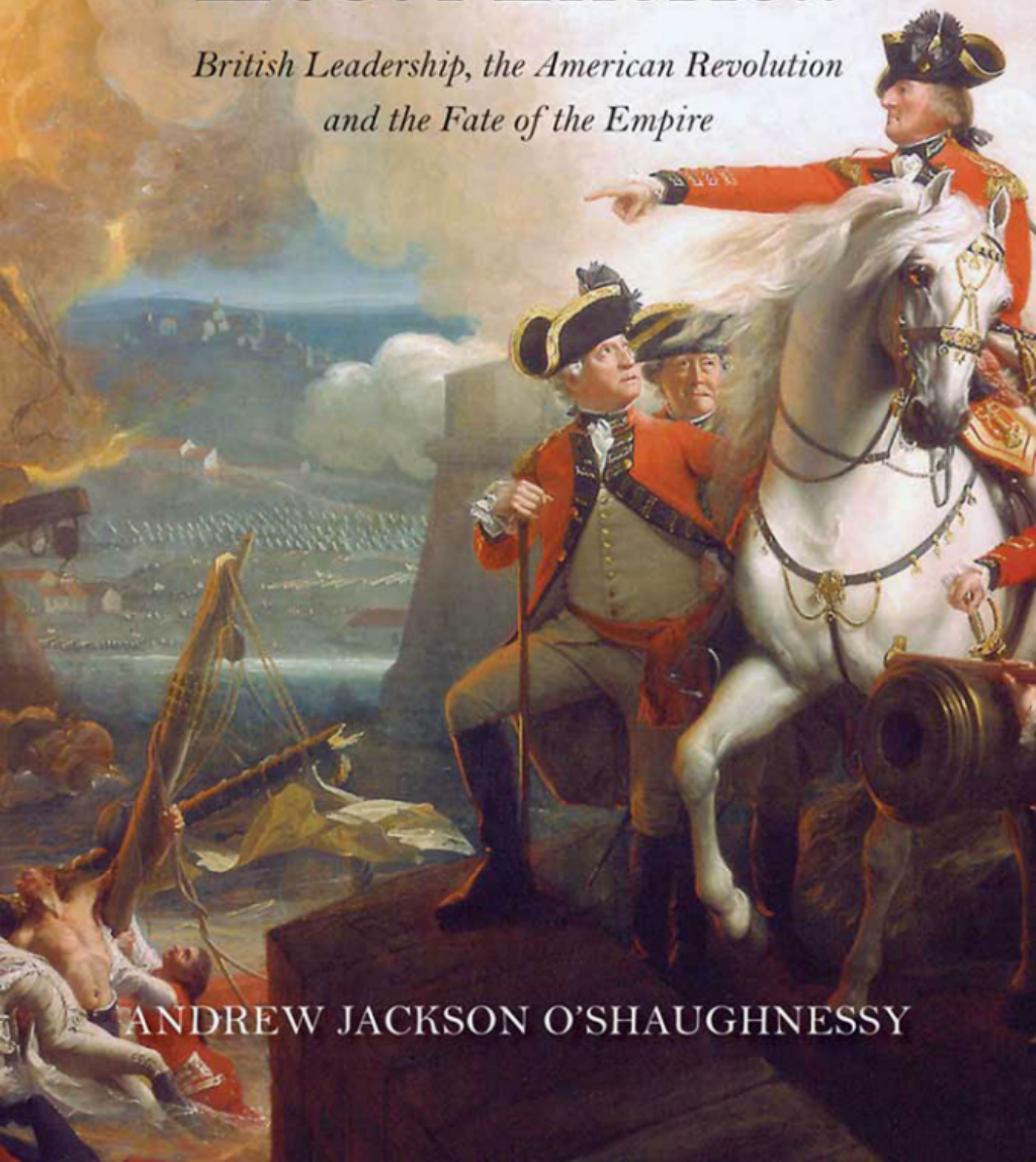


The Men Who Lost America

*British Leadership, the American Revolution
and the Fate of the Empire*



ANDREW JACKSON O'SHAUGHNESSY

The Men Who Lost America

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The Men Who Lost
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British Leadership, the American Revolution,
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Fate of the Empire

ANDREW JACKSON O'SHAUGHNESSY

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To my parents, John and Marjorie, and my brother Nicholas

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Your failure is, I am persuaded, as certain as fate.

