

Fog-of-War: Decisions Made in the Fog

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The origin of the term "*fog of war*" is attributed to Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz (1780–1831) and is defined as the uncertainty of situational awareness experienced by participants in military operations before, during, and after the fighting. This uncertainty and confusion occur when the information available to an army is incomplete, inconsistent, late in arriving, difficult to manipulate, or hard to visualize. It can result from too much information as well as from too little.

The *fog of war* played a pivotal role in many of the campaigns during the Revolutionary War. At the Battle of Brooklyn Heights and the siege during the British retreat at Fish Creek in Saratoga (now Schuylerville), decisions made in the *fog-of-war* were influenced by actual atmospheric fog.

Fog of War at the Battle of Brooklyn Heights -- Aug 27-29, 1776

After having evacuated Boston in March 1776, on July 2nd British General William Howe with 400 warships arrived at Staten Island in New York Harbor with plans to capture New York City and gain control of the Hudson River. On August 27,th 30,00 British troops staged an attack on the western end of Long Island at a tiny hamlet called Brooklyn which consisted of only seven or eight houses and an old church. The British surrounded and overwhelmed the 10,000 American troops under the command of General George Washington. Americans suffered nearly 1,000 casualties, with 300 killed and another 1,000 captured. The Americans hastily retreated to a defense location along a three-mile shore line of the East River directly across from New York City, known as Brooklyn Heights.

The East River was not truly a river, but rather a saltwater estuary nearly a mile wide which was famously difficult to navigate with swift, contrary currents and tides often in excess of six feet. Experienced ferryboat crews often took more than an hour fighting the currents in order to cross the river.

While in pursuit of the retreating Americans, Howe received intelligence that the American force was trapped at the river's edge and that the British navy had the East River under control. Warships, such as the frigates *Phoenix* and *Rose* with a total of 64 guns under the command of Howe's brother (Admiral Richard Howe), were ready in New York Harbor off Staten Island

prepared to sail up the East River between Brooklyn and Manhattan to block any escape effort by Washington. Based upon the available intelligence Howe was convinced that Washington would surrender in a day or two.

Aware that he had no quick way to reinforce troop losses, Howe was unwilling under the circumstances to needlessly risk the customary casualties which were to be expected during an aggressive frontal attack against an enemy force. No doubt Howe was hoping to avoid a large number of casualties similar to those he suffered a year earlier at Bunker Hill. Assessing the available information, in the *fog of war*, Howe concluded that he had time to employ the time-consuming but safer method of "advancing by approaches." That is, to avoid the casualties of frontal battle, the British troops would advance against the enemy by having the engineers and sappers dig trenches toward the American line while throwing up protective embankments with plans to reach and overwhelm the American troops in a day or two.

Hugely outnumbered, having been driven from the field and forced to withdraw to the shore of the East River, and with intelligence that the British navy was in position to sail up the river to block any escape to New York City, Washington nevertheless was committed to fighting it out and was not going to surrender. The Americans had been working for months to fortify the area with redoubts established along the line. The Americans had abundant provisions, plenty of ammunition, and many guns. Washington ordered reinforcement troops be sent over from Manhattan in preparation of defending against the expected frontal attack by the British.

However, April 28th and 29th brought new information. Development of torrential rains and a strong wind from the north rendered it improbable for the British warships to tack up the East River to support the British at Brooklyn Heights and to block any escape. This new weather intelligence, together with learning that Howe was not planning an imminent attack, led Washington, in the *fog of war*, to reconsider his assessment. He called a war council of senior officers, who unanimously approved his plan to undertake an immediate evacuation across the East River.

Washington issued an order to impress all water craft, large and small, that could be located in the vicinity of Manhattan. This order was issued at noon on August 29th and, despite some boats having to be brought a distance of fifteen miles, they were all at the shore of Brooklyn Heights by eight that evening.

The plan was aggressive—to secretly evacuate 9,500 troops together with their equipment and artillery. The great fear of the planners was the possibility that the close-by British might discover the army’s preparation to withdrawal in which case they would stop digging to attack with devastating consequences. To implement the surreptitious retreat, beginning in late afternoon of April 29th the troops were ordered to continue maintaining the defense line and do nothing to alert the enemy of any unusual activity. After sunset, group by group the troops were ordered to move from the line to the Brooklyn ferry landing under the cover of darkness while maintaining silence. The embarkation included troops, ammunition, artillery, caissons, provisions, cattle, and horses.



General Henry Knox was in charge of a segment of the area where he loaded cannons and carriages onto the flat-bottom boats. Several cannons were so heavy they sank to their hubs and axles in the mud at the river’s edge, where they were spiked and abandoned. All else was successfully removed to Manhattan.

