

# “To Gain the Hearts and Subdue the Minds of America”: General Sir Henry Clinton and the Conduct of the British War for America<sup>1</sup>

ANDREW JACKSON O'SHAUGHNESSY

Vice President

Thomas Jefferson Foundation at Monticello

Professor of History

University of Virginia

We know much about the Confederacy during the Civil War, but relatively few studies of the British during the Revolutionary War exist. It was a war that Britain seemingly should have won. Its failure to do so is popularly blamed on poor leadership. The generals, admirals, and politicians are portrayed as incompetent blunderers. This fact is as true in Britain as in America. It is most apparent in the media and films, which, regrettably, have the most influence on public perception of the past. It is also pronounced in popular histories, such as Barbara Tuchman's *The March of Folly: From Troy to Vietnam* (1984), in which one third of the book is devoted to the failures of British leadership in the Revolutionary War. It even permeates academic literature, in which scholars often use terms such as “hide-bound” and “mediocre.” It is a curious thesis because it diminishes the achievements of American generals, such as George Washington and

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1 The text of this article was delivered as the first Richard S. Dunn Symposium lecture at the Autumn General Meeting of the American Philosophical Society on 17 November 2011. The invitation to give this presentation was a particular honor for me, for my doctoral thesis at Oxford University was examined by Richard Dunn in 1988. It is a pleasure to recall the subsequent friendship and mentorship, for which I shall always be grateful to Richard. A version of the article was prepared, with illustrations but without notes, for the summer issue of *Military History* magazine in 2013. The subject is treated at greater length in my book *The Men Who Lost America: British Leadership, the American Revolution and the Fate of the Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 207–47.

Nathanael Greene. It is also a caricature of eighteenth-century Britain, which only three decades later defeated Napoleon.

General Sir Henry Clinton is one of ten biographical subjects, the leading decision-makers in the British war for America, in my book *The Men Who Lost America: British Leadership, the American Revolution and the Fate of the Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), which challenges the traditional stereotypes and offers an alternative explanation of the British loss of America. He was the British commander-in-chief in America during the second half of the war, between 1778 and 1782. Only one biography of him, which was written by William B. Willcox in 1962, exists. It happens to be one of the best of any commanders on either side of the war; it won the Bancroft Prize awarded by the American Historical Association. However, it was written at the height of the popularity of psychohistory. Willcox even collaborated with a colleague in the psychology department at the University of Michigan to write an article on Clinton for the leading journal in early American history, the *William and Mary Quarterly*. Willcox argued that the general had an obsessive-compulsive personality, which the biography treated as the chief source of his difficulties rather than focusing on his circumstances.<sup>2</sup>

Clinton certainly had neurotic characteristics. In August 1779, Charles Stuart, a young colonel in the 26th Regiment, wrote to his father describing a meeting with Clinton, who had “tears in his eyes” and said that he felt “incapable of his station.” “Believe me,” he continued, “I envy that Grenadier who is passing the door, and would exchange with joy [our] situations . . . [L]et me advise you never to take command of an army.” Clinton told him that he knew he was “hated, nay, detested in the Army.” He claimed that he was determined to go home and that he had been so ill-used “that I can no longer bear with this life.” Clinton had indeed tried to resign while still second in command to Sir William Howe, and he tried again after his appointment to senior command at the age of 48 in 1778. He offered to serve anywhere else—even “God Forbid! Florida.” His outburst in front of a

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2 William B. Willcox, *Portrait of a General: Sir Henry Clinton in the War of Independence* (New York: Knopf, 1964); Frederick Wyatt, and William B. Willcox, “Sir Henry Clinton: A Psychological Exploration in History,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 16 (January 1959): 3–26. Elsewhere, Willcox elaborates his belief that poor leadership was the cause of the British failure to win the American War (Willcox, “The British Road to Yorktown: A Study in Divided Command,” *American Historical Review* 52.1 [October 1946]: 1–35; idem, “Why Did the British Lose the American Revolution?” *Michigan Alumnus Quarterly Review* 62 [1956]: 317–24; idem, “British Strategy in America, 1778,” *Journal of Modern History* 19.2 [June 1947]: 97–121; idem, “Too Many Cooks: British Planning before Saratoga,” *Journal of British Studies* 2.1 [November 1962]: 56–90).

