The Tide Begins to Turn - Saratoga

When the American Revolution began, both sides adopted the same military strategy [strategy: an overall plan, such as for winning a war], or overall plan for winning the war. That strategy was to defeat the enemy in one big battle.

After barely escaping from his loss in New York, Washington revised his strategy. In the future, he wrote Congress, he would avoid large battles that might put his army at risk. Instead, the war would be “defensive.” Rather than defeating the British, Washington hoped to tire them out.

A New British Strategy Germain revised the British strategy as well. His new plan was to divide the rebels by taking control of New York’s Hudson River Valley. Control of this waterway would allow the British to cut New England off from the rest of the states. Without men and supplies from the New England states, the Continental army would surely collapse.

To carry out this plan, General John Burgoyne (ber-GOIN) left Canada in June 1777 with about 8,000 British soldiers and American Indian warriors. He planned to move this army south to Albany, New York. There he would meet up with General Howe, who was supposed to march his army north from New York City.

Problems with Burgoyne’s Plan There were two big problems with Burgoyne’s plan. The first was that what looked like an easy invasion route on a map was anything but easy. The route Burgoyne chose from Canada to Albany took his army through more than 20 miles of tangled wilderness. His army had to build bridges, chop down countless trees, and lay out miles of log roads through swamps as it crept toward Albany.

To make matters worse, Burgoyne didn’t travel light. His army was slowed by more than 600 wagons, 30 of them filled with his personal baggage. Even in the wilderness, “Gentleman Johnny” Burgoyne sipped champagne with his supper.

The second problem with Burgoyne’s plan was that General Howe had his own ideas about how to win the war. Instead of marching to Albany, Howe headed for Philadelphia, the rebels’ capital. There he hoped to lure Washington into another major battle. Howe hoped it would be the last one.
Washington, however, refused to risk his army in another big battle. He would not fight for Philadelphia. Instead, he played hide-and- seek with Howe, attacking here and there and then disappearing into the countryside.

A Turning Point By the time the slow-moving Burgoyne finally reached Saratoga Springs on the Hudson River, the area was swarming with militia. Although the rebels outnumbered his army, Burgoyne ordered an attack. Again and again the rebels beat back Burgoyne’s troops. On October 17, 1777, Burgoyne accepted defeat.

Burgoyne’s surrender marked a turning point in the war. Before the victory at Saratoga, most of the world believed that the American cause was hopeless. Now the Americans had shown they could stand up to a British army and win.

Not long after this victory, France came into the war as an ally [ally: a nation that joins another nation in some common effort, such as fighting a war] of the United States. The French government sent money, weapons, troops, and warships to the Americans. Spain also entered the war against Great Britain. The American cause no longer looked quite so hopeless.

Winter at Valley Forge Saratoga was a stunning victory, but the war was far from over. While General Washington’s army roamed the countryside, Howe’s forces still occupied Philadelphia.

Late in 1777, Congress declared a day of thanksgiving for the army’s successes. By this time, Washington and his army were on their way to Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, to make camp for the winter. Joseph Martin described the army’s “celebration”:

> We had nothing to eat for two or three days previous . . . But we must now have what Congress said, a sumptuous [lavish] Thanksgiving . . . It gave each and every man a gill [a few ounces] of rice and a tablespoon of vinegar! The army was now not only starved but naked. The greatest part were not only shirtless and barefoot, but destitute of [without] all other clothing, especially blankets.

Washington’s troops were hungry because many farmers preferred to sell food to the British. The British paid them in gold, whereas Congress paid them in paper money. As for uniforms and blankets, merchants had raised the prices for these items sky-high.
This desire for profits at the army’s expense outraged Washington. “No punishment,” he fumed, “is too great for the man who can build his greatness upon his country’s ruin.”

To help lift his men from their misery, Washington put Baron Friedrich von Steuben (FREE-drük von STU-bin) in charge of training. A military officer from Prussia (in modern-day Germany), von Steuben arrived in December 1777 and set to work turning the Continental army into an organized fighting force. The Prussian’s method, wrote Martin, was “continual drill.” It worked wonders. “The army grows stronger every day,” wrote one officer. “There is a spirit of discipline among the troops that is better than numbers.”

Another foreign volunteer, the Marquis de Lafayette (mar-KEE duh la-fey-ET), also helped raise the troops’ spirits. Although he was one of the richest men in France, Lafayette chose to share the hardships of Valley Forge. He even used his own money to buy the men warm clothing. “The patient fortitude [courage] of the officers and soldiers,” Lafayette wrote, “was a continual miracle.”

When at last spring arrived, Washington received news that the British were about to abandon Philadelphia. The time had come to put his newly trained army to the test.

**The Battle of Monmouth** By this time, Sir Henry Clinton had replaced General Howe as commander of the British forces in North America. In Clinton’s view, taking over Philadelphia had gained the British nothing. He ordered his army to retreat to New York City, where the Royal Navy could keep it supplied by sea.

Now it was Washington’s turn to chase an army across New Jersey. On June 28, 1778, he caught up with the retreating British near Monmouth, New Jersey. In the battle that followed, Washington seemed to be everywhere, constantly rallying his men to stand and fight. “Cheering them by his voice and example,” wrote Lafayette, “never had I beheld [seen] so superb a man.”

Late that night, the British slipped across the Hudson River to safety in New York City. Washington camped with his army nearby. It was pleasing, he wrote, “that after two years maneuvering . . . both armies are brought back to the very point they set out from.” Neither army knew it yet, but the war in the North was over.