America is above your reach . . . her independence neither rests upon your consent, nor can it be prevented by your arms. In short, you spend your substance in vain, and impoverish yourself without hope.

Thomas Paine, "To the People of England," 1774

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Acknowledgments

Since the time that we were fellow students at Oxford, Charles Stopford Sackville has been a good and generous friend who inadvertently suggested a title for this book when he mentioned that he was descended from “the man who lost America,” Lord George Germain. It is hoped that he will not be disappointed that this book grants Germain a lesser role in explaining the British loss of America. Another friend of my undergraduate years, Caroline Neville, is also descended from one of the biographical subjects of this book, Lord Charles Cornwallis. Her father, Robin Neville, Lord Braybrooke, introduced me to artifacts and materials relating to Cornwallis at Audley End. She and her husband, Edward Stanley, the present earl of Derby, have subsequently made me aware of additional papers of General John Burgoyne, who married the daughter of the eleventh earl of Derby.

These personal connections influenced my decision to adopt a biographical approach, although the argument of this book is a product of my earlier study of the British Caribbean during the Revolutionary War: *An Empire Divided: The American Revolution and the British Caribbean* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000). The writing of the book made me acutely aware of the global dimensions of British military commitments during the American Revolution. Although Piers Mackesy had previously explored this dimension in *The War for America, 1775–1783* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1964), he nevertheless concluded that defeat was due to poor leadership, while shifting the onus of responsibility from the politicians to the generals. Unlike many other historians, he was careful to show the underlying rationale for the behavior of the commanders, but he believed that the war was winnable and he implied that the outcome might have been different if Britain had appointed Sir Guy Carleton earlier to be commander in chief in America. His interpretation was contested by John Shy, who was influenced by the American experience in Vietnam. Nevertheless, the old shibboleths of blaming the leadership continue to hold sway. The case against this claim deserves further elaboration, and can be more effectively argued by viewing the war through the lens of the British.

I began work for this book in September 2001, thanks to a full year sabbatical leave from the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh and a Barra Senior Research Fellowship at The

McNeil Center for Early American Studies at the University of Pennsylvania. I am grateful to the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh Faculty Development Board, which funded my sabbatical and which was a model of professional development support throughout the University of Wisconsin system. Franca Barricelli generously chaired the department in my absence and was in every way a wonderful colleague, together with her husband Lane Earns. The McNeil Center for Early American Studies provided a vibrant intellectual home that was due in large part to the vision of its founder, Richard Dunn, and to the vitality of the present director, Dan Richter. The weekly seminars were conducted in a challenging but supportive and constructive atmosphere. My tenure as a fellow of the McNeil Center also taught me why the British so appreciated Philadelphia.

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It was indeed a bonus to be able to write this book at Monticello in an office at Kenwood used by President Franklin Roosevelt in the four days leading up to D-Day. There was the constant stimulation of visiting fellows and speakers, together with the regular

meetings of the University of Virginia Early American Studies Seminar at the Jefferson Library. My office is adjacent to the Jefferson Library with its impressive digital collections and the able assistance of Jack Robertson, the Foundation Librarian, and his colleagues Anna Berkes and Endrina Tay. It was also helpful to have access to Jeff Looney and the staff of *The Thomas Jefferson Papers* (Retirement Series) at the Jefferson Library, as well as Ed Lengel and the staff of *The Papers of George Washington* at the Alderman Library. As president of the Thomas Jefferson Foundation, Leslie Greene Bowman enthusiastically supported this project and granted me invaluable release time from my administrative duties to enable me to write. It is as well a pleasure to acknowledge the vision and encouragement of her predecessor, Dan Jordan, together with the senior curator of Monticello, Susan Stein. Gaye Wilson kindly assumed the role of director in my absence, despite working on her own book, with additional assistance from Mary Scott-Fleming and Christa Dierksheide. Liz Blaine and Lindsay Mericli arranged a manuscript forum chaired by Peter Onuf as the opening event of the Smith Education Center on Montalto, with its magnificent panoramic views of the Blue Ridge Mountains and Monticello. Leah Stearns and Margaret Huckaby kindly helped with illustrations. The Board of Trustees of the Thomas Jefferson Foundation has shown a remarkable dedication to research as an essential part of its mission of preservation and education. I am grateful for the support of Donald A. King, the chairman of the board, and his wife Janemarie, together with his predecessor H. Eugene Lockhart, and the respective chairs of the Scholarly Activities Committee, Charles Cullen and Jeffrey C. Walker. It is similarly a pleasure to record my thanks to former trustee A. D. Hart and his wife Margaret, who held a lunch party for me to speak about the book at their Jefferson-era home, and who represent much that is finest about Virginia.