junior officer was one of many manifestations of his neurotic personality, which led him to be hypersensitive, capricious, irritable, and unable to accept criticism. He felt it necessary to justify himself publicly for every reversal and blame everyone but himself. He was a loner who failed to consult sufficiently with his senior officers and was not popular with his men. Nevertheless, he was one of the most cerebral officers in the army, with the largest personal library of military manuals, which he annotated and read in detail. His anxiety reflected the reality of his overwhelming situation, which virtually precluded the possibility of Britain winning the American War of Independence.<sup>3</sup>

Before becoming commander-in-chief, Clinton had been a gifted and successful soldier who anticipated the retrospective judgment of every modern armchair general in his brilliant critique of his commander, Sir William Howe. He had advised against a frontal assault at the Battle of Bunker Hill and had suggested fortifying the Dorchester Heights in advance of Washington (1775). His plan of attack was adopted by General Howe at the Battle of Long Island (1776), which was one of the greatest British victories in the Revolutionary War. Although his first independent campaign was a fiasco at Charleston, he quickly recovered with his capture of Newport and his command of the invasion of Manhattan at Kip's Bay (1776). He advocated a bolder strategy against Manhattan to land north of King's Bridge and cut off Washington's retreat across the Harlem River. He had warned Howe that his chain of posts was too thinly spread across New Jersey and was proved right by Washington's success against Trenton. He foresaw and tried to prevent the disastrous train of events leading to Saratoga (1777). He pleaded with Howe not to go to Philadelphia, but to march north to join Burgoyne at Albany. Left in what he called "a damned starved" command in New York, he nevertheless created a diversion in favor of Burgoyne by marching north into the Hudson Highlands, which succeeded in alarming Horatio Gates into offering Burgoyne particularly generous surrender terms in the Saratoga Convention.

As commander-in-chief in America between 1778 and 1782, Clinton was a gifted strategist who grasped the realities of the war and understood the precarious military situation facing the British. As the son of an admiral and the brother-in-law of two admirals, he particularly understood the importance of British naval supremacy in

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3 Charles Stuart to Lord Bute, 7 October 1778, in *A Prime Minister and His Son: From the Correspondence of the Third Earl of Bute and of Lt.-Gen. The Hon. Charles Stuart, K.B.*, ed. The Hon. Mrs. E. Stuart Wortley (London: John Murray, 1925), 139; Clinton to Germain, 2 May 1778, CO/5/96, National Archives, Kew; Willcox, "British Strategy in America, 1778," *Journal of Modern History* 19, no. 2 (June 1947), 97-121.

supporting the army in America. He foresaw the potential for disaster if the British navy proved inferior to the French. He constantly warned that a detachment of the army operating outside New York was likely to be stranded if there were a superior French fleet off the coast of America, which was to be the fate of Cornwallis at Yorktown. He was well aware that Britain had come close to defeat on several occasions before Yorktown. He never took it for granted that he would have naval support and was consequently more hesitant about risk.

Clinton critically understood that force alone was not enough and that it was necessary, in his words, "to gain the hearts and subdue the minds of America." He doubted that it was possible to conquer the country, and "whether it was worthwhile to have it when conquered" without having the affections of the people. Although he dismissed the "idea of conquering America without the assistance of Friends," he was skeptical of government faith in the potential for loyalist support. This doubt was apparent in a meeting with Lord George Germain, the British secretary of state for America, in London in April 1777. During the course of their conversation, Germain asked him a rhetorical question in which he suggested that the rebels would be unable to raise an army for the next campaign and that they were growing less able every day. Clinton replied that the inability of the rebels was no "greater than ours." When Cornwallis invaded Virginia in 1781, Clinton wrote that this endeavor was pointless if "we have not their hearts—which I fear cannot be expected in Virginia . . . [W]e may conquer [but] we shall never keep."<sup>4</sup>

Clinton saw little value in taking territory only to abandon it, disappointing local loyalists who would become disillusioned. Thus, he disparaged government plans to send expeditions that would rally loyalists to make them self-sustaining and then withdraw. In such an event, he believed, the loyalists would be left to the vengeance of the rebels, and the example would deter others from rallying to the royal standard. He regarded a cut-and-run policy as a betrayal of trust that would also encumber the army with a refugee problem. He spoke of the need for what he called *solid campaigns*, ones that gained and retained ground. The possession of territory therefore required permanent garrisons of regular troops. He respected the fighting abilities of the Continental Army and the leadership of George Washington. After

