



CLASSROOM MATERIALS

Factors that Handicapped the British

Overview:

At the outbreak of fighting between England and the colonists in 1775, the British military was considered the strongest in the world. Britain had defeated France in the French and Indian War and had secured a place as the world's superpower. Conversely, the colonists were frequently forced to rely on state militia, farmers and merchants who volunteered for duty only when fighting was close to their homes.

Yet despite Britain's overwhelming military superiority, the British found themselves unable to subdue the colonists. In fact, it is often said that the American Revolution was not so much won by the Americans as it was lost by the British—a statement with obvious parallels to the Vietnam War, in which another superpower fought a much weaker enemy and failed to achieve its military and political objectives. In this lesson, students will examine some of the mistakes and misjudgments made by the British that led to the failure to win the Revolutionary War.

Related Resources for This Lesson

In this lesson, students will use the following resources:

1. Episode Four of *Liberty!* (The related web page for the episode is at <http://www.pbs.org/ktca/liberty/chronicle/episode4.html>)
2. A companion resource to this lesson, called "Factors That Handicapped the Crown." (See the end of the lesson).
3. Question Sheet PDF (for students)
4. Question Sheet PDF (for teachers, with answers)

Relevant Standards

This lesson addresses the following national content standards established by the Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL) (<http://www.mcrel.org/standards-benchmarks/>)

US History:

- Understands the major developments and chronology of the Revolutionary War and the roles of its political, military and diplomatic leaders (e.g., George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Samuel Adams, John Hancock and Richard Henry Lee)
- Understands the social and economic impact of the Revolutionary War (e.g., problems financing the war, wartime inflation, hoarding and profiteering and the personal and social economic hardships brought on by war)
- Understands contributions of European nations during the American Revolution and how their involvement influenced the war's outcome and aftermath (e.g., the assistance of France and Spain in the war, the way in which self-interests of France and Spain differed from those of the United States after the war, the effect of American diplomatic initiatives and the contributions of the European military leaders on the war's outcome)

Historical Understanding:

- Analyzes the effects of specific wartime decisions and how outcomes might have been different in the absence of those decisions
- Analyzes how specific historical events can be interpreted differently based on newly uncovered records and/or information
- Knows how to perceive past events with historical empathy
- Evaluates the validity and credibility of different historical interpretations

Strategy for the Lesson

Using a world map, the teacher might begin the lesson by demonstrating the relative distance between Britain and the 13 colonies. Ask students to speculate how difficult it might be to maintain a prolonged war effort over such a distance. The teacher might ask the class to consider or compare the British task with that of the United States in fighting a prolonged conflict in Europe and Asia in World War II, the Vietnam War, or in the liberation of Iraq in 2003-2004. The teacher can also have the class look at military tactics by asking them to discuss the traditional fighting methods of the British compared to the guerilla warfare tactics used by the colonists. The class might also look at the ability of British commanders such as Howe, Cornwallis, and Burgoyne compared to the ability of American commanders such as Washington, Gates, and Benedict Arnold.

(Note: should the teacher want to expand on the American experience in Vietnam, the following sources are recommended:

1. "How Could Vietnam Happen – An Autopsy", by James C. Thompson, from *The Atlantic Online*, April 1968.
(<http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/68apr/vietnam.htm>)
2. *Vietnam Online* (<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/vietnam/>) A comprehensive site to supplement students' knowledge of the Vietnam War and its effects.

Next, distribute copies of the question sheets for the lesson as well as copies of the “Factors that Handicapped the Crown’s Ability to Wage Effective War” handout, which are included at the end of this lesson.

Allot sufficient time for students to answer the questions. Once students have completed the questions, the teacher should evaluate them according to the depth of answer desired, the amount of time allowed for the assignment as well as any other criteria established by the teacher, such as spelling and grammar.

Extension Activities:

After students have completed the activity, ask students to presume they are “ministers” to King George III. Have them write “position papers” in which they suggest changes in Revolutionary War strategy and outline the potential benefits their suggestions strategy.

