

Review - *The Men Who Lost America: British Command during the Revolutionary War and the Preservation of the Empire*. By O'SHAUGHNESSY, ANDREW. London: Oneworld Publications. 2013. 496 p; ISBN 978-1-78074-246-5.

Speaking on the BBC Radio 4 programme *Great Lives* in 2007, the British general Sir Michael Rose – who had chosen George Washington as his historical exemplar – claimed that the British lost America because they did not understand the war they were fighting. It is one of the central arguments of Andrew O'Shaughnessy's study that this was not the case. Contrary to the traditional image of the British military as hidebound aristocrats and their political leadership as reactionary and inept, the men who commanded the Empire's forces throughout what was to become a global war were seasoned professionals who rapidly learned to respect their opponents and who, at least as far as the military men were concerned, were often opposed to the coercive policies that had provoked the Revolution.

As the leading military and financial power of the age, Great Britain might have been expected to defeat the rebels without much difficulty. O'Shaughnessy's book carefully and persuasively shows why she did not. But this is not simply another military history of the War of Independence, this time from the 'other' side. Instead the author seeks to examine the strengths and weaknesses of the whole British command system in order to set the American war in its proper context, that of a worldwide struggle with the rival powers of France and Spain for the future of the Empire. He does this through a series of biographical studies of the leading figures: the politicians (George III and Lord North); the military commanders (the Howes, Burgoyne, Clinton, Cornwallis and Rodney); and those who, as war ministers, were both (Germain and Sandwich). Although this approach necessarily leads to a degree of repetition, it does serve to demonstrate the close interrelationship between military and political factors that most histories of the Revolution, dealing with one or the other, overlook.

The British military commanders in America were a professional caste, selected for their commands on merit rather than seniority, who invested in the training and exercise of their men, understood the principles of strategic planning and operational intelligence and were personally courageous. They largely respected their American opposite numbers and adapted rapidly to American conditions, particularly in their use of light infantry. Several, such as Howe and Burgoyne, had been MPs as well as professional soldiers and understood the war's political context: both opposed it or were ambivalent (despite supporting imperial rule) before being selected for command. Both returned claiming the war was unwinnable (because the Americans were adamant for independence). Nor were the politicians ignorant of military affairs: Germain, for example, had held military command prior to becoming Secretary of State for America.

However, if the British commanders are shown to have been competent, often the government is not, for it resolutely pursued an increasingly unworkable strategy that overestimated the extent of loyalism in the colonies and discounted (or simply did not understand) the Americans' revolutionary politics. The strategic challenge of re-conquering

America was too great for an eighteenth-century war machine (especially one with such a decentralised administrative system), and O'Shaughnessy even claims that the outcome was all but decided in the four months before the Declaration of Independence. The Americans were free from the moment they refused to accept the sovereignty of the crown, the onus being on the mother country to re-establish her authority. Given the advantages of defence the rebels enjoyed, and their often overwhelming numerical superiority, this was always going to be a tall order. The French entry into the war in 1778 dramatically changed the strategic balance, not only in America but also in Europe, as the government now had to contend with the threat of an invasion of the British Isles themselves.

This is not a conventional military history of the war, still less a political one, and the reader does not learn much in any systematic way about the mechanics of parliamentary government or party politics in the 1770s, or even about the general state of Great Britain or the British Empire. The French intervention is discussed mostly in terms of the British view of it, and the treatment of the Native American role in the war is brief. Nevertheless, what O'Shaughnessy does have to say on any of these subjects is pertinent. Above all, he succeeds in setting the American war in its wider context, giving due weight to operations in Canada and particularly in the Caribbean (the subject of the author's previous book), which was so important to Britain's commerce that at several points after 1778 the government accorded the war there priority over the North American theatre. If there is a common theme to O'Shaughnessy's analysis, it might be how the British Empire was nearly defeated by 'imperial overstretch': time and again he shows how supporting the army at such a distance was an almost impossible logistical challenge as London struggled to balance so many competing priorities. That the Empire survived at all was due to the professionalism and experience of its leadership.

Given that the book is clearly written for an American audience (O'Shaughnessy, a Briton, currently teaches at the University of Virginia), it is perhaps surprising that its author does not make explicit the parallel with the American experience in Vietnam. Nevertheless, the judgements are consistently sound, and students in particular will welcome the substantial endnotes and bibliography. Histories of conflicts are often written by the victors, but, as O'Shaughnessy notes (p.9), a 'British perspective is essential for making the war intelligible'. In this he has succeeded admirably.