

# AMERICAN REVOLUTION: In Lieu of "Perfect" Plans

by Omar DeWitt

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If someone were to hand me a sealed envelope and say that it contained the "perfect plan" for playing Avalon Hill's *D-Day* or SPI's *Sniper!*, or any other game, I do not think that I would open the envelope. To my mind there is something unfair about reading how to play the perfect game; to me, it is not unlike hunting rabbits with a shotgun or deer with a high-powered rifle with a telescopic sight. Somehow it does not seem sporting. If someone beats me with a nice strategy, I will use it the first chance I get, but I do not go out of my way to gather perfect plans. To those of you out there who practice hours rolling the die sideways out of your hand so the "1" stays up or who spend more hours looking for loopholes in the rules, my position undoubtedly looks mighty strange. But part of the game is the personal challenge, and, if I am following someone else's directions on play, it is not really me who is playing the game.

Well, then, why am I writing this article? It certainly is not to tell you the profound secret that will enable you to succeed at *The American Revolution* without really trying. I have no perfect plan. However, it is an interesting game, and there are points about it worth discussing.

When we study history in grade school and high school, we have no doubt that we are absorbing cold, concrete facts. For one thing, it is there in the text book in black and white, and for another, Miss McCarthy says it's true. However, when we study history on our own and start reading books by authors of different nationalities, the facts are found not always to agree. British and US text books have different slants on the War of 1812 and the American Revolution. And when one actually plays *The American Revolution*, he finds the differences. For instance, the saying "one if by land, and two if by sea" just is not true. With a "one" or a "two" the British are not going anywhere - by sea or by land. (If you have not played the game yet, this enigmatic statement will be explained later.) Other aspects of the *American Revolution* do agree with written

histories. Historically, the British had two major problems in suppressing the rebel uprising. One was poor generalship; the other was keeping undecided colonials (of which there were many) from thinking the rebels had any chance of victory. In *The American Revolution*, the British Player has these problems, too, and they add up to quite a handicap.

The American Player's strategy is pretty much common sense: Keep out of the way, but stay in striking distance so that when an opportunity for a 1-1 attack comes up, it can be grabbed. Almost always (there can be exceptions to any rule), it is only sensible for the American to attack at 1-1 when the chance for a Major Success is there. If there are less than 5 British regulars in an area or enough Tories to preclude the elimination of 5 British regulars, other factors should be weighed. The general rule, here, is probably not to attack unless chances of a counterattack are small or if the movement of the American units elsewhere is more of a threat. In other words, the priority of an attack that does not offer some chance of a Major Success is low.

But why take the chance of a Major Success when the British are capable of a crushing counterattack? First, success triggers the French intervention - more strength and that very helpful fleet. Second, it takes only two Successes to really put pressure on the British; as soon as the British *must* control a certain number of Regions, the mobile American army can really cause problems while the British try to cover several points at once. And, of course, the American Continental Levy doubles after the second Success. The advantages, then, to the American in gaining a Major Success heavily outweigh the disadvantages of failure.

After the British gain control of a Region, the American strategy should still be primarily to gain a Major Success, but also the American should keep in mind the breaking of British control (and reactivating the Militia). This would be second in priority. The breaking of control or even the threat of breaking control might lead to a Major Success, which is the primary goal; so a plan with both possibilities available has much merit.

And what should the British Player do? Probably the most important item for the British Player to consider is an over-all strategy. If he hunts and pecks at the Regions, his chances of success are small.

The American can move around en masse and pick off isolated islands of British, which will break control and leave the British worse off than before. So, I would suggest: pick a strategy for the war and keep to it.

What strategy? It must take into account the inherent weaknesses of the British army. The main weakness is its reluctance to move; the second is its vulnerability to American Success. Any force of five or more has to be larger than nearby American forces (or risk Major Success), and any force under five is not able to control much.

The approach that seems most likely to succeed is this: start the British from one point and spread out, keeping a "hard shell" on the outside and enough smaller groups on the inside to maintain control. This approach can begin in the far north, the far south, and the middle. From the view of economy of force, the north and south seem better; the rear is protected and therefore needs no defenders; the flanks are either ocean, or wilderness, which slows movement; and the majority of the force is in the van where it is needed for attack and where it is in position to defend the likely route of attacks.

I first tried the northern approach. The problem here is all that Militia. The British have to wade through 50 Strength Points of Militia to get to New York. I never got to New York. My British had to go inland after the Militia and then sat there while their supply was cut. "Hey, mate, some bloke is cutting off the limb we're sitting on." "Aye, someone should do something." Back to the drawing board.

In another game, I started in Georgia. That came to grief because I neglected to build a fort right away, but also, problems will arise in rooting the Militia out of the five areas in Georgia - including two of wilderness.

