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Astonishingly Accurate British Intelligence in the American War of Independence

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ABSTRACT
An unsigned, undated document among the General Sir Henry Clinton Papers at the University of Michigan William C. Clements Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan, demonstrates that the British possessed remarkable, accurate intelligence on the Continental Army's order of battle and command structure. Curiously, Crown officers added derogatory nicknames denoting their understanding of the senior Rebel generals' predominant character traits. Neither the senior general assessments nor the command structure intelligence led to sustainable battlefield advantages. Still, it aided unit identification during General Howe's Spring 1777 New Jersey campaign and may have contributed to the British victory at Brandywine later that year.

Introduction

Despite Commander-in-Chief George Washington's attempts to sustain operational security, British generals possessed timely, accurate, and actionable intelligence on the composition and leadership of the main Continental Army before the 1777 campaign season. Embedded in the purloined Continental Army information were scornful but potentially insightful characterisations of the most senior Rebel generals. An undated document in the General Sir Henry Clinton Papers at the William C. Clements Library in Ann Arbor, Michigan, contains the fruits of British espionage. The report demonstrates the British Army's remarkable intelligence-gathering prowess as its generals planned their summer attacks.[1]

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[1] *William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan*. Sir Henry Clinton Papers. Vol. 29, folio 31, Undated and uninscribed Military Intelligence.

The one-page undated manuscript documents the main Continental Army's order of battle, including forty-four regiments, arranged in ten brigades and five divisions of Washington's main army without noting sources or a transmittal letter. Soldiers from the middle and Chesapeake colonies comprise the Rebel forces, including regiments from Virginia (17), Maryland (7), Delaware (1), Pennsylvania (14), and New Jersey (5).

State	Number of Regiments	Number of Brigades	Number of Divisions	Notes
Virginia	17	4	2	
Maryland/Delaware	8	2	1	
Pennsylvania	14	3	1	
New Jersey	5	1	1	Division Includes 5 PA regiments
Total	44	10	5	

Figure 1: Continental Army Organisation and State Composition[2]

Colonels led regiments, brigadier generals directed four to five regiments in a brigade, and major generals commanded two brigades. The intelligence has minor gaps, including two unnamed brigade commanders. However, the remaining brigade and division commanders are correctly named.

The intelligence is not in Clinton's handwriting but a secretary's script. The uninscribed and undated document raises several key questions: Why was it important? When was it written? What were the sources? How accurate is the intelligence? Were the characterisations of the senior American generals accurate and valuable to the British commanders? Was the information advantageous?

In 1776, British Commander-in-chief General William Howe thoroughly thrashed the Rebel armies in a successful campaign to capture the strategic New York City and its vital harbour. Faced with the need to reconstitute the Continental Army, the Continental Congress recruited replacement soldiers and named six new major generals and sixteen brigadier generals. As Howe faced a new foe, he needed accurate intelligence on the opposition's command structure and leadership. While found in a second-in-command's files, it is implausible that such a valuable document would not have been shared with Howe. Therefore, the document found among General Clinton's papers likely provided critical intelligence in planning and conducting the 1777 campaign.

[2] *William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan*.

The American brigadier and major general commissioning dates establish a timeline for drafting the British view of the Continental Army's organisation and leadership. Thomas Conway joined the Continental Army on 13 May 1777, and Washington ordered Benjamin Lincoln to join the Northern Army on 24 July 1777.[3] Therefore, based on the promotion and commissioning dates, a British secretary likely drafted the document between 13 May 1777 and 24 July 1777.

On 21 May 1777, Washington completed a reorganisation of his forces and sent a secure communication to John Hancock, the Congressional President, with a copy of his new order of battle and command structure. Washington adds a telling postscript,

> I need not suggest to Congress the necessity of keeping our Numbers concealed from the knowledge of the public. Nothing but Good face & false appearances have enabled us hitherto to deceive the Enemy respecting our Strength.[4]

Washington appended to the Hancock correspondence a detailed chart of the order of battle, leadership of each unit, and number of soldiers. He issued a general order informing the army of the new command arrangement a day later.

Despite Washington's warnings, it is possible that ranging British units intercepted the letter or that an informant obtained the information from a Congressional source. The British intelligence information is written in the exact order as Washington's 21 May 1777 enclosure to Congress and portrays the regiments, brigades, and divisions and their associated commanders. However, there are notable differences. The British intelligence lacks the regimental troop levels and the names of the two brigadiers commanding the Maryland line. Additionally, the British believe that Hazen's Canadian Regiment was attached to the Maryland line, but Washington's order assigns them to Brigadier General Peter Muhlenberg' Virginia regiments. Spencer's Additional Regiment is connected to the New Jersey Line versus Washington's placement with the Pennsylvania troops. Despite these minor command structure exceptions, the British intelligence information is remarkably accurate and could be helpful on the battlefield. However, the Washington-Hancock correspondence is not likely the intelligence source as the British document lacks troop strengths, which certainly would have been added to the British intelligence if available.

