

American Strengths and Weaknesses

The Patriots began their revolution in a weak position. They had a hastily organized, untrained army and a tiny navy. Their weaknesses were far more obvious than their strengths.

American Weaknesses

The Continental Army was always short of men. General Washington never had more than 20,000 troops at one time and place. Many soldiers enlisted for six months or a year. Just when they were learning how to fight, they would pick up their muskets and go home to tend to their farms and families.

Few Americans were trained for battle. Some could shoot well enough from behind a tree. But when facing a mass of well-disciplined redcoats, they were likely to turn and run.

The army was plagued by shortages. Guns and gunpowder were so scarce that Benjamin Franklin suggested arming the troops with bows and arrows. Food shortages forced soldiers to beg for handouts. Uniforms were scarce as well. In winter, one could track shoeless soldiers by their bloody footprints in the snow.

Such shortages outraged Washington. But when he complained to the Continental Congress, nothing changed. Congress, the new nation's only government, lacked the power to raise money for supplies by taxing the states (the former colonies).

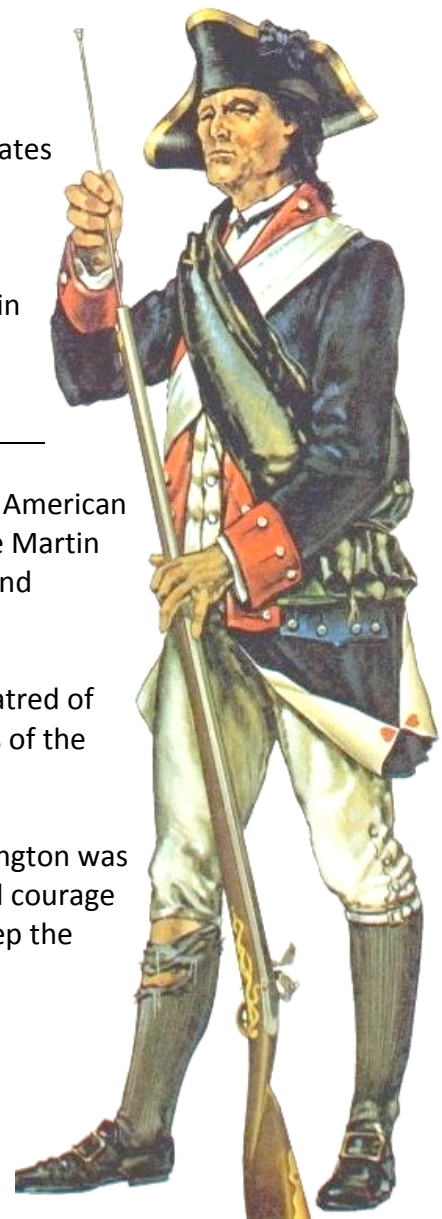
In desperation, Congress printed paper money to pay for the war. But the value of this money dropped so low that merchants demanded to be paid in gold instead. And like everything else, gold was scarce.

American Strengths

Still, the Americans had strengths. One was the patriotism of people like Joseph Martin, a teenaged boy who wanted nothing more than to join the American army and become a soldier despite often desperate conditions. People like Martin willingly gave their lives to defend the ideal of a country based on liberty and democracy. Without them, the war would have been quickly lost.

The Americans also received help from overseas. Motivated by their old hatred of the English, the French secretly aided the rebels. During the first two years of the war, ninety percent of the Americans' gunpowder came from France.

The Americans' other great strength was their commander. George Washington was more than an experienced military leader. He was also a man who inspired courage and confidence. In the dark days of war, it was Washington who would keep the ragtag Continental Army together.



British Strengths and Weaknesses

Britain, in contrast to the American colonies, entered the war with many advantages. But looks can be deceiving, and the British encountered many problems as well.

British Strengths

With a professional army of 50,000 troops, British forces greatly outnumbered the Continental Army. In addition, George III hired 30,000 mercenaries (professional soldiers who fight for anyone who pays them). These hired soldiers were known as Hessians because they came from a part of Germany called Hesse-Cassel. The British were also able to recruit many loyalists, African Americans, and Native Americans into their forces.

British and Hessian troops were well trained in European military tactics. They excelled in large battles fought by a mass of troops on open ground. They also had far more experience than Americans at firing artillery.

The British forces were also well supplied. Compared to the pitifully equipped Continental Army, they seldom lacked for food, uniforms, weapons, or ammunition.

British Weaknesses

Even so, the war presented Britain with huge problems. One was the distance between Britain and America. Sending troops and supplies across the Atlantic was slow and costly. News of battles arrived in England long after they had occurred, making planning difficult.

A second problem was that King George and his ministers were never able to convince the British people that defeating the rebels was vital to Britain's future. There were no Joseph Martins in England volunteering to fight the Americans. The longer the war dragged on, the less happy British taxpayers were about paying its heavy costs.

A third problem was poor leadership. Lord George Germain, the man chosen to run the war, had no real sense of how to defeat the rebels. How could he? He had never set foot in America. Nor did it occur to him to go see for himself what his army was up against. If he had, Germain might have realized that this was not a war that could be won by conquering a city or two. To end the revolution, his forces would have to crush the Patriots' will to fight, state by state. Instead, Germain kept changing plans and generals, hoping that some combination of the two would bring him an easy victory.