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4 Report of conversation with L[ord] D[rummond] and Tryon, 7 Feb. [1776], Clinton Papers, William L. Clements Library, 13: 36; Sir Henry Clinton, "Account of his Conversation with Germain," 7 April 1777, vol. 20, f. 47; Paul H. Smith, *Loyalists and Redcoats: A Study in British Revolutionary Policy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1964), 91; Clinton to Germain, 9 June 1781, CO 5/102, no. 130, National Archives, Kew; Willcox, *The American Rebellion*, 528–29.

he had received news of the British defeat at Trenton (1776), he wrote that “we have held them too cheap.”<sup>5</sup>

In his military operations as commander-in-chief, Clinton exhibited some of the same tactical brilliance that he had demonstrated as a junior commander. In obedience to his first order to abandon Philadelphia and withdraw to New York, he succeeded in extricating some 20,000 troops, 3,000 loyalists, and 1,500 men, with Washington’s army in pursuit and a superior French fleet commanded by Admiral d’Estaing off the coast. His opponents missed one of the best early opportunities to cripple the British on a scale far greater than at Yorktown. Despite Washington’s claim of victory, Clinton deflected an attack at the Battle of Monmouth (28 June 1778), resuming his march without the loss of a single wagon on arriving in New York. In 1780, Clinton achieved the summit of his military career with the siege and capture of the largest and wealthiest city in the South: Charleston. His plan to return immediately from the South and crush Washington’s army in New Jersey was foiled by a premature attack launched by his deputy, at the behest of local loyalists, in New York. Clinton had never believed in focusing the war effort in the South but instead advocated concentrating on the defeat of Washington in New York, for which he thought it essential to capture the Hudson Highlands. He succeeded in taking the fortresses that acted as the gateway to the North with a view to capturing West Point, which he nearly achieved in 1780. He had built up an effective espionage network from virtually nothing, and he personally began the correspondence to instigate the betrayal of West Point by the general in command, Benedict Arnold. The plan, of course, was famously foiled—but only by chance.<sup>6</sup>

Despite these achievements, Clinton was perceived as too cautious, engaging in a series of desultory campaigns and frittering away opportunities by remaining inert with the main body of his army in New York. During the campaign season in 1779, Clinton was much criticized by contemporaries for his seeming inertia and for launching widely dispersed expeditions, but he had good reason. He had delayed the beginning of the campaign season for 5 months because he was awaiting the return of 5,000 of his best troops from St. Lucia and reinforcements from Britain. The troops from St. Lucia never returned, and the reinforcements did not arrive until August, when Chief Justice William Smith wrote in his journal that both civilians and soldiers in New York were “disgusted and dispirited” by the inactivity of Clinton.

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5 Clinton to Germain, 25 August 1780, CO 5/100, National Archives, Kew; Willcox, *Portrait of a General*, 126, 127, 831.

6 Roger Kaplan, “British Intelligence Operations during the American Revolution,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 47.1 (January 1990): 115–38.

According to Smith, "the Boys in the Army hint their Contempt of the General, and common Soldiers murmur." Smith wrote deprecatingly about how Clinton was constantly on the move "and yet about Nothing." On visiting a post of the Queen's Rangers and light infantry, the Hessian captain Johann von Ewald "found that all the officers of this corps were speaking badly about General Clinton." He attributed it to boredom and "continual monotony," together with the poor conditions of officers living in inadequate quarters and men sleeping in tents with "ruined horses, worn-out clothing, and empty purses." Clinton's inactivity was even mocked in rebel satires:

What's odd for Sir Harry, he nothing begun,  
Kept close to his works—without firing a gun.  
But, perhaps, th' poor man could not get on his legs,  
After sitting so long—like a hen o'er spoil'd eggs.

In October, William Tryon, the governor of New York, "expressed his Apprehension that the poor Man knew not what to do." Toward the end of that year in London, Thomas Hutchinson wrote in his diary of widespread belief that Clinton had "lain still all the summer, merely from indecision and a fluctuating state of mind." This opinion was also the retrospective view of many military historians who regarded his virtual stagnation and multiplicity of disjointed offensives as mere excuses to waver and delay.<sup>7</sup>

Clinton might seem superficially comparable to George B. McClellan during the Civil War, but his anxiety and apparent lethargy were due primarily to his situation. He was expected to win the war with fewer professional troops and less naval support than his predecessors, while Britain was simultaneously at war with France, and later Spain and the Netherlands. On his appointment as commander-in-chief, he was ordered to release 5,000 troops for the Caribbean, 3,000 for Florida and Georgia, 2,000 for Halifax, and 300 for garrisons in Bermuda and the Bahamas. The government initially expected him merely to maintain a defensive position and even gave him permission to withdraw from New York to Halifax. The cabinet was divided over whether to abandon the war in America to focus on the global war with France in the Caribbean, Europe, and India. Clinton complained to his dying day that the

