



2014-047

Andrew Jackson O'Shaughnessy, *The Men Who Lost America: British Leadership, the American Revolution, and the Fate of the Empire*. New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2013. Pp. xiv, 466. ISBN 978-0-300-19107-3.

Review by Ralph Hitchens, Poolesville, MD (rmhitchens@netscape.net).

"The men who lost America were able and substantial individuals who nevertheless failed" (5). Andrew Jackson O'Shaughnessy (Univ. of Virginia) offers a counterpoint to "the popular misconception" that these men—King George III, Lord North, Lord George Germain, the Howe brothers, Generals Burgoyne, Clinton, and Cornwallis, Admiral Rodney, and the Earl of Sandwich—were "simply incompetent and hidebound" (5). Whether such a popular misconception really exists in the minds of those who have studied the American Revolution, *The Men Who Lost America* is very satisfying to read on many counts. The biographical sketches of each man, copiously annotated from primary and authoritative secondary sources, summarize the pertinent political and military events of the war in a narrative that extends to its offstage conclusion with the British victory at the Battle of the Saintes in April 1782.

O'Shaughnessy's subjects were men of unquestioned intelligence and ability, often commanding military resources that dwarfed those of the rebellious colonies—yet they lost the war. The book's concluding chapter opens by quoting Charles Stedman, a British Army officer of the time who wrote that "men were obliged to conclude, either that a force of Great Britain was ill-directed, or that no invading army ... can be successful in a country where the people are tolerably united ... [even though] British commanders [in the southern Colonies] ... had been uniformly successful in all general actions they fought, and had not in a single instance been defeated" (353). Words that resonate with Vietnam veterans a couple of centuries later! "[British] strategies failed not as a result of incompetence and blundering, but because of insufficient resources, the unanticipated lack of loyalist support, and the popularity of the Revolution" (353). Put simply, the war was unwinnable.

As an avid student of military history and unabashed second-guesser, I take issue with the author's thesis. I believe that the war was winnable and that some of the men he profiles were responsible for losing it. Even "the best and the brightest" lose wars by clinging to preconceptions and "axiomatic thinking." For example, British leaders, military and political alike, naively believed that most American colonists were loyal to the Crown and had been tyrannized and led astray by a radical minority of revolutionaries. This misconception persisted long after experience should have taught them otherwise and still influenced British military strategy five years into the war. There is also plenty of evidence that the primary cause of the British defeat lay in faulty military decisions coupled with a curious lack of decisiveness, mainly at the operational level, during the war's first two years.

Except for Admiral Sir George Rodney, the men O'Shaughnessy profiles were admirable in their time—cultured, intelligent, professionally experienced and respected members of the social and political elite of Great Britain. What modern-era infantry "grunt" wouldn't want to serve under a man like Sir William Howe, who lavished care on his troops and, when he called upon them to hazard their lives, as at Bunker Hill, did not himself shrink from personal risk? Similarly, his brother, Admiral Lord Richard Howe, was a highly competent seaman and imaginative naval tactician much revered by the lower deck; he even came out of retirement in 1797 to help defuse the great Spithead mutiny.

General Charles, Earl Cornwallis, one of the most distinguished British soldiers of the late eighteenth century, saw service in many theaters of war. He was a fine battlefield tactician who, like Howe, took good care of his men. General Sir Henry Clinton, though he found it difficult to get along with superiors and sub-

1. A concept made familiar by Daniel Yergin, *Shattered Peace: The Origins of the Cold War and the National Security State* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977).

ordinates alike, was nonetheless a gifted soldier. He played a decisive role in Britain's first great victory of the war at the Battle of Long Island, and later as Commander in Chief led the successful assault on Charleston, which opened the Southern Campaign. General John Burgoyne is remembered today as something of a dilettante with literary pretensions, but he had distinguished himself in the Seven Years War. Although he led his small British army to disaster at Saratoga in 1777, he was dutifully following his orders as he understood them. And does he not deserve praise for resolutely choosing a bold course of action over a prudent one that would have accomplished nothing from a strategic standpoint?