Factors that Handicapped the Crown's Ability to Wage Effective War

- The royal government and generals had no firm purpose for waging the war. They had no logical aim. Military victories and control over a section of land could not create favorable postwar conditions and/or relations. They sought some type of compromise; yet, there was no real basis for negotiations. Once the war had started, the Americans could not see anything of value in what Britain offered in return for a permanent peace.
- There was no center of the enemy that Britain could capture and end the war. The Continental Congress moved from city to city, and each Continental army fought almost as an independent army. There was no one that the British army could defeat that would quickly bring about the surrender of the entire colonial opposition.
- Britain greatly underestimated the colonists' resolve to win the war once it began. They expected the people to give up their resistance once thousands of troops landed in America. They expected colonial support for their leaders to crumble, especially because none of the colonial leaders had had any previous experience in leading a national government or a major war.
- British commanders seriously underestimated the skills, talents, maturity, and charisma of George Washington.
- Because of its huge debts, the royal ministry had to wage war economically. It had to take shortcuts or do without certain things; these actions added to the caution and delays.
- Fighting against their own countrymen was both a psychological and emotional handicap for soldiers as well as civilians on both sides of the ocean.
- The element of time continuously handicapped British operations. Communications and transportation, both across the Atlantic and within the colonies, were slow and ineffective. The typical transatlantic voyage took four to six weeks. Seasonal weather conditions played a major role in the quality as well as length of the journey.
- Delays in news, orders, and supplies were costly. The uncertainties surrounding arrivals or replies frequently led to either undue caution, unnecessary delays, or uncertain expectations in key situations, which later proved costly. Speed of communications and transportation was never considered so vital so frequently in any of Britain's previous wars.
- The use of foreign mercenaries proved a useful propaganda weapon for the colonial press. These foreigners were viewed as hired killers of the king to fight against the king's own people.
- The Crown's army suffered from extreme overconfidence. Regular officers and men were sure of victory, especially after examining the appearance of the colonial militia and initial battle behaviors of the colonists.
- The British depended on the bayonet instead of shooting accuracy. This was crucial in some areas where accurate distance shooting could change conditions on the battlefield.

- Military etiquette used on European battlefields, as developed by Frederick the Great, had to be modified. The British preferred to fight in the traditional Continental style throughout the war.
- Crown officers were more gentlemen than soldiers. They were used to the comforts of life as if they were still in England. Every Crown general's way of life as an English gentleman had to be maintained at all times—even on the march and near the battlefield.
- There were few advocates of a so-called soft peace with the colonists. Many ministers of Parliament wanted harsh terms and payments. Thus, the colonists assumed that it was a do or die struggle on their part.
- Britain was mostly self-sustaining. Britain's ability to maintain a large army overseas and to support its population at home was limited. Britain's merchant marine was further handicapped due to the lack of protection from attack or capture on the open seas. For example, over 750 military and nonmilitary cargo ships were captured by colonial ships in one twenty-month period. The merchants were also restricted because of the closing of colonial and ally ports to their ships.
- Britain was not prepared for a war, much less a long, intense war. Not until after the Battle of Bunker Hill in July 1775 did England even begin to think in terms of war rather than merely rebellion. It tried to avert a war. Even as late as July 1776, it still hoped to end all hostilities. Britain never planned for a long war and always waited for the one decisive victory.
- Britain had no allies to help fight a war to protect its overseas empire. After the Seven Years' War, no one would support it. With the exception of hiring troops from Germany, Britain had to fight entirely alone.
- Britain tried not to go to war with France. A war with France meant a war with Spain. Britain had to avoid a two-front war effort because it could not finance or capably wage a two-front world war. It hoped a concentrated effort in the colonies would bring about a quick conclusion before the Americans could convince the French to aid them.
- Britain constantly sought and hoped for Loyalist support on a large scale. This support was never received. Its armies could never get a large number of Loyalists to help them control any particular area. Moreover, the generals and Parliament also never did what was needed to gain and keep the Loyalists' support because they tended to ignore or de-emphasize the support that the Loyalists did give.
- Overseas warfare was difficult to wage due to the problem of distance. The 3,000 miles that separated the colonies from the British Isles took between four and twelve weeks to cover. In addition, the troops often arrived sick and weary from the voyage, and most of their horses died in transit.
- The Royal Navy was in poor condition many old or poorly repaired ships, and thus it was very ill-prepared for any heavy-duty operations. After 1765, few warships were kept in full condition and even fewer were built.
- Britain frequently won with smashing victories at the last minute. It did not begin to really try to win the war until 1778. By then it was too late because France and Spain had entered the war.

Question Sheet (with answers)

1. Consider the military strategies employed by the British during their involvement in the Revolution. Which one, in your view, is the most damaging to the British cause? Explain your answer?

