

British vs. American Military: A Comparison

AT THE START OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION (1775–1783), the 13 colonies that would become the United States were ill-prepared for the conflict. Though the colonists were committed to independence, they lacked a strong central decision-making body to plan, organize, and execute a war. They also lacked money, food, clothes, medical supplies, weapons, and training. Great Britain, on the other

hand, enjoyed a large war chest, a well-trained army, and the strongest naval force on earth. The British found themselves at a disadvantage, however, in the face of Continental hit-and-run guerrilla war tactics and aid to the rebels from France and Spain. With the help of its allies and on the strength of its ideals, the United States emerged victorious.



British grenadier, 57th Regiment



Rifles of the Revolution



Doctor bandages soldier's foot.



Militia infantryman, Continental Army

British Advantages

- British forces superior to American forces in experience, training, equipment, and organization.
- At the beginning of the war, British forces outnumbered Continental forces; for example, British general William Howe's expeditionary force in 1776 numbered 32,000, compared to American general George Washington's force of less than 20,000.
- Britain's navy was the biggest and strongest in the world.
- Abundance of funding allowed for long-term war planning and the hiring of foreign mercenaries for reinforcements.
- Britain had key alliance with Iroquois and other Native American peoples.
- British bases in Canada provided a stable base of attack.
- Almost a third of colonists were still loyal to King George III.
- Splintered families, with brother fighting against brother, undermined American unity.
- A weak central governing authority placed the Continentals at a disadvantage.
- Britain's total population was three times that of colonies, providing a larger pool of potential recruits.

American Advantages

- Patriot zeal for independence, in contrast to lower motivation among opposing troops, especially Hessian mercenaries.
- Superior knowledge of home ground coupled with effective guerrilla warfare tactics, such as attacking from the rear and adopting enemy uniforms as a disguise.
- Financial and military aid from France and Spain.
- Whereas Britain changed its commander in chief in the middle of the war, American commander in chief George Washington saw the war through from beginning to end.
- Though improperly trained in warfare compared with the British, Continentals were familiar with guns and had gained experience and skills fighting Native Americans.
- Poor decision-making on the part of the British, including over-cautiousness and delays in moving troops, helped the Patriots win.
- Though some colonists were Loyalists, they were not as well-organized as the Patriots; many Loyalists feared harassment and therefore kept their sympathies private.
- The British public was divided and tentative in its support of the war.
- The Continentals supported themselves from a sympathetic surrounding population, whereas the British had to supply themselves from thousands of miles away.