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7 Clinton to Germain, 20 August 1779, CO 5/98, National Archives, Kew; W. H. W. Sabine, ed., *Historical Memoirs of William Smith 1778–1783*, 2 vols. (New York: New York Times, 1971): 173, 157, 177; Johann von Ewald, *Diary of the American War: A Hessian Journal*, trans. and ed. Joseph Tustin (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 159–60, 178; Bruce Ingham Granger, *Political Satire in the American Revolution 1763–1783* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1960), 185–88; Peter Orlando Hutchinson, ed., *The Diary and Letters of His Excellency Thomas Hutchinson, Esq.*, 2 vols. (New York: Burt Franklin, 1971), 24 November 1779; 2: 298.

5,000 troops sent on an expedition to St. Lucia, owing to a clause in the contracts of the German auxiliaries prohibiting service in the Caribbean, were “the very nerves of his army” because they represented some of the finest officers and regiments in the British army. Although their return was promised, the soldiers serving in the expedition never rejoined Clinton’s army in New York. He received only 4,700 reinforcements to make up the loss of 19,200 men. The British naval presence also declined proportionally from 41% of the fleet in the summer of 1778, to 9% in the summer of 1779, 13% in the summer of 1780, and 11% in the summer of 1781. Clinton was literally incapacitated in his ability to launch expeditions in 1779 and early 1780 by the presence of a superior French fleet commanded by d’Estaing. He was further hindered by the inadequacy of supplies from Britain, which the army needed owing to its failure to occupy large areas of territory in America. It prevented him from opening the campaign earlier in 1779. Thanks to the recent work of the editors of the Washington Papers in Charlottesville, it has become increasingly apparent that Clinton was right in expecting a major joint attack by Washington and the French fleet in New York. It was averted only by the decision of the French admirals in two successive years to not engage in joint operations with Washington. It represented yet more lost patriot opportunities to inflict an earlier defeat in the war against Britain.<sup>8</sup>

In the months before Yorktown, Clinton began to behave erratically and became almost incoherent in his strategy. He suffered periodic spells of blindness. He sent contradictory and unclear orders to Cornwallis in Virginia. He alternated between fantastical schemes to reoccupy Rhode Island and Philadelphia. Despite his need for naval support, he quarreled disastrously with Admiral Mariot Arbuthnot, describing him as “false as hell” and as an “old dotard.” His behavior again reflected the reality of his circumstances. He had been undermined by the home government, which preferred the bolder strategy of Lord Cornwallis, with whom Germain corresponded directly from London. Clinton had ordered Cornwallis to not advance into North

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8 Willcox, *Portrait of a General*, 242; Clinton to Germain, New York, 8 October 1778, CO/5/96, National Archives, Kew, also printed in the appendix to Sir Henry Clinton, *The American Rebellion: Sir Henry Clinton’s Narrative of his Campaigns, 1775–1782*, ed. William B. Willcox (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954), 97; William B. Willcox, “Sir Henry Clinton: Paralysis of Command,” in *George Washington’s Generals and Opponents*, ed. George Athan Billias, 100, no. 8 (New York: Da Capo Press, 1994); Conway, *The War of American Independence*, 158; Jonathan R. Dull, *The French Navy and American Independence: A Study of Arms and Diplomacy, 1774–1787* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 359–76; R. Arthur Bowler, “Logistics and Operations in the American Revolution,” in *Reconsiderations on the Revolutionary War: Selected Essays*, ed. Don Higginbotham, 67 (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1978).

