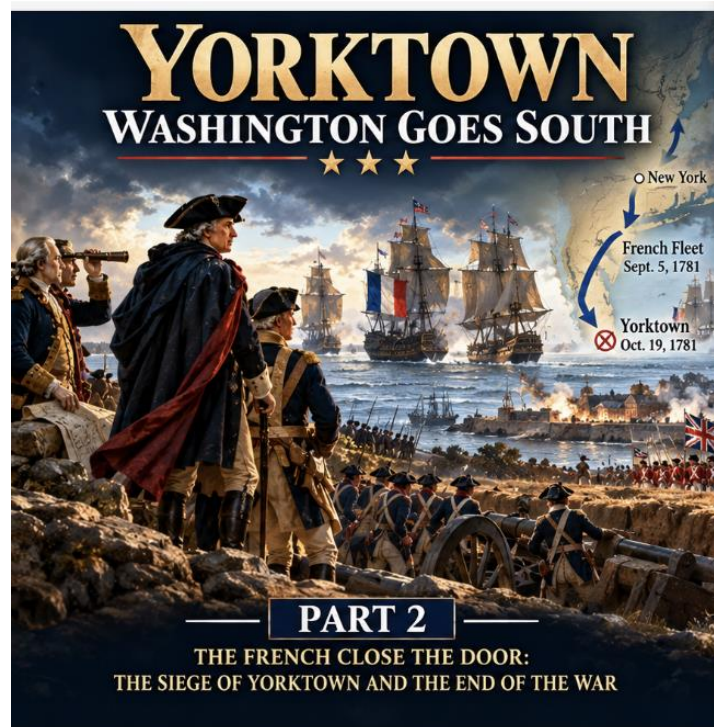




## How the British Lost the War

### Part 2—Yorktown: Washington Goes South

#### Washington Sees His Opportunity

For most of 1781, George Washington's attention remained fixed on the British stronghold at New York. With French forces under the Comte de Rochambeau available to cooperate with him, Washington hoped that a combined American-French attack might finally dislodge Sir Henry Clinton and his principal British army.

Then the strategic picture changed.

Cornwallis had established his army at Yorktown, Virginia, on the Chesapeake. At almost the same time, Washington learned that French Admiral François de Grasse was bringing a powerful fleet from the Caribbean toward Chesapeake Bay.

Washington recognized the opportunity.

Instead of attacking the strongest British position in America, he would leave Clinton sitting in New York and move the combined American and French armies hundreds of miles south against Cornwallis. Washington took pains to conceal his intentions and encourage Clinton to believe that New York remained the intended target.

The man who had survived the Revolution by refusing to risk his army unnecessarily was now prepared to gamble on one enormous opportunity.

## The French Close the Door

Everything depended upon the sea.

Cornwallis had positioned himself at Yorktown partly because British control of the Atlantic had traditionally given British armies operating along the coast an enormous advantage. If necessary, the Royal Navy could reinforce, resupply or evacuate them.

That advantage suddenly disappeared.

On **September 5, 1781**, a British fleet under Rear Admiral Thomas Graves encountered de Grasse's French fleet near the entrance to Chesapeake Bay. In the **Battle of the Chesapeake**, sometimes called the Battle of the Virginia Capes, the two fleets fought an inconclusive tactical engagement.

Strategically, however, the result could hardly have been more decisive.

The British fleet withdrew to New York. De Grasse returned to Chesapeake Bay.

### The French had closed the door.

Cornwallis could no longer escape by sea, and Clinton could not easily reach him from New York. Meanwhile, American and French troops were approaching from the north, while Lafayette's forces helped contain Cornwallis in Virginia.

For perhaps the first time in the war, British naval superiority could not rescue a trapped British army.

## Washington Arrives

Washington and Rochambeau moved their combined forces rapidly south. It was an extraordinary logistical achievement involving thousands of soldiers, artillery, horses and supplies moving hundreds of miles from the New York area to Virginia.

By late September, the allied armies were assembling around Yorktown.

Cornwallis now faced approximately **17,600 American and French troops** with an army of about **8,300 British and German soldiers**. The Americans and French began constructing siege trenches and bringing heavy artillery closer to the British defenses.

Washington had spent most of the Revolution avoiding the destruction of his own army.

Now he was in position to destroy someone else's.

## Saratoga Happens Again

The similarities between Yorktown and Saratoga were striking.

In 1777, Burgoyne had advanced deep into hostile territory expecting assistance that did not arrive in time. American forces gathered around him until retreat became impossible. Eventually, an entire British army surrendered.

Four years later, Cornwallis found himself in a remarkably similar predicament.

The circumstances were not identical. Burgoyne's disaster resulted largely from Britain's confused and poorly coordinated strategy in 1777. Cornwallis's predicament resulted from a more complicated combination of the Southern Campaign, his operational decisions, disagreements and communications with Clinton—and, decisively, French control of the Chesapeake.

But the strategic result was much the same.

A British army had become isolated from the main British force at New York while the Americans concentrated overwhelming strength against it.

## The Siege Tightens

American and French artillery began pounding British positions on October 9. As the siege lines moved closer, Washington needed to capture two British defensive positions—Redoubts 9 and 10—that blocked further progress.

On the night of October 14, French troops attacked Redoubt 9 while American troops under Alexander Hamilton assaulted Redoubt 10. Both positions fell.

The allied siege lines could now be extended closer to the British defenses. Artillery fire intensified, British positions deteriorated, and Cornwallis's options disappeared one by one.

He attempted to move troops across the York River during the night of October 16–17 in hopes of breaking through the allied forces on the opposite bank. A storm disrupted the attempt.

The trap had finally closed completely.

## October 19, 1781

Cornwallis requested terms.

On **October 19, 1781**, more than 7,000 British and German soldiers marched out and surrendered their weapons. Cornwallis himself did not attend the formal surrender ceremony, pleading illness, and sent Brigadier General Charles O'Hara in his place. Then came one of the great ironies of the Revolution.

Clinton had been preparing a relief expedition from New York. A British force of roughly 5,000 men finally sailed south—**on October 19, the very day Cornwallis surrendered.** The help had come too late.

## Winning Battles Wasn't Enough

From Brandywine to Yorktown, a pattern emerges.

The British defeated Washington at Brandywine and captured Philadelphia—but Washington's army survived. Burgoyne advanced from Canada—but became isolated and surrendered at Saratoga. Britain captured Savannah and Charleston and defeated Greene at Guilford Courthouse—but American resistance continued. Cornwallis marched into Virginia looking for a decisive result—but found himself trapped at Yorktown.

The Americans certainly made mistakes, lost battles and suffered terrible hardships. Their ultimate victory also depended heavily upon French money, soldiers and, at Yorktown, indispensable French naval power.

But the strategic burden was fundamentally different for the two sides. The Americans did not have to conquer Britain. **They had to keep the Revolution alive.** Britain had to destroy that Revolution across an enormous territory while simultaneously defending a worldwide empire and maintaining armies thousands of miles from home.

Saratoga made that task enormously harder by bringing France openly into the war. Yorktown demonstrated the consequences. The British had won at Brandywine. They had occupied Philadelphia. They had captured Charleston and won at Guilford Courthouse. Yet Washington's army remained.

And as long as that army remained, so did the Revolution.

**Britain discovered the hard way that winning battles, capturing capitals and occupying territory are not necessarily the same thing as winning a war.**