

How accurate is it to say that it was French intervention in the War of American Independence that determined the British defeat by 1783?

Whilst French intervention arguably was the most significant turning point in the American War of Independence, and thereafter British victory no longer seemed plausible, the underpinning factor that led for the French to intervene in the first place was British weakness. In addition to that, many have argued that American strengths played an influential factor in bringing about British defeat by 1783, yet, as I shall argue in this essay, that too was underpinned by British weaknesses which enabled American rebels' strengths to materialise in the first place. Therefore, whilst it is accurate to state that French intervention determined British defeat by 1783 in as much as British victory no longer seemed possible, arguably Britain was doomed from the start to lose this war due to fundamental weaknesses that they were unable to rectify. By the time the French intervened, any hopes for an alternative outcome were gone.

Firstly, French intervention, later followed by the Spanish, was the most significant turning point in the War of American Independence that solidified what became perceived as the inevitable: British military defeat. However, that was fundamentally underpinned by British weaknesses. France, still resentful from their defeat during the seven years' war which caused the loss of significant amounts of territory, known as Nouvelle France, in north America, were eager to intervene to potentially retake that territory as well as restoring their honour. Benjamin Franklin, a capable genius, understood this when he went on a diplomatic mission to France in 1776 to convince the French to help the American rebels. After the Treaty of Alliance in 1778 was signed, France entered the conflict, thereby turning what was previously perceived as a rebellion and thereby a domestic British affair into an international war. This was a very significant turning point in that Britain was now filled with other geopolitical worries that overarched their concern for the 13 colonies. The retention of much more profitable sugar colonies in the West Indies, in addition to strategic naval ports such as Gibraltar and lucrative colonies in India, were deemed much more important places to defend. As a result, British military forces in the 13 colonies significantly reduced, from having 65% of Britain troops posted there to a mere 20%, as they were posted elsewhere to protect Britain's colonies. Finally, to prevent the threat of a domestic invasion of the mother country from becoming reality, a large portion of the navy and the army stayed posted in the British isles. Therefore, in this regard French intervention was quite significant in that Britain no longer cared for the loss of the 13 colonies as long as more strategic bases and colonies were retained. Lastly, the French navy blockaded Chesapeake Bay, a prime example in which the Royal navy, dispersed worldwide due to the international character that this war had taken, was no longer able to concentrate its forces in North America, making military victory no longer possible by 1783. However, French intervention was underpinned by British weaknesses, for what convinced the French to intervene in the first place was British defeat at the Battle of Saratoga, in which, outnumbered and outmanœuvred, General Burgoyne was forced to surrender. This defeat made what was otherwise perceived as an omnipotent British army appear vulnerable, convincing France to enter the War of Independence as they saw that hurting Britain was possible.

Having established that French intervention was significant yet in itself was caused fundamentally by British weaknesses, we can now explore American strengths, another factor that has been argued to have been the most important factor in bringing about British defeat by 1783. Their strengths can be summarised as geography, ideology and leadership.

The American rebels knew the terrain inside out, meaning that they were able to conduct guerrilla warfare against the British rather than clashing in the open, which was what the British were hoping were going to happen, for in that regard they had an advantage. However, guerrilla warfare tactics, with frequent ambush, meant that the British were unable to defeat rebel militias. The 13 colonies covered an estimate of 1 million square miles, further showing how spread out the area was. Therefore, American rebels had a geographic advantage over their British adversaries. Secondly, ideologically-speaking recruits fought for the "glorious cause" and deeply believed in protecting their views and way of life, which we may describe as obstreperous. The army was in itself a reflection of that egalitarian and meritocratic society, which further incentivised American colonists to join. In contrast to the British, whose army was demotivated and knew not for what it fought for except from crushing a people yearning for liberty, the Americans were ideologically-driven, and in a war, the battle of ideas can be argued to be equally as important as military actions. Furthermore, capable and charismatic leadership was one of the most important strengths of the Americans. George Washington, a tall, physically impressive, aggressive, six foot six ginger with wooden teeth, transformed an untrained yet eager militia into a professional, capable fighting force rebranded as the continental army. Throughout the war, starting from the Battle of Lexington in 1775 to the Peace of Paris in 1783, Washington motivated his men in times such as the Battle of Trenton, through the harsh, dire winters, to keep face and persist. Therefore, it could be argued that it was American strengths that played a more significant factor in bringing about British military defeat, yet that assumption holds little ground. For as aforementioned had the French never intervened, the likelihood of British victory would still have existed, the conflict would have persisted and the British would not have admitted mental defeat, in which they were no longer willing to fight because of more pressing geopolitical priorities. Most importantly, American strengths were underpinned by British weaknesses, for fundamentally it was British weaknesses that enabled American strengths to materialise. Had the British not been so ideologically weak, had they not pursued outdated, European-centred military tactics, and had they employed a fighting force that presented themselves as the enemies of all Americans, the Americans would never have been able to exploit their geographic strengths, their leadership would not have been so successful and ideologically-speaking they would have found it more difficult to present themselves as the side that was more virtuous and fighting for that "glorious cause."

