

# Military Leaders Have Always Sought the Best Information About the British Have Won at Yorktown

*The victory of the Americans and French at Yorktown, Virginia, on October 19, 1781, secured the independence of the United States and was a tribute to their ingenuity and perseverance. For General Charles Lord Cornwallis, the British commander, it was an admonition against going into battle without adequate geographical information and intelligence. Information we today call geospatial intelligence or GEOINT.*

By Bruce Heinlein



A painting of Yorktown prior to the battle. Credit: National Park Service, Colonial National Historical Park, Yorktown Collection.

Military leaders have always sought the best information about their surroundings. Obviously commanders want to know about their opponents: their strength, location, and ability to maneuver and fight. The terrain, the obstacles to movement and the dangers of the environment: swamps, rivers, water currents, or an area's tendency for bad weather, are equally important. How then did the British become trapped in this small port at a bend in the York River?

## A Costly War for Both Sides

The road to Yorktown for Lord Cornwallis was circuitous, but with no indication that it would result in disaster. The British had fought and won numerous victories throughout the Southern Campaign of the American Revolution which had been costly for both sides. The British won major victories at Savannah and Charlestown, and hoped to cut off support for the Revolutionary cause and bolster Loyalist support for the Crown.

But the disaster at Cowpens in January 1781, which inflicted a very unexpected and severe blow to Cornwallis, robbed the British of a sizable part of its force in the South. Then, two months later, near victory for the Americans at Guilford Courthouse further weakened the British. Nevertheless, after the battle Lord Cornwallis thought significant resistance in the Carolinas was over, and he decided to venture to Virginia.

His army moved to Wilmington, North Carolina, for resupply and then into Virginia. Opposing the British in Virginia was the General Marquis de Lafayette and a small American force. As Cornwallis advanced, Lafayette withdrew to the north. But instead of chasing them, Cornwallis chose to rest at Yorktown and wait for naval supplies. This decision set the stage for disaster.

## An Unsuitable Defensive Location

Although records do not indicate why Lord Cornwallis chose Yorktown, he completely mis-

understood Yorktown's suitability as a fortress. The city had boomed with the advent of the tobacco industry, but was now in decline. Norfolk and Portsmouth had clearly surpassed Yorktown as ports. And while Yorktown had 300 homes and some docks, the cliff the town stood upon completely blocked potential British naval support of the army. Likewise, the York River was wide at Yorktown, and while warships could anchor there, an escape attempt across the river faced significant challenges from the currents. And finally, while the town offered a small frontage for the British to defend, that frontage and the ravines leading out of the town limited avenues for breakout attempts. Thus, the geography and environment of the site were almost completely unsuitable for a substantive defense. The only argument favoring Yorktown was that access to the river and a defensible line should have allowed the sheer force of the Royal Navy and British Army to prevail. The British fleet was expected to control access to the great Chesapeake Bay and thereby Yorktown. The army under Lord Cornwallis could outfight any small force the Americans might throw against it. This argument was wrong in both assumptions.

## Strategic Mobility Lost

Unfortunately for the British, a French fleet arrived off the Chesapeake in August, less than a month after Lord Cornwallis, and blocked British access to the bay. A British fleet arrived



General Charles Lord Cornwallis  
Credit: National Park Service, Colonial National Historical Park, Yorktown Collection.

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in September to find the Chesapeake in French control. The two fleets fought an inconclusive naval battle that yielded strategic results: the French fleet returned to the blockade, and the British fleet withdrew to New York. British strategic mobility had melted away.

Worse, the British commander had no idea that the bulk of the Continental Army, led by General George Washington himself, was moving to Yorktown for a strategic battle. This movement from New York to Virginia was the best deception and greatest strategic mobility effort by the Americans during the war. The bulk of the American Army arrived in Virginia before Cornwallis' headquarters was aware the Americans were moving. Lord Cornwallis' intelligence failed him, and he was now facing the majority of the American Army which was soon joined by a French Army. The combined allied force quickly besieged the town. The British were now trapped.

## Would Reinforcements Arrive?

British supremacy over both the land and waters around Yorktown had been neutralized. The poor geography of Yorktown, once seemingly unimportant, was now critical to Lord Cornwallis' defense. Cornwallis had already begun to realize that failed geographical and intelligence information had helped put him into

a dire situation. His only remaining hope was that the reinforcements promised by General Clinton, the British Commander-in-Chief, would arrive soon. They did not. As the armies faced each other at Yorktown, both sides built and reinforced siege lines. The siege began and British casualties mounted. The confines of the small hamlet quickly became apparent as there was no shelter from the cannon fire except the small beach below the cliff. British naval gunfire was useless in support of ground forces. The British tried to escape across the York River, but currents and a storm prevented the escape. Washington tightened the siege lines and the British became more cramped. Approximately two weeks after the siege began, Lord Cornwallis' forces surrendered.

## A Failure to Use Intelligence Wisely

The strategic success of General Washington and the combined Franco-American forces at Yorktown was greatly aided by the failure of the British to use geospatial and intelligence information wisely. The defensive site at Yorktown paled in comparison to others locally available. Also, Cornwallis received intelligence late on the movement of the large Continental army from New York. If he had received this intelligence earlier, Lord Cornwallis might have broken out of Yorktown and escaped.

In the end, a third of the British Army in North America surrendered at Yorktown. Negotiations for peace continued, but the war was over. The most professional army in the world, with a long string of military victories in the American Revolution, was suddenly defeated and the war lost, in part because of poor geospatial information and intelligence.

## Importance

Geospatial information and intelligence, GEOINT, is always important. History, with its many examples of military commanders failing to heed its warnings, reminds us how crucially important GEOINT is, and the profession and the craft that provide it.

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