

The Revolutionary War: Supply Chain Issues Defeat the British!

What Caused the British to Lose the War?

Most people in the United States think of the Revolutionary War in very romantic terms: the good, stout-hearted people of the colonies were fed up with an oppressive British regime and rose up to break free of the tyranny and declare their independence. The true history of that period was of course much less clear. In fact, in examining the chronology and events around the Revolutionary War, it is fortunate that the British did not squash the rebellion to maintain their rule. Fascinatingly, some of the decisive military highlights during this pivotal historical time were heavily influenced by the ability to manage demand and supply for the wartime operations.

In short, one reason the British lost the war was due to poor supply chain management.

Poor Supply Forces the Evacuation of Boston

In 1775, the situation in many of the American colonies was tense, and Massachusetts was the center of activity. The aftermath of the Boston Tea Party had resulted in increasing measures of British control, including the Coercive Acts and a strong military presence in Boston. In the April battles of Lexington and Concord, hostility turned to warfare as the local militia started to clash with colonists.



The Battle at Concord Bridge, Massachusetts

Throughout the rest of that year, the smaller American forces harassed the British in and around Boston. Bunker Hill, famous for its battle, was a vantage point from which the Americans fired upon the city as well as the passing ships. With such an unfriendly environment, the British relied on supplies coming from across the Atlantic Ocean. This extended supply chain was unreliable and often supplies were delayed for weeks or even lost. In March, 1776, after almost one year of these attacks, the British under General Thomas Gage decided to evacuate the city. He wrote, “It appears to me most necessary ... to be in some province where you can be secured, and from whence to draw supplies...”

Because of the supply uncertainty, the British had to choose a new base of operations. Although they would have preferred to make New York their new center, they ultimately chose Halifax, Nova Scotia to ensure proper supply.

The Americans had gained a huge moral victory, and with that momentum the Declaration of Independence was created in July of that year. British supply issues gave the Americans inspiration to continue the revolution.

The British Turn the Tide in New York

Unfortunately for the Americans, the tide soon shifted in the second half of 1776. General William Howe led a large force of British and mercenary soldiers through Staten Island, Long Island, and then captured New York City from the weaker forces of General Washington. Howe continued to chase Washington’s forces north to White Plains, then

back south into Fort Lee, New Jersey and further points south. By the winter of that year, the British were in control, returning to New York while the American forces made shelter. The only bright spot was a victory in retaking Trenton, as Washington's forces crossed the Delaware River for a surprise attack.

The year 1777 looked to be a promising year for the British. General John Burgoyne marshaled a large military force in Canada and prepared to drive southward to Albany, New York. With supporting forces from Howe coming from New York City to meet him, the New England colonies would be separated from their southern counterparts, drawing a line across the country from which to ultimately crush the rebellion.

The British had an opportunity to pursue their advantage and end the war decisively. Their resources gave them a distinct competitive advantage.

Miscommunication, Poor Planning, and a Botched Campaign



As Burgoyne and an army of 10,000 men moved south in June 1777, they quickly realized how ill prepared they were for the journey. Artillery and other baggage did not have the proper logistics to support the transit. The unexpected heat sapped the strength of the forces and supplies again became an issue. The colonists destroyed crops and stores along the British path so that they could not replenish themselves along the way. The British assumption of local supply was made false and no backup plan existed.

Perhaps even more detrimental to Burgoyne's journey was the lack of support from other factions. Howe was supposed to meet Burgoyne in Albany, providing reinforcements and supplies. Instead, he decided to pursue a campaign southward (no doubt enraged by Washington's raiding efforts), and ultimately took Philadelphia. Not only did Howe not support the original plan to meet in Albany, but he also did not communicate this change of plans to Burgoyne.



General John Burgoyne



British Offensive Plan, 1777

Lack of an integrated plan for the British groups proved to be disastrous. Burgoyne cautiously tried to press on without supplies and support. With the delays, the American forces were able to regroup and grow their numbers throughout the summer. In September and October of 1777, battles turned in the favor of the Americans.

Finally, Burgoyne was forced into surrender in Saratoga on October 7. Poor planning and communication were his downfall.

The Turning Point in the War, and What Came After

The effect of Burgoyne's failed campaign had a large effect on the ultimate results of the war. Momentum had changed back to the American side, which in turn grew confidence and produced further enlistments. Also, the victory at Saratoga had a large influence on an outside party—France. Being a long time rival of Britain, France very much wanted the revolution to succeed. Still, they had stayed out of the conflict, waiting to see if the Americans could mount a serious defense. With the surrender at Saratoga, the British showed their inability to manage the situation. The French decided to enter the war and formally signed an alliance with the United States in February, 1778.

The rest of the war was a series of battles across the various colonies. By not separating and containing the colonies, the British were forced to fight multiple smaller militias in different locations. With supplies and both naval and ground support from the French, the Americans continued to fight and win battles. General Cornwallis surrendered to the Americans at Yorktown in October, 1781. In 1782, British forces had been forced to evacuate their key strongholds.



Washington at Yorktown

The lean, agile American forces were effective against the traditional British army. By 1783, the war was over.

Reflections on the War from a Supply Chain Perspective

Clearly, the British lost their early advantage in the war. Uncertain supply with long lead times forced them out of Boston, the first visible American win. Poor planning and insufficient logistics slowed the campaign of Burgoyne, allowing the Americans time to regroup. Negligent communication and misaligned plans between Burgoyne and Howe ultimately split the British effectiveness. The ultimate surrender at Saratoga was the first true defeat of the British army, bolstering the American resolve and opening the door for France to become involved.

Did bad supply chain management lose the war for the British? Of course, there were many combined factors that led to the eventual independence of the United States. However, poor supply chain management had a major effect on the outcome of the war.

Key element	Impact	Supply chain practice
Long lead times, uncertain supply from England	British forced out of Boston: American confidence grows and Declaration of Independence signed	Supply strategy, reliability and risk mitigation
Misaligned plans in the 1777 campaign	Surrender at Saratoga: confidence in Americans drives enlistment and entry of France	Integrated business planning (S&OP)
Conventional British fighting style vs. American forces	Continued smaller American victories sap British forces, led to ultimate surrender	Supply chain adaptation and lean mentality

Reference Materials and Cited Work

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