Neither of these approaches is inherently fatal, although the odds of a northern approach succeeding are reduced because of the Militia. Before I try to get through the northern minutemen again, I'll wait for them to get unionized; then I can take care of them while they are on strike for the 5-minute man and holidays with pay.

The third suggestion was the "middle". This is the approach that the SPI playtesters thought most fruitful for the British. They suggest landing in the Potomac Valley and gaining control there because it cuts direct

north-south movement of the American troops and because it produces more Continentals than any other Region. Then, keeping a strong force in the Region for defense, move the rest of the British force south. After the South has been controlled (39 Victory Points), the control of Canada (10) and the capture of New York (10), plus a couple of 1's will give the game to the redcoats.

This plan means that the British must keep a rearguard in the Potomac Valley that is larger than the combined American forces or become vulnerable to a Major Success and loss of control. The British cannot retire to forts since units in forts cannot help to control a Region. While the wilderness slows down the American units, they can use the Ohio Valley, or PV2, as a concentration point to threaten the British units in the South.

Picking one of these plans is not unlike deciding if you want to snack on candied grasshoppers, fried worms, or caterpillar-a-jus. But, who knows? You might like it.

Whatever approach the British Player takes, to win he must have better than usual luck with the die. He needs poor levy, and he needs to be able to move when he has to (large groups of British have been lost in the games I have played because they could not move the one area they needed to get into supply).

After a strategy is decided upon, the next question is when to begin it. My memories of high school history include pictures of ragged (but gallant) American soldiers being chased around by myriad British and Hessian troops. This is not the case in the early going in *The American Revolution*. Those who have not played the game before, will do well to check carefully the Continental Levy table. Unless you have a trick die that rolls only 6's, you are likely to be outnumbered by the American forces (Continental and Militia) from Turn Two (Summer, 1775) until the Summer of 1776. The British Player who moves blithely out of Boston may be in for a rude surprise.

If the British decide on the Middle Strategy, a move from Boston to the Potomac Valley on the first turn is not advisable. It pits 13 British regulars and 5 Tories (18 Strength Points) against 15 Militia plus whatever the Continental Levy produces, which will be enough in *all* cases, to get a 1-1 on the British in the Summer Turn before the British can build a fort. That means the Americans have one chance in 6 of a Major Success (it would be 1 in 2 except that in a 1/2 Exchange the 5 Tories and only 4 British regulars would be exchanged, and Tory losses do not count toward a Major Success). Perhaps those are acceptable odds to some, but I am not sure the gain is worth the risk.

Even in the Summer of '76, moving the reinforcing 40 British regulars to the Potomac Valley can be chancy. It is quite possible that the Americans will be able to get a 1-1 in the fall on the 40. So, if the sea

**COMBAT RESOLUTION TABLE**  
Probability Table (Attacker's Strength to Defender's Strength)

Die Roll	1 to 1	2 to 1	3 to 1	4 to 1
1	De	De	De	De
2	1/2 De	De	De	De
3	1/2 De	1/2 De	De	De
4	1/2 Ex	1/2 De	1/2 De	De
5	1/2 Ex	1/2 Ex	1/2 De	1/2 De
6	1/2 Ex	1/2 Ex	1/2 Ex	1/2 De

**REGIONAL VICTORY POINTS AND FORCES KEY**  
Victory Point: 8-5  
Continentals: Strength Point Advancing  
Middle Strength Point Advance  
Tory Strength Point Advance

**WINTER ATTRITION TABLE**  
Year: 1777, 1778, 1779, 1780, 1781, 1782, 1783  
Part: 2.0, 1.2, 1.0, 1.2, 1.0, 1.3, 1.2, 1.3  
Remainder: 1.2, 1.2, 1.2, 1.3, 1.3, 1.3, 1.3

**VARIABLE FORCES VICTORY POINT ADJUSTMENT**  
A - Additional British reinforcements (+1)  
B - New British reinforcements (+1)  
C - Possible British Reinforcement (+2)  
D - Increased British effect (+3)  
E - Increased French effect (+4)  
F - Strong American center government (+2)  
G - Less effective Militia (+4)  
H - Former British positions (+3)  
I - Irish rebellion (-2)  
J - British militia in Ireland (+5)  
K - Increased threat (-10)  
L - Canadian Revolt (-15)

**CONTINENTAL LEVY CHART**  
Region: Canada, New England, Middle Atlantic, Southern, etc.  
Levy: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 45, 46, 47, 48, 49, 50, 51, 52, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 58, 59, 60, 61, 62, 63, 64, 65, 66, 67, 68, 69, 70, 71, 72, 73, 74, 75, 76, 77, 78, 79, 80, 81, 82, 83, 84, 85, 86, 87, 88, 89, 90, 91, 92, 93, 94, 95, 96, 97, 98, 99, 100

