Why Did the British Lose the American Revolution?

So, how exactly did the British lose the American Revolution? After all, the British army was the best trained, best equipped, and most professional army in the world. The Royal Navy was, at the time of the American Revolution, the undisputed ruler of the High Seas. Though economically strained by debt from the Seven Years War and soon by the expanding nature of the American Revolution, the empire's infrastructure was still stable and relatively sound. Not only that, the British Empire still retained the loyalty of at least a third, perhaps more, of the colonists living in the thirteen North American colonies which revolted.

By contrast, the American colonists were in economic and political disarray. The states were not effectively unified. The national government was largely impotent. Continental currency was practically worthless. The American army was poorly supplied, insufficiently trained (initially), and inconsistently paid.

Virtually all the advantages went to the British, and yet the American colonies won their independence. Why?

Why Did the British Lose the American Revolution?

How did the British lose the American Revolution? How did the strongest empire in the world lose thirteen fledgling colonies in North America?

The reasons Britain lost the American Revolution begin with an understanding of what the British had to accomplish militarily in order to win. King George III and Parliament bulled their way into a military confrontation with the colonies, when a political solution would've been far less costly and much more effective in retaining the loyalty of most American colonists.

Had the British government listened to some of its own members, like Edmund Burke, who counseled respect and conciliation toward "our English brethren in the Colonies," the war could have been avoided. This was not to be the case, however, as British Tories carried the day.

Once war broke out, the British had to suppress the American insurrection and restore their preeminence in North America. To accomplish this, they had to crush any American army in the field and win the loyalty or at least compliance (however reluctant or grudging) of a majority of the American colonists.

The British faced three significant obstacles to achieving those objectives:

1) Their army simply wasn’t large enough to occupy enough square miles of territory in North America.

2) Distance. The American rebels had the "Home Field" advantage, while Britain had to maintain long supply lines back to the Mother Country.
3) The American Spirit. So long as the colonists were determined to resist, the British would have a difficult time retaining all the thirteen colonies. They had to break the American will to fight or at least disrupt America's unity to make it too painful for the colonists to wage a sustained rebellion.

**How the British Could Have Won the American Revolution**

Even though waging war in the first place was not the best choice for the British, the British did have several opportunities to defeat the Americans:

1. **New York and New Jersey Campaign - 1776**

The New York and New Jersey campaign of 1776 afforded Britain its first opportunity to score a decisive blow against the American colonies.

By December 1776, the British had decimated the American Continental Army, humiliating and chasing them out of New York and into New Jersey. Had it not been for Howe pulling his punches a bit in New York and some freak weather conditions (dare we say "miraculous"?), the American army could've been destroyed in Long Island.

Even with a remnant of Washington's army escaping New York, however, the situation still looked bleak. Washington's army was on the run and literally disintegrating. Thanks to casualties, surrender, desertions, and expiring enlistments, the American army was down to a shadow of its former self in December 1776 and faced extinction.

Had General Washington not attacked the Hessians at Trenton on December 26, 1776 (and won), it's likely the American Revolution would've faded into oblivion. The United States of America would've been a short-lived dream. Washington did attack the Hessians, however, and followed up that victory with another at Princeton. Then, in addition to talking most of his troops into extending their enlistments, Washington positioned his army for winter quarters at Morristown, New Jersey -- in a way that forced the British to withdraw from New Jersey and retreat back to New York.

While no one should forget the sacrifice and bravery of the Continental Army, it is not an exaggeration to say that the leadership of General George Washington saved the American Revolution.

2. **Saratoga and Philadelphia - 1777**

The next opportunity for Britain to end the American War for Independence was suggested by British General John Burgoyne. Burgoyne's plan was to invade America from Canada and split the colonies in half - isolating New England from the Middle and Southern colonies.

Had Burgoyne and General William Howe coordinated their efforts, the invasion could have been as devastating to the American colonies as General William T. Sherman's "March to the Sea" was to the South in the American Civil War.
Due to poor communication and the enormous egos of the British commanders, it was not to be! General Howe launched an attack on the American capital of Philadelphia, leaving Burgoyne to fend for himself against the northern American army, commanded by Horatio Gates.

Burgoyne’s advance bogged down and was decisively repelled at Saratoga. His surrender to Gates at Saratoga was the turning point of the American Revolution.

Howe’s attack on Philadelphia was militarily successful, but the capture of Philadelphia did little to stop America’s resolve to continue the fight, especially given what had happened at Saratoga.

Eventually, the British army withdrew from Philadelphia and fought General Washington's better trained army in its march back to New York. The battle was a draw, and both sides knew the war would go on for much longer.

3. The Southern Front - 1778-1781

The British had perhaps their best chance at winning the American Revolution by rolling up the American colonies from the South. Things looked good for them, after capturing Savannah, Georgia (1778), Charleston, South Carolina (1780), and the utter destruction of the southern Continental Army at Waxhaws (1780) and Camden (1780).

Unfortunately for the British, the American Congress allowed General Washington to appoint the next American leader for the South. Washington's choice was Nathanael Greene, a remarkable American general who wore the British down in a series of battles, which set the stage for Yorktown (1781).

Had the British been able to crush Greene, Yorktown never would've happened and the British probably would've swept the entire South.

4. Benedict Arnold's Treachery

The last best chance for Britain to win the war was Benedict Arnold. Had Arnold's plan succeeded, he would've handed Britain the keys to West Point. This would have allowed the British to take control of the Hudson River, drive the Americans fully out of New York, and perhaps split New England off from the rest of the colonies (as Burgoyne hoped to accomplish before Saratoga).

Not only that, but Arnold came close to delivering General Washington to the British as well. The loss of America's Commander in Chief would have been devastating to the colonies both politically and militarily.

Alas, it was not to be. Arnold's treachery was discovered, and West Point was saved. And with it, Britain's last best hope of winning the American Revolution evaporated.
The French Connection

French support of the American colonists was, of course, a significant factor in how the American Revolution turned out. Without French support, it's unlikely the Americans could've sustained a long war effort against the British Empire. Trapping Cornwallis at Yorktown certainly would not have happened, were it not for the French.

Once the French recognized the United States and entered the war, the American Revolution became a world war for the British. Losing the American colonies wasn't necessarily the "least of their problems," but it certainly wasn't their only concern.

Still, the Franco-American alliance had problems, and France too had more global than North American concerns. Had the British played their cards more effectively in the southern campaign and had Benedict Arnold's plan worked out better for them, it's still possible they could've won the American Revolution or at least ended it on more favorable terms.

Historians have long enjoyed asking "What if" questions about history, including the American Revolution. Whether the American Revolution could've turned out differently will likely continue to be a subject for such discussions.