Among the political figures profiled, King George III stands out as perhaps the most steadfast champion of the war, which he and his supporters saw as constitutional in nature—upholding the supremacy of Parliament as the guarantor of the rights of all Englishmen. There is much to esteem in King George, a diligent monarch and devoted family man who might have happily lived a simpler life as a country squire. As O'Shaughnessy emphasizes, George III became knowledgeable about military affairs and deferentially sought advice from long-serving professionals. Though he was waging a war on behalf of Parliamentary supremacy, "The interests of his country and his own interests were conveniently allied in his mind" (39).

The King's equally sympathetic first minister (the term "prime minister" was not yet in use), Frederick Lord North, was mocked for his homely appearance yet admired by both friend and foe for skillfully managing a divided Parliament during the war. And, as Chancellor of the Exchequer, he proved an assiduous and capable steward of the public fisc, implementing significant reforms of the government's financial policies. The author stresses that Lord North, though unenthusiastic about the American war (he repeatedly and without avail asked to resign), loyally supported his king and used his remarkable, much admired rhetorical skills to keep an increasingly dissident Parliament in check.

The principal manager of the British war effort from 1775 until the end of 1781 was the Secretary of State for America, Lord George Germain. O'Shaughnessy's portrait of him is thorough and nuanced. Germain was a divisive figure in Parliament and the public eye, not least because he had suffered professional disgrace during the Seven Years War. A senior general in the Allied (Anglo-German) army at the Battle of Minden in 1759, he was suspected of either uncharacteristic hesitancy or outright disobedience in failing to pursue the retreating French. He was relieved of command, but the British Army took no further action against him. Germain, not heeding the modern proverb "be careful what you ask for," demanded a court-martial to clear his name. The court, alas, dismissed him from the Army and declared him unfit to serve the King in any military capacity. Though he retained his seat in Parliament and rose to high office, for the rest of his career Germain was tarred by political enemies with his failure at Minden.

Facing more and more parliamentary and public disfavor as the war ran its unhappy course, Germain nonetheless showed uncommonly good strategic sense and administrative ability: he "had a more realistic and pragmatic approach to the war than is often appreciated" (176). He well understood the difficulties of waging war in America, having studied closely the British Army's experiences during the French and Indian War. Even before taking office in 1775, he advocated a single decisive campaign bringing overwhelming force to bear on the colonial army. Once in office, he worked tirelessly to assemble the military and naval resources in 1776 to embark on such a campaign. "His strategy represented what most military historians believe to have been the best opportunity for Britain to win the American Revolution" (177).

Lord Germain displayed commendable restraint throughout a long string of unsuccessful campaigns, eschewing the temptation to micromanage his difficult subordinates. However, his strategy in the key campaign in 1776 was frustrated by his commanders, the Howe brothers in New York and Sir Guy Carleton in Canada, whose conciliatory attitude and failure to capitalize on their much superior military strength let the chance for decisive victory slip away. The Howe brothers, in particular, lapsed from indolence into an outright incompetence that O'Shaughnessy fails to recognize. Sir William Howe did not aggressively follow up his convincing victory against George Washington's army on Long Island, and his brother, Vice Admiral Lord Howe, failed to use the large British fleet in New York harbor to block Washington's daring nighttime evacuation of his army across the East River or his later transfer of most of the Continental Army across the Hudson to New Jersey. Many historians have noted that Washington veered between egregious military

blunders and acts of surprising tactical brilliance in responding to the Howe brothers' leisurely approach to campaigning.

