorktown represent the triumph of an indirect blow that sought to dismantle the British world (as the Germans were to try by backing Irish nationalists in 1916 and by stirring up disaffection in the Islamic world)?

IN 1781 THE OUTCOME WAS STILL UNCERTAIN. Indeed, there was risk for the French in the possibility of their fleet being 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 the larger fleet usually won and the odds favoured the

French (24 to 19 ships of the line), Rodney's victory in the Battle of the Saints in the Caribbean the following April and Nelson's later successes demonstrate how equations of strength do not necessarily determine the outcome.

Earlier in 1781, Lieutenant General Charles Cornwallis had marched from North Carolina to Yorktown because he believed a Chesapeake base would allow the British to challenge the American Patriot position in Virginia and facilitate co-operation with the Royal Navy. Moreover, Cornwallis had not been as successful as he anticipated in pacifying the Carolinas. The pacification of South Carolina appeared to require the subjugation of North Carolina and this, in turn, the conquest of Virginia. Had Cornwallis failed to move into Virginia, he feared his position in South Carolina would have worsened.

But once Cornwallis established himself there, he lost the initiative. He had 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." 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. He began to fortify the position on 2 August, and wrote 20 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."

GEORGE 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. But, crucially, Washington 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 withdrawing from it only as part of the peace settlement. Similarly, the French and Americans were still in control of the major cities in Vietnam even as they successively pulled out of the country in 1945-73.

The French had other goals in 1781, notably, but not only, in the Caribbean and Newfoundland, yet they decided to focus on the Chesapeake, and not New York. Washington learned this on 14 August, and began at once, with impressive focus, 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.



By 2 September, the trap was closing. Cornwallis ominously reported the arrival of French forces in the Chesapeake, although Washington was not to arrive until later in September, much to 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:

"[Only] a successful naval action can save me. The enemy made their first parallel on the night of the 6th 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 9th 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 ... against so powerful an attack we cannot hope to make a very long resistance."

On 12 September, Cornwallis added a postscript: "last night the enemy made their second parallel at the distance of 300 yards. We continued to lose men very fast."

This was to be an artillery victory for an attacking force that probably could not have won a comparable victory in the field. In contrast, the British in Savannah, a better position to defend, had held off an American-French siege in 1779.

Cornwallis had been misled as to the likelihood of a French force both appearing and remaining in the Chesapeake. Yet, 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 Cornwallis surrendered.

That did not itself mean the end of the war, but Yorktown proved a crucial psychological blow. It 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 for the Newcastle and Chamberlain ministries respectively.

The significance of the battle of the Virginia Capes repeated the British failure to defeat the French Brest fleet in the indecisive battle off Ushant in 1778, which was followed in 1779 by the Bourbon attempt to invade Britain.

As in 1588, 1692, 1759, 1805, 1916, 1943 and other occasions, there was nothing inevitable about the translation of naval superiority, whether British or that of Britain's opponents, into victo-

ry. British naval success in 1781 could have easily led to the relief of Cornwallis's army. While not bringing victory in America, it would have prevented defeat.

IN LONDON THE PRIME MINISTER, Lord North, was deserted by independent MPs and in February 1782 his Commons' majority went. There was the pressure of news of fresh losses, especially Minorca, St Kitt's and St Lucia, and no equivalent to the domestic issues of 1780, notably the Gordon Riots and a general election, to distract attention from the war.

North had repeatedly tried to retire and lacked leadership. However, the far more resolute George III felt that letting him go would encourage his opponents at home and abroad. The king's determination was based on a flawed assessment of the military and political situation in America and in 1782 he was driven by failure to consider abdication and moving to Hanover.

George 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 British power, 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 by North to sway to the views of the Commons, the king — showing his habitual determination (i.e. stubbornness) — 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.



"Amazing... for the price of our one-bedroom flat we can buy a Chateau in France. Maybe we should look into that."

Yorktown, to a degree, provoked in Britain the necessary outcome of a redrawing of the situation. Earlier secret negotiations with France in 1780 had been hampered by Britain's refusal to discuss America with a third party. In March 1781, North insisted on the need to respond to the fall in Commons support.

NORTH RESIGNED ON 20 MARCH 1782. Rockingham understood that the central geopolitical purpose for Britain was that of maintaining Anglo-American co-operation so as best to pursue common anti-Bourbon goals. The new government not only negotiated on America but also secured a shift in the conduct of business: in place of ministers presenting business for Cabinet consideration after first submitting it to the king, business was laid before the Cabinet without such approval.

Yorktown had been crucial, not least in removing the manpower necessary for another large British offensive. Had the key battle of 1781 been a British naval triumph comparable to Rodney's impressive 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 under consideration. As the French Foreign Minister, Vergennes, was anxious to direct his attention to blocking Russian expansion in Crimea, British readiness to negotiate was matched by that of France. Indeed, the war was to be followed by an attempt to improve Anglo-French relations, only for that to fall victim to the Dutch crisis of 1787.

Had France abandoned the Americans in 1780, 1781 or 1782, the war would have been far harder for them as the British could have focused their forces, while the Americans would have suffered from the withdrawal of French troops, supplies and financial backing.

The contrast with the inability of the French to win such decisive benefit from dispatching a force to assist Mysore, despite the fighting vigour of the latter and the impressive French naval performance, emphasised the significance of contingencies.

Possibly had the French commander reached India with as good a force as that sent to America, then he might have been better placed to achieve his objectives, as the Mysore leaders were better generals than their American counterparts, delivering victories notably Perumbakam (1780) and Coleroon (1782), outcomes aided by their deployment of effective light cavalry, which the Americans lacked.

It was the interrelationship of struggles that was so important, throwing strategic choices to the fore. This interrelationship made Yorktown such an emblematic battle. It was the major clash 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.

Jeremy Black's books include *To Lose an Empire, British Strategy and Foreign Policy, 1758-90* (2021).