Finally this book is dedicated to my parents and my brother. My parents read and edited the first draft of each chapter of this book. Their emigration to America, when my father John began teaching at Columbia University's Graduate School of Business, was the source of my youthful interest in the interplay of the histories of the United States and Britain. It was all the more enticing because American history was not generally part of the school history syllabus in England. My mother Marjorie took us to museums and historical sites in New York, which made me yet more curious about the historical relationship with Britain. My brother Nicholas discussed the concept of this book with me over twenty-five years ago in Oxford. My parents and brother championed my pursuing this topic and have been a constant source of support. It is with love, esteem, and gratitude that I dedicate this book to them.

Introduction

At about ten o'clock in the morning of October 17, 1781, outside the small tobacco port of Yorktown in Virginia, a lone drummer mounted the parapet of the besieged British lines, beating the call for a parley. The sound of his drum was inaudible against the background of constant firing. If it had not been for the visibility of his redcoat, "he might have beat away until doomsday." He was followed by an officer holding up a white handkerchief and carrying a message proposing negotiations for surrender. The roar of American and French cannon suddenly ceased. Ebenezer Denny, a junior officer in the Pennsylvania Line of the Continental Army, described how "when the firing ceased, I . . . had never heard a drum equal to it—the most delightful music to us all." The troops on either side stared in silence at one another from a distance of less than two hundred yards. While the drummer was sent back, the British officer was blindfolded and taken to the headquarters of General George Washington, where he delivered a message from General Charles, Earl Cornwallis proposing a cessation of hostilities for twenty-four hours to allow two officers to meet "at Mr. Moore's house to settle terms for the Surrender of the Posts of York & Gloucester." The request was refused pending the submission of more detailed terms of surrender in writing. The opposing artillery resumed firing throughout the afternoon, but the battle was really over. The guns once again fell silent throughout the night and the negotiations continued throughout the next day.¹

At noon on October 19, the British army lowered the Union Jack. The victors were forced to wait for the pleasure of seeing their humiliated foe parade before them. Although Washington had specified that the surrender ceremony would take place at two o'clock precisely, the British and German troops did not appear for another hour. Dressed in smart new uniforms, they formed two columns more than a mile long. Their path was bordered on one side by American troops and on the other by French. There were numerous spectators from the surrounding countryside, beaming with satisfaction and joy. The onlookers eagerly awaited the appearance of Cornwallis. He was "the object of peculiar interest." A surgeon in the Continental Army, James Thacher, described how every eye was ready to gaze on the humiliated commander, but Cornwallis disappointed their eager expectations

by pleading illness or “pretending indisposition.” He instead sent his second in command, a ruddy-faced Irishman and “plausible talker,” Brigadier General Charles O’Hara of the Brigade of Guards, who had been bayoneted at the battle of Guilford Court House and who had long believed that Britain was engaged in an unwinnable war in America.²

After some two hours of hushed anticipation, the vanquished British army began to advance along the Hampton Road, marching at a slow and solemn step, with shouldered arms, colors cased, drums beating, and fifes playing patriotic marches of Britain and the German states. As the captive army approached the opposing trenches, the “elegantly mounted” General O’Hara asked to be directed to the French commander, General Jean Baptiste Donatien de Vimeur, comte de Rochambeau. O’Hara removed his hat and apologized for the absence of his commanding officer. According to French accounts, he then attempted to surrender Cornwallis’s sword to Rochambeau, who refused and deferred to General George Washington. An American officer added that O’Hara was mistaken: “the Commander-in-Chief of our army is to the right.” It was not an error. The British preferred to surrender to the French rather than acknowledge the ignominy of defeat by the Americans. O’Hara reluctantly tried to present the sword to Washington, but was referred by Washington to General Benjamin Lincoln, who had earlier been snubbed by the British when they refused him the usual courtesies of surrender at Charleston in South Carolina in 1780. Lincoln merely returned the sword to O’Hara and gave him directions to take his troops to a spacious field to lay down their arms.³

