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Module 1: Fundamentals of Strategy D14

27 April 2025

Session 1.1 / FA #1

Prompts

- Your answer should be 350-500 words in length. Additionally, you are required to respond to at least two of the Blue Team DBF answers. These responses should be a minimum of 100 words in length and are due NLT 48 hours after the initial post due date.
- **Due:** The primary post is due on NLT Monday at 2359 and the secondary posts are due NLT Wednesday at 2359.

1. Gold Team

- a. Please answer the following question: *What was more important in preventing a British victory over the rebel colonists during the early years of the war, friction/fog of war or the inability to understand the true nature of the conflict?* Utilize Clausewitz in your answer.

2. Blue Team

- a. Please answer the following question: *Was George Washington's decision to directly engage the British in the New York and New Jersey campaign of 1776 counterproductive to overall American strategic interests? What were potential other courses of action?* Utilize Clausewitz in your answer.

Gold Answer

GOLD POST:

The inability of the British to understand the true nature of the conflict was more important in preventing a British victory over rebel colonists during the early years of the war than friction or the fog of war. Clausewitz warns us that "the first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish ... the kind of war on which they are embarking" (Clausewitz, *On War*, 88). British leadership, like Lord George Germain and the Howe brothers, did not comprehend the nature of the war. Instead, they saw it as an easily quashed limited rebellion, without realizing its political and ideological factors.

Clausewitz defined friction as "the force that makes the apparently easy so difficult" (Clausewitz, *On War*, 121), which certainly existed along with the fog of war. British operations suffered from logistical problems, difficult terrain, and the nature of the colonies being widely scattered. However, these problems are not sufficient to explain their strategic failures. Instead, the problem lay in the concept that the British underestimated the resolve and political rationale of the American cause. As Professor Meeks also argued in his lecture, the British commanders conducted the conflict as if it were a conventional military campaign instead of understanding it as a broader war for political legitimacy and existence.

John Ferling's *Whirlwind* supports such a perspective, noting that American political unity and ideological fervor enabled the Continental forces to sustain early defeats (Ferling, *Whirlwind*, 155). Likewise, O'Shaughnessy's *The Men Who Lost America* describes how the British leaders switched from conciliation to repression and back again without any obvious political strategy (O'Shaughnessy, *Men Who Lost America*, 100). This confusion directly corresponded to Clausewitz's warning that a failure to ensure alignment between political ends and military ways and means leads to disaster.

Therefore, although the friction and fog of war enhanced British problems, the failure to properly understand and adjust to the war's nature was critical. The Americans did not have to continuously win battles. They needed only to avoid a decisive defeat and to let British political will become diminished. The British leadership's inability to grasp this dynamic, and the results of its strategic incoherence, eventually provided opportunities that American forces, for all their deficiencies, could exploit.

In conclusion, Clausewitz was correct that wars are to be understood across their political spectrum, and the British experience in the early stages of the American Revolution proves that point. Without a sophisticated understanding of the nature of the struggle, the greatest military can flounder and eventually lose the war.

Blue Response #1

Very thoughtful take, and I appreciated your use of Clausewitz to reframe Washington's decision as strategically flawed regardless of the way it played out in the end. Now, that's not to say there is not also a Clausewitzian reason why Washington took the gamble. Clausewitz speaks of war as

a continuation of politics by other means, and it did have real symbolic and political significance to hold New York in the early days of that war. It helped sustain the legitimacy and support for the cause even if the odds of military victory were terrible. You are right that it almost backfired, but the flight that ensued paved the way for Trenton and Princeton, where Washington flipped the story. Not a great strategy, perhaps, but not an insignificant strategic one either. Washington may have taken a chance, but he never lost sight of the political aim.

Blue Response #2

That's a sharp analysis, and I like the way you balanced Washington's early misfires with his longer-term strategic learning. Your references to Clausewitz regarding the army as a center of gravity and the role of chance are right on target. Washington's choice to defend New York does indeed seem a somewhat desperate gamble that violated all sorts of fundamental principles, at least given how much weaker his famously divided forces were compared to the enemy forces at the time. But as you mentioned, the remarkable thing is how quickly he adapted. Trenton and Princeton weren't just morale victories, but course corrections. I also appreciated your note about Lee's plan, because it poses the "what if" question without sliding into hindsight bias.