The oars and helms were manned by Brigadier General John Glover’s brigade of experienced Marblehead mariners who for upwards of twelve hours traveled back and forth in the darkness negotiating overloaded boats through the East River’s turbulent swift currents and rapid tides. Agonizingly, as dawn approached many American troops remained on the shores of Brooklyn, doomed to discovery by the British in the morning light and the resulting onslaught. Yet, as the sun began to rise, a heavy fog settled over the area covering the continuing American evacuation from sight of the British. By mid-morning, as the fog lifted, all 9,500 troops had been safely ferried to Manhattan. General Washington was on the last rescue boat to leave Brooklyn.

Decisions made in the *fog of war*, as well as in actual atmospheric fog, during this battle served to save a significant portion of Washington’s newly formed army from total ruin. The decisions

by both the Americans and British made in the *fog of war* may very well have avoided an early American surrender and the end of the War for Independence.

Fog of War during the Retreat at Fish Creek--Oct 11, 1777

After suffering defeat at the Second Battle of Saratoga at Bemis Heights, British General John Burgoyne retreated north along the Hudson River toward Fort Edward. Burgoyne hoped to reach Fort Ticonderoga, sixty miles to the north, and eventually escape to Canada.

The American troops were deployed to the west and north of the retreating British as well as on the east side of the Hudson in an effort to surround and block the retreat. An additional prong of the strategy was to advance against Burgoyne from the south by moving up to a position on the south bank of Fish Creek which runs easterly to empty into the Hudson in Saratoga (now Schuylerville). General Horatio Gates—in the *fog of war*—was operating under the current intelligence that British forces had abandoned their entrenched camp on the north side of Fish Creek and had retreated north toward Fort Edward, leaving behind only a light rearguard. Gates, eager to pursue the British, ordered Brigadier General John Nixon to cross Fish Creek at dawn on October 11, 1777, to take possession of what was thought to be an abandoned camp along with any supplies and armament abandoned by the retreating British. General John Glover with his Brigade from Marblehead, Massachusetts, was ordered to follow Nixon into the camp.

During the fall months of 1777, as is true even today, at dawn on the Hudson the chilled morning atmosphere often creates a near twenty-foot plume of dense fog immediately over the water and the adjacent shore. The fog generally burns off by late morning. Gates was aware of the inevitable near-zero visibility which his troops would experience as they advanced through the morning fog into the British camp. However, his orders were based upon the most current intelligence that his troops would be moving against an abandoned British camp.

On the assigned morning, as Glover prepared to follow Nixon into the fog enshrouded British encampment, a captured British soldier reported to Glover that Burgoyne had significantly altered his strategy the previous afternoon by ordering the troops that had retreated to Fort Edward to return south to Fish Creek to rejoin the entrenched army. If true, this newly received information meant a large British force would be in position to repel any advancing American army crossing Fish Creek.

The British soldier was hurriedly brought to Gates who—in the *fog of war*—made a decision to accept the captive's intelligence and reject the earlier information. Gates countermanded his orders in time to permit Nixon to reverse his march and to safely return to the southern banks of the creek, thus avoiding what certainly would have been a disastrous ambush by the entire British force which, in fact, was then fully entrenched in the camp with twenty-seven guns and enshrouded in the dense fog.

Gates' swift determinative decision to recall Nixon—thereby sparing countless soldiers from certain death or capture—which was based upon new unverified information received from an enemy soldier, is a classic example of the pressure under which military leaders must operate within the *fog of war*.

Having been recalled from the potential disaster on Fish Creek, both Nixon and Glover were active in the continuing siege of the British until Burgoyne surrendered five days later. Gates assigned Glover the responsibility for escorting the surrendered Convention Army of about 5,750 on the month-long, march of 250 miles to Boston.

Viewing the events at Brooklyn Heights and Fish Creek, during which vital decisions were made by military leaders in the *fog of war*, it is tempting to speculate as to what might have been the consequences if alternative decisions had been made. Also it is tempting to speculate as to what degree luck played in the outcome of these decisions.

The issue of judging the role of luck versus character when studying military conflicts has been the subject of discussion over the ages. Machiavelli, quoting the great Roman historian Titus Livy (59 BC–17 AD), tells us, "Luck is of little moment to the great general, for it is under the control of his intellect and his judgment."

Was it luck or rather was it the quality of the character and judgment of General Washington at Brooklyn Heights and General Gates at Saratoga? Upon receiving intelligence of changing circumstance regarding both Howe's decision to advance by approaches and also the unanticipated arrival of foul weather confronting the navy, what if Washington had not had the foresight, courage, and determination to alter his plans and accomplish the near impossible task of ferrying thousands of troops and equipment over the treacherous East River at night? What if Gates had not had the character to make the decision to countermand his order to attack—a decision based upon his judgment that intelligence given in the *fog of war* by an unknown, captured enemy could be trusted.

The outcome of each of these two battles was key to the American victory of the Revolutionary War and each the result of determinations made in the *fog of war*. Without Washington's decision to undertake the evacuation across the East River, many historians believe an American surrender at Brooklyn Heights would have been inevitable and likely would have ended the War for Independence. Gates' successful management of the siege during Burgoyne's retreat assured the British surrender—the turning point of the American Revolution.

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Saratoga Sword Surrender Site October 17, 2020