O'Shaughnessy gives deserved credit to another cabinet member blamed for the loss of America, John Montagu, the Earl of Sandwich and First Lord of the Admiralty. Though a "notorious libertine" (320), Sandwich was one of the most conscientious and hard-working First Lords in the long history of the Royal Navy. Nevertheless, when the American war expanded into a global conflict with the entry of the French (1778), the Spanish (1779), and the Dutch (1780), the Royal Navy proved unable to quash the rebellion. Sandwich had insisted on taking firm measures to suppress the American revolution already in 1775; this is reflected in the formidable fleet entrusted to Lord Howe the following year. But his strategic priorities shifted after France became an active adversary: as the author observes, Sandwich consistently favored keeping strong forces in home waters in line with the successful British strategy during the Seven Years War. He clashed with Lords North and Germain over their preoccupation with the war in the Western Hemisphere.

Expansion of the fleet was a slow, laborious process, hampered by tight fiscal constraints. O'Shaughnessy rightly concludes that "The overextension of the fleet was the undoing of the British war in America" (345). That undoing, however, ought not to be laid at the feet of the Earl of Sandwich, who struggled against insuperable political and material obstacles to increase the size and capabilities of the Royal Navy. The blame must be shared with the last military figure profiled, in many respects the most controversial of them all.

Admiral Sir George Rodney emerged from the war a great hero of the Royal Navy, thanks to his victory over French Admiral François Joseph Paul de Grasse at the Battle of the Saintes. A firm disciplinarian and capable tactician, he was one of the few senior admirals who could be entrusted with command of a major fleet, and one of an even smaller number willing to serve under Lord North's administration at this late stage in the hitherto frustrating war. Rodney also showed great interest in naval innovations like copper sheathing to prolong hull life and improve sailing qualities, as well as long-overdue changes in medical care to better the lot of the common sailor—even in the pestilential West Indies environment, the mortality rate in Rodney's fleet was "1.4 percent compared to 11 percent among the army in the Caribbean" (296).

Unfortunately, Rodney also exhibited astonishing greed and a tendency toward financial impropriety that set him apart even at a time when the prize-money system of incentive—"the age-old practice of private profit from the plunder of war" (304)—had firmly embedded materialistic concerns in the lives and careers of every naval officer. After Holland entered the war, Rodney promptly descended with his fleet on the small Dutch colony of St. Eustatius, a lucrative commercial center of Caribbean trade and source of considerable material support for the American rebels. But his conduct there "had disastrous strategic consequences for the British war in America.... Rodney remained at St. Eustatius for three critical months during which he ceased to pursue further naval operations" (308).

In 1781, together with his chief subordinate, Rear Admiral Samuel Hood, Rodney had parried briefly with the huge French fleet under de Grasse, but the plundering of St. Eustatius and the resultant legal wrangling thoroughly preoccupied Britain's best admiral. Although Rodney learned in late summer 1781 that de Grasse had sailed to North America to conduct joint operations with the Continental Army and the French troops in the Colonies, he neglected to inform his counterpart in New York, Rear Admiral Thomas Graves, in a timely manner and also failed to consider the possibility that de Grasse would take his entire fleet to North America. He dispatched Hood with part of his fleet to reinforce Graves, bringing the combined squadron to nineteen ships of the line (against de Grasse's twenty-eight), but Rodney himself elected to sail to England with three ships of the line to answer the storm of parliamentary and public criticism over his actions at St. Eustatius. His plea of illness (a recurrence of gout) was a weak excuse—he had, after all, been bedridden during the "Moonlight Battle" off Cape St. Vincent in January 1780, yet prevailed over a Spanish fleet. Had he taken his entire fleet and his own valuable person to North America in pursuit of de Grasse, the decisive Battle of the Chesapeake in September 1781 might have had a different outcome and the army of Lord Cornwallis, trapped at Yorktown, might have been saved. Instead, Graves and Hood were beaten by de Grasse and Cornwallis was doomed. Rodney eventually returned to the Caribbean and his sub-

sequent victory at the Battle of the Saintes helped Britain negotiate an honorable peace with its European adversaries, but the war against the American colonies was irretrievably lost.

O'Shaughnessy does not quite dispel accusations of incompetence against the British political and military leadership during the American Revolution. But he has written an outstanding scholarly book that will inform a wide readership about the manners, morals, and careers of his memorable subjects, as well as the wrangling that shaped the course of that great conflict.