[3]George Washington et al., *The Papers of George Washington. Revolutionary War Series,* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1985), Vol. 10, p. 385.
[4]Washington et al., *The Papers of George Washington. Revolutionary War Series*, Vol. 9, pp. 491–93.

Other high-probability British intelligence sourcing alternatives are not dispositive. Major General Charles Lee, a Crown prisoner who was socially active among the British officer corps, could have been a source as he possessed intimate knowledge of the Continental Army at the time of his capture. Some historians labelled Lee a traitor for drafting a purported plan for the British to win the war, and one might think he was an intelligence source. However, the British could not have obtained the highly sensitive information from Lee, as he became a captive before Major General Benjamin Lincoln transitioned from the Massachusetts militia to the Continental Army and did not know about the units assigned to the new major general. Another possibility is that the Rebel troop dispositions were among Lincoln's military papers garnered by the British in a Bound Brook, New Jersey raid. Nathanael Greene described the loss: 'This is a great misfortune as it will inform the Enemy of many disagreeable circumstances.'[5] Lincoln's captured correspondence could have contributed to the development of the British document. Still, intelligence analysts would have to gather additional information, such as Thomas Conway's new appointment, who appeared on the British document but had not joined the Continental Army before the New Jersey raid. Additionally, Washington did not finalise his order of battle and leadership reorganisation until a month after the Bound Brook skirmish. As with most eighteenth-century intelligence, discerning secretive sources is challenging due to the lack of contemporary documentation.

Intelligence reports, especially those detailing military units, are typically dry, matter-of-fact, and without humour or witticisms. Curiously, the British intelligence officers added derisive or cutesy nicknames for the five major generals, Lord Stirling (William Alexander), Benjamin Lincoln, Adam Stephen, John Sullivan, and Nathanael Greene, while simply listing the last names of the brigadiers and colonels.[6] Although seemingly frivolous, the nicknames might provide British commanders insights into the perceived battlefield actions and leadership capabilities of the Rebel generals.

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[5]US National Archives, *Founders Online,* "To John Adams from Nathanael Greene, 13 April 1777, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/06-05-02-0087. Accessed 19 January 2025. [Original source: *The Adams Papers*, Papers of John Adams, vol. 5, *August 1776–March 1778*, ed. Robert J. Taylor. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006, pp. 152–153.]

[6]While William Alexander's claim to a Lordship is dubious, commanders on both sides referred to him as Lord Stirling. The remainder of this paper will follow the convention of his peers and the British intelligence document and refer to William Alexander as Lord Stirling. For an example of a contemporaneous appellation, see Henry Clinton, *The American Rebellion Sir Henry Clinton's Narrative of His Campaigns, 1775-1782 with an Appendix of Original Documents*, ed. William D Wilcox (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954), p. 24.

The characterisation of Lord Stirling as drunken is the most derogatory and potentially the most insightful assessment. Lord Stirling's prodigious alcohol consumption was well-known among associates and the British military. While a captive after the 1776 Battle of Brooklyn, Lord Stirling dined with William and Admiral Richard Howe, who witnessed his alcohol consumption personally. Primarily due to his over-imbibing, the self-purported Lord would not live to celebrate the war's end in 1783. While correctly characterising Lord Stirling's guzzling habits, the British don't mention the heavy drinking of two other major generals: Virginian and Washington critic Adam Stephen would be dismissed from the Continental Service a few months later for being drunk on the Germantown battlefield; and John Sullivan would survive the war but also die of alcoholism at an early age.[7]

British intelligence labelled newly commissioned Major General Benjamin Lincoln 'Lincoln So, So.' The sole British combat experience with Lincoln was a lopsided raid on his exposed position at Bound Brook, New Jersey. Rebel sentries failed to alert Lincoln's command of the attacking British, and only his quick thinking saved his unit from being overwhelmed. However, the Grenadier Lieutenant John Peebles characterised the action as a rout,

> The light infantry and jaegers drove them [Rebel picquets] with precipitation…and they took to their heels as many as could get off … their Genl. Lincoln escaped very narrowly.[8]

Lincoln's inability to detect the attacking British and organise an effective defence may have led to the 'So, So' characterisation.