These British weaknesses will now be explored to further elucidate the aforementioned statements. Logistics, leadership and recruitment were the three core aspects that constituted British weaknesses during the American War of Independence. Poor senior military leadership, slow communication and outdated, anachronistic military tactics that did not apply to the New World, were all key in bringing about British defeat, which itself caused American strengths to materialise and, after Saratoga, convinced the French to intervene. In terms of logistics, it took 8-10 weeks for messages to be communicated between London and the 13 colonies, which meant that any top-down, executive orders were bound to be inapplicable by the time they were received because the military situation would have drastically changed in the space of two months. Furthermore, poor senior military leadership meant that the British were unable to bring about significant military victories that would have eradicated the rebel threat. As previously stated, the British relied on old-fashioned, European-centred military tactics, such as the take-and-hold tactic. Instead of conducting blockades, they pressed their armies onwards to take hold of towns and supplies. Whilst effective in Europe, this was a strategic mistake in North America. The British army went into the hinterland, yet forces were depleted as they manned the ports to keep possession of them. Assumptions from senior military leaders, such as the fact that

there was a hypothetical loyalist base that would enthusiastically join the British army, proved out to be wrong, for that loyalist base was non-existent. A prime example of British weakness can be seen in the Battle of Saratoga, in which the troops of General Burgoyne were crushed by Washington's continental army. Recruitment as another fundamental British weakness can be linked to the reasons for Burgoyne's defeat. British soldiers were a lot less ideologically-driven, for most of them were conscripts that were unwilling to fight. These conscripts included prisoners that took this as an opportunity to carry out rape, plunder and murder. Lastly, the British employed Iroquois Indians, sworn enemies of colonists, which further solidified the image of the British army as the enemy and reinforced the image of Washington's army as the virtuous one, causing further men to willingly join the rebel militias. The news of the murder by Native Americans of a female colonist was widely dispersed by means of the Committee of Correspondence, leading to a great turnout of men in the militias, thereby outnumbering Burgoyne's army by a ratio of 2:1. If the Native Americans were sided with the British, then the British were enemies. Therefore, the nature of the British army, which could have been altered, was a significant cause for military defeat, and made it possible for American strengths to materialise, as more colonists entered Washington's army, convinced that the British were composed of enemies that were attacking them. Secondly, outdated military tactics increased the likelihood of American victories, thereby creating an argument that British military weaknesses outshone American successes. It was due to British weakness that American strengths, as detailed above, was allowed to materialise. Those strengths caused British defeat at the Battle of Saratoga, which in turn convinced the French to intervene, thereby changing the course of the war and determining British defeat by 1783.

To conclude, whilst it is accurate to say that French intervention in the War of Independence determined British defeat by 1783, that was ultimately underpinned by British weaknesses. This equally applies to American rebel strengths, which materialised largely thanks to the British enabling them to due to their logistical, leadership and recruitment weaknesses. French intervention transformed the War of Independence from a domestic rebellion into an international conflict, convincing the British that it was worth losing the 13 colonies if other territories, such as the sugar plantations in the West Indies, Gibraltar and India, were retained. This is without stating the most important concern, pulling troops out and reposting them back to Britain to prevent a domestic invasion of the mother country. This intervention was underpinned by British weaknesses, because thanks to British defeat at the Battle of Saratoga, France thought that the chance of British defeat was high and their intervention could make that happen. Equally, American strengths only materialised because the British were unable to rectify their mistakes. Lastly, due to those weaknesses, it is to be argued that Britain was doomed to fail from the start, therefore whilst French intervention was the most significant turning point in the war, from the start the likelihood of British defeat by 1783 was predetermined by one, fundamental cause: British weakness.

Paul Ostroverhy
ostroverhypaul@gmail.com
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Stowe School

