

Jeffrey Thomas

Professor Claude Berube

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Why was Great Britain not able to translate its naval strength into decisive strategic effects during the War for American Independence?

Great Britain was not able to translate its naval strength into decisive strategic effects during the War for American Independence despite commanding the most powerful navy in the world. This failure demonstrates the inadequacy of military force that is detached from clear political objectives, joint operations, and an evolving appreciation of the conflict's unique nature. Control of the sea certainly gave Britain operational flexibility and logistical reach, but it did not equate to control of hearts, minds, and geography on land. To comprehend how this great sea power did not lead to strategic success, we can look to the classic strategic thought of Clausewitz, Sun Tzu, Mahan, and Corbett, each of whom provides us with the lens through which to view British failure.

Carl von Clausewitz's principle that "war is not merely an act of policy but a true political instrument, a continuation of political intercourse carried on with other means" (Clausewitz, *On War*, 87) brings us to the first British failure: the strategy between military operations and political ends. British forces had tactical success and dominated the sea, but they underestimated

the politics of the American rebellion. The British never precisely defined what they were aiming at, whether the purpose was reconciliation, punishment, or to restore full authority. This ambiguity was passed down to field commanders, who typically veered between brutal repression and conciliatory overtures. Technically competent operations were strategically adrift because everyone had their own agenda. Clausewitz emphasized that “the first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgment” is to determine “the kind of war on which they are embarking,” warning against efforts to wage a war without a clear understanding of its nature or aim (Clausewitz, *On War*, 88).

Alfred Thayer Mahan, who at first glance would appear to be an advocate of the British cause. In *The Influence of Sea Power upon History*, Mahan emphasizes the decisive role of navies in shaping global power. “The necessity of a navy, in the restricted sense of the word, springs, therefore, from the existence of a peaceful shipping, and disappears with it” (Mahan, *Influence of Sea Power*, Chapter 14). While navies may be created to protect commerce in peacetime, Mahan makes clear that their ultimate strategic purpose emerges in times of war. No one rivalled Britain’s Royal Navy: it guarded the transatlantic supply lines, maintained blockades, and controlled ports. However, as Mahan himself also pointed out, naval power must be connected to project and sustain operations ashore. In the American instance, British forces often landed and temporarily occupied territory, but could not make permanent gains. The war at sea proved ineffective in shaping events on shore as the British could not translate tactical victories into permanent political control. This had the effect of turning Britain’s maritime power into a hammer in search of the nail that kept disappearing. The Royal Navy’s perceived dominance was cloaked in a logistical and administrative house of cards. As Taylor notes, “In 1775, the navy employed only 18,000 sailors: too few to sustain the global reach of the empire... ‘the ships

decaying and unfit for service, the storehouses empty, and a general despondency running through the whole naval department”” (Taylor, *American Revolutions*, 282). The naval machine was large, but it was riddled with strategic emptiness and overreach that resulted in an inability to mass effects where they were most needed.

Julian Corbett provides a critical counter to Mahan. In *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*, Corbett cautioned that sea power alone cannot win a war. “It is almost impossible that a war can be decided by naval action alone” (Corbett, *Some Principles*, 7). He stressed the coordination of sea and land forces, and the necessity to employ naval power to facilitate and protect the ultimate success of decisive land campaigns. The British southern campaign demonstrates what can go wrong when this level of integration is not achieved. Joint operations were rarely aligned. While Cornwallis marched inland out of reach of naval support and overextended his supply lines, he was soon cut off at Yorktown. The Royal Navy was taken by surprise by French naval action and could not get to him in time. The inability to exploit the joint potential of land and naval power left Britain’s global reach at the strategic level inoperable.

This failure is underscored by Professor Andrew Zwillling’s observation that British and French naval competition shaped the broader framework of global operations, yet only the French effectively projected that maritime power in support of allied land campaigns (Zwillling, *Global War Lecture*). The French naval triumph at The Battle of the Chesapeake, which sealed Cornwallis’s fate at Yorktown, provided an example of the principle of sea power in support of the larger joint goal. British commanders, in contrast, understood naval control as an end in itself, not as a means to policy ends. This was a grave strategic mistake.