British intelligence officers added a generational spin in coining appellations for the three remaining major generals. In the intelligence document, the British referred to Adam Stephen as 'Granny Stephen', the oldest among the commanding generals. While Stephen was fifty-nine and twenty-five years older than Nathanael Greene, there is no contemporary evidence that the people regarded the Virginian as limited due to his age. Furthermore, British generals had first-hand experiences with Stephen, he

[7]Reports that Adam Stephen, an intrepid veteran of numerous battles and skirmishes dating back to the French and Indian War (1756-1763), was drunk on the Germantown battlefield should be taken with a grain of salt. Washington disliked Stephen from before the war and distrusted his battlefield judgment. Unlike confirmed alcoholics John Sullivan and Lord Stirling, Stephen led a highly productive post-war life, founding Martinsburg, West Virginia, and living to the age of seventy-three.

[8]John Peebles and Ira D. Gruber, *John Peebles' American War: The Diary of a Scottish Grenadier, 1776-1782*, 1st ed, Publications of the Army Records Society, vol. 13, (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1998), p. 109.

exchanged testy letters with Brigadier General William Erskine over alleged British brutalities against a wounded officer, which should have directly informed the British about his backbone and assertiveness.[9] Three months later, Stephen attacked a British outpost at Piscataway, New Jersey, demonstrating an uncommon aggressiveness without Washington's approval. While daring, the British viewed the attack as a complete failure. A Hessian officer observed 'a disorderly attack' in which the Americans continually exposed either their right or their left flanks' and had to 'fall back with great loss.[10] This action tarnished the British view of Stephen. Still, no opposing officer belittled him as a granny. Stephen's authoritative biographer describes him with non-geriatric terms such as outspoken, reckless, flamboyant, creative, exhibiting probative views and having an odd intellectual flair.[11] These traits do not comport with meaningful age-related physical or intellectual declines. The British likely referred to Stephen as granny simply due to his relatively old age.

Next in the generational line is John Sullivan, who the intelligence report labels 'Mother Sullivan.' British commanders possessed first-hand knowledge of Sullivan's personality and abilities, having captured him during the Battle of Brooklyn in August 1776. A Hessian colonel concluded with high praise that Sullivan was a 'man of genius.'[12] Later, Howe convinced a naive Sullivan that he could find a peaceful solution to the conflict if Sullivan would transmit his intentions to Washington and Congress. Accepting Howe's proposition, Sullivan agreed to carry a peace conference offer to Congress in exchange for parole. While the British commanders may have believed that Sullivan was gullible and easily influenced, there is no surviving record that they thought he exhibited any maternal traits.

Nathanael Greene is the last in the family trilogy, whose British intelligence appellation was most likely 'puppy'. Greene was the youngest of the group at thirty-four, and one of the least experienced generals. However, the handwriting is indistinct and appears only to have a single p as shown below)

[9]Letter from George Washington to John Hancock, February 5, 1777, George Washington et al., *The Papers of George Washington. Revolutionary War Series,* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1985), Vol. 8, pp. 249–53.
[10]Harry M Ward, *Major General Adam Stephen and the Cause of American Liberty* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989), p. 169.
[11]Ward, p. 245.
[12]Charles P. Whittemore, *A General of the Revolution - John Sullivan of New Hampshire* (New York & London: Columbia University Press, 1961), p. 40.

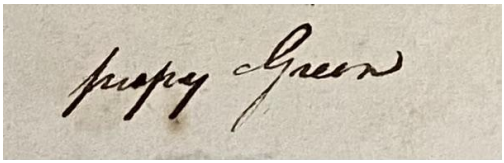

Figure 2: Signature of Nathaniel 'pupy' Greene.[13]

There are several alternative interpretations. such as husky, frisky, or fishy, but each of these suffers from a k and h not cursively going below the line. Another option is limpy, as Greene had a deformed leg, but the third to last letter does not appear to be an m. A more probable clue might be that people uttered puppy to insult one another in the Revolutionary Era, as historian Joanne B. Freeman has demonstrated.[14] Further, the British observed Greene's sophomoric generalship, including his failure to plan the defence of Brooklyn properly and for leaving soldiers stranded at Fort Washington to be killed or captured. Therefore, given the context, the puppy interpretation makes the most sense.[15]

Perhaps the British intelligence officers omitted the most striking observations that the American generals lacked military acumen and were unproven. Only Stephen possessed any pre-war combat experience, albeit on a small scale. All the Rebel generals were new to their responsibilities and commands, having served less than one year, Congress had appointed most of them to their current positions within the last few months, and only John Sullivan and Nathanael Greene had been in their commands since the previous summer. Despite Sullivan's and Lord Stirling's first taste of large-scale combat during the battle of Brooklyn, it was an untested group that the British dubbed with derisive nicknames.[16]

[13]University of Michigan William C. Clements Library.