**INITIAL DEPLOYMENT (all scenarios)**  
BRITISH:  
At Boston: Eastern Mass., Bay Colony  
In Fall - 13 Combat Strength Points of Regulars, 3 Combat Strength Points of Tories  
In New York:  
2 Combat Strength Points of Regulars  
In Quebec: Area of Canada  
1 Combat Strength Point of Regulars  
Offshore Mass., Bay Colony: British Fleet Marker, TD Marker  
AMERICANS:  
At Boston: Eastern Mass., Bay Colony  
27 Combat Strength Points of Militia

**TERRAIN EFFECTS CHART**  
MOVEMENT AREA OR CONDITION: Open, Wilderness, Fort, Swamp, Mountain, etc.  
MOVEMENT POINT EXPENDITURE TO ENTER: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 45, 46, 47, 48, 49, 50, 51, 52, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 58, 59, 60, 61, 62, 63, 64, 65, 66, 67, 68, 69, 70, 71, 72, 73, 74, 75, 76, 77, 78, 79, 80, 81, 82, 83, 84, 85, 86, 87, 88, 89, 90, 91, 92, 93, 94, 95, 96, 97, 98, 99, 100  
COMBAT EFFECT: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 45, 46, 47, 48, 49, 50, 51, 52, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 58, 59, 60, 61, 62, 63, 64, 65, 66, 67, 68, 69, 70, 71, 72, 73, 74, 75, 76, 77, 78, 79, 80, 81, 82, 83, 84, 85, 86, 87, 88, 89, 90, 91, 92, 93, 94, 95, 96, 97, 98, 99, 100  
OTHER: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 45, 46, 47, 48, 49, 50, 51, 52, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 58, 59, 60, 61, 62, 63, 64, 65, 66, 67, 68, 69, 70, 71, 72, 73, 74, 75, 76, 77, 78, 79, 80, 81, 82, 83, 84, 85, 86, 87, 88, 89, 90, 91, 92, 93, 94, 95, 96, 97, 98, 99, 100

movement of other units to the Potomac Valley fails in the summer of '76, thought should be given to landing the 40 British in the Susquehanna Valley or Virginia (moving them into the fort with another British force is perfectly safe, but when the time comes to move them out, only 40 Strength Points can go by sea at one time). The 40 British regulars would build a fort and winter there. Any fall '76 move to a new area should be carefully weighed: the British cannot build a fort in the winter, and the Americans are at the height of their strength. After the winter of '77, the Americans lose 2/3 of the Continentals, things calm down for the British, and they can move about more at ease. At best, with this strategy, the British Player can expect only a fort in the Potomac Valley before the spring of '77; then he begins gaining control of the Potomac Valley and moving south.

If the British decide on the Northern Strategy, there is nothing much to be done against all those Militia until the 40 British

regulars arrive in the summer of '76. He can sit in Boston for a year and hone his die-rolling skills.

If the Southern Strategy is picked, immediate movement to Georgia is OK if it can be accomplished quickly. Depending on the Continentals (numbers and positions), movement in the summer might be OK, but not in the fall of '75 because a fort could not be erected before the Spring Turn, when it would probably be too late. Here, too, not much can be done to gain control until the 40 British regulars arrive.

In all three strategies, the British Player has one turn after the 40 British regulars arrive to win the game with only 41 Victory Points; then the total he needs rises to 51, and he has 6 nonwinter turns to gain that total before it rises to 61. All in all, it is quite a challenge for the British.

Those who have played only games with hex or square movement grids may start this game thinking that any movement area is

just like any other, with the possible exception of terrain. However, there is more to it than there may seem at first. The areas have to be looked at with an eye to supply. The British have to worry about supply, and that comes only via a coastal area. Therefore, a coastal area is of particular value if it is adjacent to several noncoastal areas. The wily American will usually defend the noncoastal areas of a Region; so the British have to move after them. Judicious choice and use of certain pivotal coastal areas will make this a bit simpler. The coastal area of Georgia is adjacent to four noncoastal areas; the one in the Roanoke Valley is adjacent to three; the one in the Potomac Valley is adjacent to three; and the coastal area in Canada is adjacent to seven - eight if Erie is counted. The British should give thought to using these areas in their strategic and tactical approaches. Canada is not as important an area as might be surmised from the above, because the adjacent areas have few Victory Points.