As they neared the field of surrender, the royal troops became disorderly and exhibited “unsoldierly conduct,” their step irregular and their ranks frequently broken. Some of them seemed to be “in liquor.” When they entered the surrender field, with their spirit and pride put to the severest test, the last act of the drama was played out. They were unable to conceal their mortification. Their platoon officers appeared to be exceedingly chagrined when giving the order to ground arms. According to a New Jersey officer, the British officers in general “behaved like boys who had been whipped at school,” with some biting their lips and pouting while others cried. They beat their drums “as if they did not care how.” Many of the soldiers showed a sullen temper, violently throwing down their arms into a single pile, as if determined to render them useless. After an intense siege following a march of fifteen hundred miles through the south, a corporal of the 76th Foot threw down his weapon with such violence that it broke, as he shouted “May you never get so good a Master!” The round, broad-brimmed hats of the soldiers enabled them to hide their faces out of shame. It was indeed a humiliation for an army that had begun the war with an assumption of its own superior military prowess. When he beheld the soldiers so reduced from their former glory to such a miserable plight, Aedenus Burke of South Carolina reflected that he forgot for a moment their “insolence, their depredations and cruelty.”⁴

Throughout much of November 1781, there was still no certain news in London of the outcome of the battle of Yorktown. As accounts of the strength of the enemy positions arrived, the mood of the government grew more anxious each day. George III and Lord

George Germain, the Cabinet minister most responsible for the conduct of the war, had been so confident of victory that the draft of the king's speech for the state opening of Parliament predicted British success in America. Germain, in particular, was aware that the outcome of the battle would determine the fate of the war and probably the future of the government of Lord North. He began to confide uneasiness on the subject to his friends. At noon on Sunday, November 25, 1781, Germain was at his London residence next to Carlton House in Pall Mall, when he received official confirmation of the news that he had been dreading. Saying nothing to a guest, he immediately ordered his coach to drive to the residence of one of the other secretaries of state, Lord Stormont, in Portland Place. After Germain imparted the "disastrous information" of the surrender of Lord Cornwallis, he and Stormont instantly drove to see the lord chancellor, Lord Thurlow, in Great Ormond Street. Following a short conference, they collectively decided to summon their nerve and go in person to the prime minister, Lord North.⁵

Between one and two o'clock in the afternoon, the three Cabinet ministers arrived at the official residence of the prime minister in Downing Street. Although he had long despaired of the war and had many times attempted to resign, Lord North reacted to the news with shock. Germain described how the prime minister responded "As he would have taken a ball in his breast." Pacing up and down his rooms for several minutes, North suddenly opened his arms, exclaiming wildly, "O God! It is all over!" North repeated the words many times in a state of consternation and distress. After North had calmed down, the ministers discussed whether to postpone the state opening of Parliament, which was due to occur in less than forty-eight hours. With many members having already arrived in the capital and others on their way, they decided against a change. They then spent several hours rewriting the king's speech, which was to be delivered from the throne in the House of Lords. The speech had originally predicted victory but was altered to make a token reference to the events at Yorktown. Germain then sent word of the "melancholy termination of Lord Cornwallis's expedition" to King George III, who was at Kew Palace on the outskirts of London. Germain then returned to his office in Whitehall, where he found additional confirmation of Cornwallis's defeat at Yorktown in a French account.⁶

As a supporter of the government and a member of Parliament, the memoirist Nathaniel Wraxall attended a dinner party with nine other guests that evening at Lord George Germain's home in Pall Mall. Apart from Thomas de Grey, Lord Walsingham, who had formerly served as an under secretary to Germain, the guests were unaware of the fateful news that Germain had received from America. Before the dinner was finished, one of the servants delivered an urgent message from the king. Looking and directing his remarks exclusively at Lord Walsingham, Germain said: "The King writes just as he always does, except that I observe he has omitted to mark the hour and the minute of his writing." George III always wrote the precise time to the last minute in his letters. Although Germain's remark was calculated to awaken interest around the table, the guests made no comment and repressed their curiosity, owing to the presence of his three daughters.⁷

The moment that his daughters left the room, Germain told the dinner party guests of his just having heard that the comte de Maurepas, the first minister of France, was “lying at the point of death.” Wraxall replied that if he were the first minister of France, it would grieve him to die without knowing the outcome of the great contest between England and America. Germain responded that the French minister had survived long enough to witness the result. Wraxall thought Germain was alluding to an indecisive naval action off the Chesapeake Capes, between the fleets of Britain and France. Wraxall then explained he had meant to say that it was a shame that the dying French minister would never know the final result of the war in Virginia. Germain repeated that the French minister had survived to witness it completely: “The army has surrendered, and you may peruse the particulars of the capitulation in that paper.” Without any visible emotion, Germain removed the paper from his pocket and gave it to Wraxall, who read it aloud while the other guests sat in stunned silence. The news cast a gloom over the rest of the evening as the party pondered the political fallout.⁸