Answers will vary. Many students might note that the British insisted on traditional fighting styles while the colonists fought as guerillas. In addition, the typical belief of the British was that war was “gentlemanly,” and therefore, officers were not to be targeted during battle. The colonists disagreed with that particular view.

2. The first handicap describes how the royal government and general had no firm purpose for waging the war and no logical aim. How might this flaw have caused the British to fail?

Most students will note that without some concrete “game plan” it would be difficult to focus British resources on a concentrated effort to defeat the American forces.

3. How did the British underestimate the “American resolve” to win the war?

First, the British believed that American resistance would crumble when thousands of British troops landed on US shores. Secondly, they also believed that the American military and political leadership was inexperienced and unable to fight a sustained war against an organized government and military force, such as Britain.

4. How did geography hinder the British war effort?

Distance made it difficult for the British to move men, supplies, news and orders. Sailing conditions from Britain to the colonies were difficult, and troops often arrived exhausted and ill. Communication and transportation systems were usually slow and ineffective. Other hindrances included supply shortages, the lack of roads which necessitated creating paths through the wilderness and harsh climate extremes in the Northeast.

5. What impact did the British impression of George Washington have on their war effort?

The British underestimated the ability, skills, talents, maturity and charisma of Washington. They probably considered him unfit for command and unable to lead.

6. In your view, how did the presence of Indians affect the war effort of the British and the colonists?

Answers vary. Some might say that the Indians had to weigh the “lesser of two evils” between the colonists and British when deciding which side to join, given that both groups had previously attempted to seize Indian lands. In the end, Indians fought on both sides but were probably more prevalent on the British side. In the beginning, Indians helped the British navigate through wilderness, serving as their eyes and ears. British use of Indians sometimes backfired, however, as it did during the famous incident involving colonist Jenny McCrea who was scalped and killed by Indians. The colonists used this story to create propaganda against the British, encouraging men to join the militia in response to the atrocity.

7. What impact did a “long, prolonged conflict” have on the British in the Revolution?

The British economy was already struggling with huge debts because of the Seven Years’ War. To continue another long conflict would drive the British treasury into bankruptcy. In addition, as casualty counts increased, many in Britain found themselves less and less in favor of the war and more and more opposed to it.

8. Describe how the “hard peace” advocates undermined the British war effort.

Most people in Britain demanded a “hard peace” which would include harsh terms for the colonists as well as payments for war debts and reparations. Since the colonists saw this as a threat, they figured it was a “do or die” situation and fought harder for independence with little inclination towards negotiation.

9. In your view, could the British have overcome the obstacles listed in the “Factors” list and still won the war? Give an example how they might have done this. If you feel the obstacles were too complex to overcome, give a short explanation explaining your view.

Answers will vary. Some students may note that since the British were the great superpower of the period, they should have concentrated more effort towards subduing the colonists. Others may note that the British government could have adapted their policy to be more accepting of a soft peace. Still, others may note that the British could have equipped their army from Canada or from the West Indies and effectively defeated the colonists.

10. In your view, if the British had been less insistent on a “hard peace” from the colonists, do you think we would be part of the British Empire today? Explain your answer.

Answers will vary. Some students may note that if the British had been conciliatory toward the colonists, there would have been no reason for the colonists to break away, and the British Empire in North America would probably have been maintained. However, other students may note that because of the distance and the gradual development of a uniquely “American” identity (as opposed to a British identity) America would have eventually pushed for independence but on more congenial terms.



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Question Sheet

1. Consider the military strategies employed by the British during their involvement in the Revolution. Which one, in your view, is the most damaging to the British cause? Explain your answer?
2. The first handicap describes how the royal government and general had no firm purpose for waging the war and no logical aim. How might this flaw have caused the British to fail?
3. How did the British underestimate the “American resolve” to win the war?
4. How did geography hinder the British war effort?
5. What impact did the British impression of George Washington have on their war effort?
6. In your view, how did the presence of Indians affect the war effort of the British and the colonists?
7. What impact did a “long, prolonged conflict” have on the British in the Revolution?
8. Describe how the “hard peace” advocates undermined the British war effort.
9. In your view, could the British have overcome the obstacles listed in the “Factors” list and still won the war? Give an example how they might have done this. If you feel the obstacles were too complex to overcome, give a short explanation explaining your view.
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