Centuries before any of this, Sun Tzu, saw the military virtue of being flexible and knowledgeable in warfare. “If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the

result of a hundred battles” (Sun Tzu, *Art of War*, 49). British officers were never able to grasp the revolutionary nature of the American War. They believed, as Mahan himself was forced to admit, that sea power and garrisons could coerce local populations into loyalty. But, as much as it was a colonial rebellion, it was more of a political and ideological movement woven into the fabric of the society. British policies of coercion and seizure of territory misfired, particularly in the South, where scorched-earth brutality isolated fence-sitters and stoked Patriot fervor. Carpenter characterizes this misjudgment as “scriptwriting,” assuming that the campaign would play out as planned, rather than adapting to the evolving situation on the ground (Carpenter, *British Strategic Failure*, 3-4).

American and French alliance did not miss the importance of this adaptability. British commanders frequently behaved as if the oceanic chessboard remained static, assuming the tempo of operations to be determined by control of the seas. Yet French naval strategy was flexible and dynamic. As Carpenter explains, “The years 1778-81 are the only period in the long history of Anglo-French naval rivalry that the French Navy could stand toe to toe with the British Royal Navy tactically and operationally” (Carpenter, *British Strategic Failure*, 62). This parity positioned the French to deal the decisive blow at the Battle of the Chesapeake when they coordinated their movements with American troops to trap Cornwallis at Yorktown. By comparison British sea power was immensely powerful, but detached from specific political aims and not properly embodied in the land operations. That gap between tactical capability and strategic coordination proved deadly to Britain’s effort.

Overreach worsened those defects. Cornwallis was well inland hundreds of miles from resupply by the navy, vulnerable in a difficult landscape, with untrustworthy Loyalist support, and no obvious route of escape. As Carpenter writes, “A valid criticism of Cornwallis throughout the

campaign is his seeming lack of any appreciation for the problem of logistical support once he moved inland and abandoned his seaborne connection” (Carpenter, *British Strategic Failure*, 36). Even the Royal Navy’s control of the coast, could not ease the breakdown of the supply and communication necessary to sustain land operations. The British would seize the land only to have to retreat as local militias and Continentals, who knew the terrain and had local support, returned to harass them.

Additionally, the issue was not a matter of geography. Mackesy’s indictment of British strategy emphasizes the bureaucratic chasms that were beginning to open up inside London’s war machine. “The causes of the British failure were political and strategic; they were failures of a negative kind through most of the war, since except on rare occasions the British held the strategic initiative, yet failed to win a decision; failures of a positive kind when they suffered their two great strategic disasters at Saratoga and Yorktown” (Mackesy, *British Strategy*, 88). This diagnosis emphasizes that Britain was not starved of means but that it failed to use what it had in a coherent way. Although the Royal Navy was supreme at sea, that supremacy was not exploited in a manner that produced a decisive effect. British leaders also had no clear doctrine on how to integrate maritime supremacy with land campaigns, isolating sea control as a capability in itself instead of as a means to produce political effects ashore.

This division was felt most acutely at Yorktown. Even though there was evidence of French cooperation with US forces, the British naval command did not dispute the Chesapeake in a timely manner. The resulting encirclement was more an expression of British disarray than of French mastery. Clausewitz’s idea of “friction,” the idea that routine and simple endeavors can become difficult in war, was on full display. “Countless minor incidents - the kind you can never really foresee - combine to lower the general level of performance” (Clausewitz, *On War*, 119).

The British friction was mostly self-imposed, with ill-defined goals, divided leadership, and an overconfidence in sea power without coordinated land support.

And yet, the Royal Navy remained supreme. The paradox, in other words, is not that Britain lacked the capability; it's that it failed to understand the nature of the war it was fighting.

Maritime power cannot create political legitimacy where it does not exist. Additionally, it cannot compensate for misunderstandings of local dynamics, combined joint operations, or adapting to the nature of irregular resistance. Naval dominance, in the end, became a floating fortress unattached to the political coast it was meant to protect.

In summary, the British failure to turn naval strength to strategic advantage in the War for American Independence does not stem from the size and power of their navy but from the inability to apply it in terms of strategic principles. Clausewitz, Sun Tzu, Mahan, and Corbett offer a framework with which to view these failures, however conceived, as a lack of harmony between the political objective and military capability, a lack of regard for terrain and the human element, the misemployment of coordinated joint forces, or the fallacy of sea power as all-powerful. Sea power is a facilitator, not a panacea. Without strategic clarity and operational coherence, even the most potent fleet can become adrift.