The guests really wanted to know how George III had reacted to the news. They were well aware that the king would find it especially painful, as it was the most humiliating event of his reign. George III had become the driving force behind the war and had threatened to abdicate rather than accept defeat. Germain gratified the wishes of his guests by reading aloud the letter from the king, while remarking that the letter was a testimony to the king’s fortitude, firmness, and consistency of character. Wraxall recalled thirty years later that the lapse of time had not erased the deep impression that the reading of the letter had made on him that evening. It contained not a word of despondency or despair, while the handwriting indicated complete composure of mind. The king wrote defiantly that the news did not make the smallest change in his views and that he was ready to continue the war. He would not admit defeat.⁹

I

The British loss of America is a subject of perennial interest, not least because it gave birth to two powerful modern nations: the United States and Canada. It was a war Britain seemingly should have won. It had spent eight years waging what the staunchest supporters regarded as a “holy war” against “dangerous” revolutionary principles, “which threaten[ed] a general subversion of every system, religious or civil, hitherto respected by mankind.” Even moderates believed the retention of America was essential to the survival of Britain as a great power within Europe. According to Adam Smith, the author of *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), the “expectation of a rupture with the colonies . . . has struck the people of Great Britain with more terror than they have ever felt for a Spanish armada, or a French invasion.” Britain had the advantage of a professional army, the largest navy in the world, officers who were veterans of many campaigns, the availability of military supplies, and ready access to credit. Britain had a vibrant economy, which was leading the way in agricul-

tural innovation, commerce, banking, credit, and canal building, and was fast becoming the first industrial nation in history. It is little wonder that many contemporaries imagined that the war would be an easy triumph for Britain. When events turned out otherwise, it is equally understandable that the failure was attributed to poor leadership.¹⁰

The ten biographical subjects of this book were the key British decisionmakers who oversaw the conduct of the war for America. They include George III, who was portrayed in the Declaration of Independence as the tyrant responsible for the American Revolution; Lord North, the prime minister regarded as having triggered the war with his fateful decision to punish the people of Massachusetts for the Boston Tea Party through the Coercive Acts of 1774; General Sir William Howe and Admiral Lord Richard Howe, the brothers commanding the British army and navy in America during the first half of the war who are regarded as having missed the best opportunity to defeat the Continental Army in 1776; John Burgoyne, the general who surrendered at Saratoga (1777); Lord George Germain, the secretary of state for America and the chief architect of the American War in Britain; Sir Henry Clinton, commander of the British army in America during the second half of the war when he was accused by critics of inactivity; Lord Cornwallis, whose surrender at Yorktown effectively ended the British war for America; Admiral Sir George Rodney, one of the few commanders to emerge with his reputation enhanced from the war but who failed to prevent the French fleet of Admiral François-Joseph Paul, comte de Grasse from entrapping Lord Cornwallis's army at Yorktown; and John Montague, earl of Sandwich, the first lord of the Admiralty, whom critics held responsible for the inadequacy of the Royal Navy.

These political and military leaders became the object of satire, emanating from critics who ranged from writers like Philip Freneau, Thomas Paine, Mercy Otis Warren, and Francis Hopkinson in America, to the poet Robert Burns in Scotland and the caricaturist James Gillray in England. They continue to be ridiculed in fiction, popular history, and movies. Although less crudely presented, such caricatures permeate even scholarly literature. It is glibly assumed that failure must have been a consequence of incompetent and mediocre leadership. The men who lost America were on the wrong side of history. They were associated with opposition to progress and with attempting to introduce an authoritarian style of government. They were the enemy in an event that has become part of an American national mythology wherein Britain represented antiquated aristocratic attitudes that must inevitably fail against the meritocratic and republican virtues of America. It is like a story. The end of the war is a foregone conclusion, as history progresses toward modernity.¹¹

The men who lost America were able and substantial individuals who nevertheless failed. This book takes a "warts and all" approach that will consider their defects and their roles in contributing to the defeat, but it will also take issue with the popular misconception that they were simply incompetent and hidebound. The difference between success and failure is often a fine line. Horatio Gates, the American general who won the battle of Saratoga (1777), was himself defeated by Lord Cornwallis at the battle of Camden (1780),