Carolina without first securing South Carolina and to not enter Virginia until he had secured North Carolina. They disagreed fundamentally on strategy. Clinton thought it essential to win hearts and minds by giving the loyalists continued support rather than following what he regarded as the reckless methods of Cornwallis. Clinton better understood the vulnerability of Cornwallis in the event of the arrival of a larger French fleet. He was in disbelief when he discovered that Cornwallis had disobeyed his instructions and marched into Virginia despite the high casualties suffered by his army at Guildford Courthouse (1781). Finally, Clinton was immobilized in his efforts to rescue Cornwallis by the delays in repairing the fleet after the naval battle of the Chesapeake Capes and the apparent obstruction of Admiral Thomas Graves. His army and the fleet did not arrive off the Chesapeake until after Cornwallis's surrender at Yorktown.<sup>9</sup>

Clinton spent the rest of his life preoccupied by his belief that he had been made a scapegoat for the British defeat in America. He embroiled himself in a public feud by writing a series of pamphlets attacking Cornwallis. He became obsessed with vindicating himself. He even had a dream in which an abject Lord Cornwallis made a formal apology to him for Yorktown. His tirades now fill two volumes of his papers. He laboriously worked on a three-volume justification of his conduct entitled "An Historical Detail of Seven Years Campaigns in North America"; the manuscript was possibly intended as a book but was never published by Clinton.<sup>10</sup> These memoirs contain much fabrication. It is not surprising that they were distorted, since he had permitted a strategy he had not devised, one that ran counter to his basic instinct. It was unfortunate that his first positive order to Cornwallis in months was to occupy a naval port in the Chesapeake and that he refused to grant Cornwallis's wish to leave Virginia. He expected at the same time that Cornwallis would return the majority of his troops to New York. In accusing Cornwallis, Clinton obscured the real reason for the British failure at Yorktown. In reality, both commanders were acting under a misapprehension encouraged by assurances from the home government that the British fleet would be sufficiently reinforced to combat the French. The loss of a British fleet would have had larger global consequences than the surrender of Cornwallis's army at

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<sup>9</sup> Willcox, *The American Rebellion*, 166; Sabine, *Historical Memoirs of William Smith*, 2: 390; Steuart, *The Last Journals of Horace Walpole*, 2: 402; Willcox, *Portrait of a General*, 485n.

<sup>10</sup> Sir Henry Clinton. *The American Rebellion. The British Commander-in-Chief's Narrative of his Campaigns, 1775-1782*, ed. William B. Willcox (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954).



Yorktown, which is why Graves dithered in New York and refused to consider another battle with de Grasse.<sup>11</sup>

The tragedy of Clinton's later life was that the public was no longer interested in the American war. The memoirist Horace Walpole described the way the Revolution was forgotten in Britain owing to the vast variety of new concerns, writing acidly that the events of the war would forever remain obscure, together with Clinton. Walpole thought that the nation did not have the patience to sift through the multiplicity of difficult questions about the war, when the evidence had been concealed by ministers, the events had been transacted at a great distance, the witnesses were in many cases absent, and the various parties affirmed or denied allegations with equal heat. He reflected on the irony that the nation had originally supported the politicians and generals who had waged the war with such warmth, "and now forgot them with equal levity." Clinton was well aware of the public apathy, but he believed that Britain would one day have to contend with America. He thought that the United States would seek to expand until it had absorbed Canada, the Caribbean, and Spanish America. He believed that it was important to remember the American Revolution because he predicted that Britain would fight another war against the United States, and he was indeed proven right in 1812. He regarded such a war as desirable because of the threat American expansionism posed to British commercial interests in the Americas and the Caribbean.<sup>12</sup>

Quoting Macbeth, "Thou canst not say I did it," Clinton protested to the end of his life that he had been made the scapegoat for the British loss of America. It was not the *cri de coeur* of someone who was out of his mind but rather the lament of a rational man who had commanded with insufficient resources while his authority was undermined by his own government. After Yorktown, he had preserved the remainder of the British army in New York and Charleston, making it possible for George III and Germain to consider continuing the war for America. An eyewitness at the battle of Yorktown, Captain Johann von Ewald, believed that it would have been "the greatest impossibility" for Clinton to have rescued Cornwallis: "[I]n a word, the whole thing seemed to me a delusion." Ewald thought that "to lay the entire blame on him is too severe, because the chief mistake lay with the admiral of the fleet, who let himself be hoaxed by the Comte de Grasse when the latter

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11 Clinton, *The American Rebellion: Sir Henry Clinton's Narrative of His Campaigns, 1775-1782*, ed. Willcox.

12 *The Last Journals of Horace Walpole during the Reign of George III*, ed. A. F. Steuart, 2 vols. (London: John Lane, 1910), 2: 402.

entered the Chesapeake contrary to expectations.” Clinton had always been skeptical of the great fallacy in Britain that the majority of Americans would support Britain. It was ultimately the failure to win such support that led to the British loss of America.<sup>13</sup>

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13 Willcox, *Portrait of a General*, 490; Ewald, *Diary of the American War*, 337, 338.