I asked the developers to explain the reasoning behind a couple of the rules. Every time the British try to enter an area, they must roll a 3, 4, 5 or 6, or those units must end the movement portion of their turn. This rule was put in for two reasons. One is play balance; without the rule, the Americans were wiped out. The second is historical; looking at the maneuvers of the actual campaign, they found that only about one out of three troop movements went as they should have. The most obvious example of nonmovement occurred in the Saratoga Campaign when Lord Germain, who was controlling British operations from Britain, neglected to tell Howe what he was expected to do. As a result of Howe moving off to Philadelphia, Burgoyne was cut off and cut up at Saratoga, giving the Americans a Major Success and triggering the French arrival. For another example in the same summer, it took Howe one month to march 54 miles from the head of the Elk River to Philadelphia.

The rule that the British can break up force in any one area into no more than two groups was made to close a loophole to the above rule. Otherwise, British Strength Points could be divided into 9 groups, with the odds being that six of the points would make the move.

One rule clarification: although the loss of 5 British Strength Points because of lack of supply does count as a Major Success, the loss of 15 because of lack of supply does not trigger Partial Withdrawal; it is just another Major Success.

From the reading I have done on the American Revolution, the feelings of the Continental Army and General Washington that have come across to me are those of desperation and frustration. The main goal seems to have been to keep an army in being and nip at any loose British ends that presented themselves. But primarily: avoid defeat. And that usually meant avoiding large, pitched battles.

## COMBAT RESOLUTION TABLE

Probability Ratios (Attacker's Strength to Defender's Strength)

Die Roll	1 to 1	2 to 1	3 to 1	4 to 1
1	De	De	De	De
2	½ De	De	De	De
3	½ De	½ De	De	De
4	½ Ex	½ De	½ De	De
5	½ Ex	½ Ex	½ De	½ De
6	½ Ex	½ Ex	½ Ex	½ De

Attacks executed at greater than 4:1 odds are treated as 4:1. Attacks at odds of less than 1:1 are not permitted. All fractional elimination is rounded up. All losses are incurred at *basic* (i.e., not doubled or tripled) strengths regardless of fortifications effect on odds.

½ De = *Half of the defender eliminated.* One half of the Defender's Strength Points are eliminated; the attacker suffers no loss.

½ Ex = *Half Exchange.* One-half of the Defender's Strength Points are eliminated, as computed at basic Strength Points; the Attacker loses an equal amount as computed at basic Strength Points.

### EXPLANATION OF RESULTS:

De = *Defender Eliminated.* The defending unit(s) is eliminated (destroyed) and is immediately removed from the map.

In the winter of 1776, Washington was not sure he could continue the war. It was in desperation that he attacked and eliminated a couple of Strength Points of Hessians at Trenton and then a few more Strength Points of British at Princeton. Even after the Battle of Saratoga, there was no feeling of confidence pervading the Continental Army - just the hope that the odds against them were not as high as they seemed.

On the other hand, the British had trouble coming up with a strategy to defeat the rebels totally, but when they met them in the field, they were seldom defeated. The British attitude that has come down through the histories is one of confidence in their ability to beat the rebels.

In the game *The American Revolution*, the feelings the players have are exactly turned around. At the end of 1776, the American Player does not have only a few thousand soldiers in rags and bare feet; he has a force almost as large as the British, and, in combat just as effective. Even after the first winter attrition, the American seldom has to worry much. All he has to do is sit a few areas away from the British expansion, bunch all his forces (which the Americans never did in the actual campaign), and dart in for a try at a Major Success when the opportunity develops. The American does not get the desperate feeling of having to hang on - he can always move two areas away from the British and be confident in knowing the odds of the British getting that far are very slight.

The loss of control of a few colonies is of no moment; when the British get control of enough Regions to make a total victory a possibility, the Americans merely bunch up and get control back in one or two of the Regions.

The British, however, have to be very circumspect about even attempting to move, not only in the first year of the war (as was true in the actual campaign), but throughout the war. Whenever the British have as little as 20 Strength Points in an area not in a fort, they are vulnerable. There is no feeling of confidence for the British Player - he is desperately trying to keep the American army smaller than the smallest British force in any front-line area.

The obvious counterargument is that the British had no reason to be confident of winning, and that Washington had no excuse for feeling the Americans had any chance of ultimately losing the war. That may be true, but the fact remains that in the game the psychological attitudes are the opposite of history.

I strongly suspect that if one were to try to even out the game by adjusting some of the rules (except the Victory Point Total), he would find that balance in this game is an extremely fine adjustment. I would not be surprised if a chance to help the British would doom the Americans. I think the most sensible way to balance this game - or any game - is to play games in sets of twos, changing sides for the second game. Then if the British lose (or win!) both games, the winner of the set would be the player with more British Victory Points.

I do not discount the possibility that my opponents and I just have not found the right approach for the British to make. And that possibility is one reason why I will continue to play the game. Some other reasons are: the game is quick, the rules are clear and relatively simple, and it is a nice change of pace from the hex-grid games. And it is a challenge. ●●