[14]Joanne B. Freeman, *The Field of Blood: Violence in Congress and the Road to Civil War* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018), p. xvi.

[15]The author wishes to thank Leif Ulstrup for assistance with an AI chatbot, which pointed to 'puppy' as the most correct interpretation, and to historians Joanne B. Freeman, Kiersten Marcil, Andrew Wehrman, Matthew Fockler, and Salina B. Baker for handwriting analysis and interpretative suggestions.

[16]On 19 February 1777, Congress commissioned Major Generals Lord Stirling, Adam Stephen, and Benjamin Lincoln, and John Sullivan and Nathanael Greene on August 9, 1776. Congress commissioned five Brigadier Generals on 21 February 1777, including George Weeden, Peter Muhlenberg, William Woodford, John Philip De Haas, and Anthony Wayne. The other three Brigadier Generals were all commissioned in their roles less than a year prior, William Maxwell (23 October 1776 ?? October), Charles Scott (1 April 1777), and Thomas Conway (13 May 1777).

There is evidence that General Howe, based in New York City, utilised this highly accurate picture of the Continental Army's order of battle and leadership structure during the initial stages of his 1777 summer campaign. Howe attempted to lure Washington from his fortified camp in the New Jersey hills into a general action by invading the former colony's Raritan Valley and threatening Philadelphia. Washington failed to take the bait but sent a division to harass the British retreat to New York. On June 26 Howe ordered two columns to attack the probing Rebels.[17] In a dispatch to Lord George Germain, Howe correctly identifies the advance guard divisional commander as Lord Stirling, along with two battalion commanders, William Maxwell and Thomas Conway. The inclusion of Conway is notable because the British had never encountered the recently arrived former French Army officer before this skirmish and would not have been able to identify him on the battlefield visually. During their time in New Jersey, the British reportedly captured three brass cannons, killed sixty-three officers and soldiers, and wounded or captured two hundred more.[18] Howe's after-action report demonstrates that the British accurately understood a portion of the most recent Continental Army's structure, supporting the assertion that the intelligence document in General Clinton's files was actionable and valuable[19].

By June 30 Howe had returned to New York City, and Clinton arrived there on 5 July 1777 and assumed command of New York's defence after Howe sailed with an invasion fleet to attack Philadelphia later that month.[20] Howe likely provided Clinton with the Rebel command intelligence document as part of a garrison turnover process and retained a copy to assist in the campaign to capture the Rebel capital. Howe's decision to travel by sea and the Chesapeake Bay and attack Philadelphia from the south was controversial. The British general believed the only way to end the rebellion was to lure Washington's army into battle to protect the Rebel capital. Once he destroyed Washington's army and captured Philadelphia, Howe believed the rebellion would subside. The implication of this decision was to not support British General John Burgoyne's plan to invade from Canada cutting off New England from the other colonies by capturing the vital Hudson Valley. As a result, Howe landed his forces at

[17]Ira D Gruber, *The Howe Brothers and the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, N.C: The University of North Carolina Press, 1972), pp. 227-30.

[18]Washington's report to President John Hancock confirms Lord Stirling's skirmish with the British but minimises the Rebel losses. George Washington et al., *The Papers of George Washington. Revolutionary War Series,* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1985), vol x, pp. 137-38.

[19]William Howe to Lord George Germain, 5 July 1777, K. G. Davies, ed., *Documents of the American Revolution, 1770-1783: Colonial Office Series,* (Shannon: Irish University Press, 1972), vol. xiv, pp. 127-29.

[20]Henry Clinton, p. 61.

the Head of Elk at the top of Chesapeake Bay and commenced an attack towards Philadelphia.[21]

As with any intelligence, its usefulness degrades over time, and Howe opposed a slightly modified organisation in the Philadelphia campaign. By the time of the opening battle, the Rebel command structure had changed with Brigadier General Anthony Wayne, replacing Lincoln, whom Washington ordered to support the Northern Army under Major General Horatio Gates. Additionally, Washington created a light infantry brigade under the command of Brigadier General William Maxwell and a North Carolina Brigade joined the main army before the Brandywine battle.[22] While potentially helpful, no British officer referenced an understanding of the Rebel army's command structure or order of battle in journals or accounts of the campaign's major clash at Brandywine Creek in September 1777.[23] Omitting intelligence sources from battlefield correspondence to protect the data-gathering operation is not unusual.

