7.4 Britain Almost Wins the War

After abandoning Boston in the spring of 1776, Germain came up with his first plan for winning the war. British forces, led by General William Howe, were ordered to capture New York City. From that base, British troops would then move north to destroy the rebellion at its heart—Massachusetts.

To block the British invasion, Washington hurried with his army from Boston to New York. It was there that he heard good news: Congress had finally declared the colonies to be “free and independent states.” Washington had the Declaration of Independence read aloud to his troops. The time had come, he said, to “show our enemies, and the whole world, that free men, contending for their own land, are superior to any mercenaries on Earth.” Most of his men agreed that independence was a prize worth fighting for.

African Americans and the War - For African Americans, however, the Declaration of Independence raised both hopes and questions. Did Jefferson’s words, “all men are created equal,” apply to them? Would independence bring an end to slavery? Should they join the Revolution? Even before independence was declared, a number of African Americans had joined the Patriot cause. Black militiamen fought at Lexington, Concord, and Bunker Hill. Early in the war, however, blacks were banned from the Continental Army. Washington did not want the army to become a haven for runaway slaves.

In contrast, the British promised freedom to all slaves who took up arms for the king. As a result, thousands of runaways became Loyalists and fought for Britain. A shortage of volunteers soon forced Washington to change his mind. By 1779, about 15 percent of the soldiers in the Continental Army were African Americans. Large numbers of black sailors also served in the Continental Navy. As black Americans joined the war effort, whites began to question their own beliefs. How could they accept slavery if they truly believed that all people are created equal, with the same rights to life, liberty, and happiness? By the time the war ended, Vermont, Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Pennsylvania had all taken steps to end slavery.

Defeat in New York - On August 27, 1776, the American and British armies met in Brooklyn, New York, for what promised to be a decisive battle. The Americans began their defense of the city “in high spirits.” But the inexperienced Americans were no match for the British, with their greater numbers and superior training. In two days of fighting, the British lost only 377 men, while the Americans lost 1,407.

Satisfied that the war was nearly won, Howe ordered a halt to the British attack. Washington, he assumed, would do what any self-respecting European general would do in a hopeless situation. He would surrender honorably. And so Howe waited.

Washington had no intention of giving up. But for his army to survive, he would have to retreat. Even though Washington knew this, he could not bring himself to utter the shameful word “retreat.” An officer named Thomas Mifflin rescued him from his pride. “What is your strength?” Mifflin asked. “Nine thousand,” Washington replied. “Not enough,” said Mifflin bluntly, “We must retreat.”

Fading Hopes - The battle for New York City was the first of many defeats for the Americans. In the weeks that followed, British forces chased the Americans out of New York, through New Jersey, and finally across the Delaware River into Pennsylvania.

For Joseph Martin and his comrades, this was a trying time. There was little food to eat, and the soldiers grew weak from hunger. As the weather turned cold, muddy roads and icy streams added to their misery. With their terms of enlistment nearly up, many soldiers headed for home. Along the way they spread the word that anyone who volunteered to risk his life in the Continental Army had to be crazy.

By the time Washington reached Pennsylvania, he had only a few thousand men. Many of his remaining troops, he reported, were “entirely naked and most so thinly clad [clothed] as to be unfit for service.” More troops had to be found, and found quickly, he wrote his brother. Otherwise, “I think the game will be pretty well up.”

Fun Facts

African Americans faced a difficult decision during the Revolution. Would the Americans or the British give them freedom at the end of the war? At the Battle of Cowpens in South Carolina, the Continental Army, which included African Americans, soundly defeated the British.

While chasing the retreating Continental Army, British soldiers looted homes of Americans, both Patriots and Loyalists. Such actions turned many former supporters into enemies.
Homework: Read Section 7.4 and answer the questions below.

7.4 Britain Almost Wins the War

1. Why did the Declaration of Independence increase Americans’ motivation to fight and win the war?

2. For which group of Americans did the Declaration of Independence raise hopes as well as questions? Why?

3. What factors allowed the British to almost win the war in 1776?