Augmenting his command structure intelligence, Howe employed accurate geographic intelligence provided by friendly residents to cross an undefended ford, launching a surprise attack on the American right flank. British forces brilliantly executed a left hook, assaulting the Rebels from an unexpected direction, rolling up the Rebel lines from the side and advancing to their rears. Despite being caught off guard and outflanked, none of the Continental Army's major generals lived up to their British nicknames in the battle.[24] Some observers criticised Sullivan, who faced the initial fury, for incoherently leading his forces. However, most participants credit him for making

[21]For the most recent scholarship on the 1777 Philadelphia campaign see, Gary Ecelbarger, *George Washington's Momentous Year: Twelve Months That Transformed the Revolution, Vol. I: The Philadelphia Campaign, July to December 1777*, 1st ed, (Chicago: Westholme Publishing, 2024).

[22]For a detailed Continental Army Order of Battle for the Brandywine Battle, Michael C. Harris, *Brandywine: A Military History of the Battle That Lost Philadelphia but Saved America, September 11, 1777,* (El Dorado Hills, CA: Savas Beatie, 2014), pp. 405–10.

[23]William Howe to Lord George Germain, 10 October 1777, Wilhelm Knyphausen to Lord George Germain, 21 October 1777, K. G. Davies, ed., *Documents of the American Revolution, 1770-1783: Colonial Office Series,* (Shannon: Irish University Press, 1972), vol.xiv : pp. 202-209, pp. 238-241.

[24]While not mentioning the major generals by name, Captain Friedrich von Muenchhausen, aide de camp to General Howe, assessed that 'Washington executed a masterpiece of strategy .... All this done with great speed and good especially good order' in Levin Friedrich Ernst Muenchhausen, *At General Howe's Side 1776-1778*, ed. Ernst Kipping and Samuel Stelle Smith, (Monmouth Beach, N.J: Philip Freneau Press, 1974), p. 31.

the most of his position despite facing the unexpected British flank attack.[25] On the other hand, British and American battle participants gave Greene's division high marks, and later historians cited the Rhode Island general's quick-thinking and courageous stand against superior forces, as facilitating the Continental Army's unmolested retreat.[26] The divisions under the command of the generational trio and the drunk acquitted themselves with honour in defending against the British general's masterful flanking manoeuvre, which caught Washington unprepared.

Howe's Philadelphia campaign illustrates that intelligence gathering and confirmation were never-ending. The British were fortunate to capture a document outlining the Continental Army order of battle from a fallen Rebel officer during the Brandywine battle. British commanders learned the missing brigade commander names of John Sullivan's division and several other, admittedly negligible, changes. The new document essentially confirmed the British intelligence gathered before the campaign commenced. Additionally, the captured document estimated that there were 12,900 soldiers in the Continental Army, a figure Washington desperately sought to keep from the British generals.[27]

Unfortunately, a nineteenth century fire destroyed Howe's military and personal papers before any scholarly review and publication.[28] As a result, the 1777 document is one of the few pieces of extant intelligence to interpret Howe's military strategy

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[25]For a historiographic view of John Sullivan's Brandywine Battlefield performance, Michael C. Harris, *Philadelphia Campaign, 1777-78,* (Havertown, PA: Casemate Publishers, 2023), pp. 296–98, pp. 415–27.

[26]For a British perspective, Peebles and Gruber, *John Peebles' American War*, 133. G. D. Scull, James Gabriel Montresor, and John Montresor, *The Montresor Journals*, Collections of the New-York Historical Society .... 1881. Publication Fund Series.[v. 14] pp. xiv, p. 578. ([New York: Printed for the Society, 1882), p. 417, //catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/000012843. Accessed 20 January 2025. For a Rebel perspective, James McMichael, "Diary of Lieutenant James McMichael, of the Pennsylvania Line, 1776-1778," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 16, no. 2 (1892): 129–59, p. 150, http://www.jstor.org/stable/20083473. Accessed 20 January 2025. For a historian's perspective, 'His [Greene's] skill and valour…enabled the rest of the Republican army to get safe away ….' G.O. Trevelyan, *Saratoga and Brandywine. Valley Forge. England and France at War*, vol. III, American Revolution (Longmans, Green, 1922), p. 232 https://books.google.com/books?id=D7UtAQAAIAAJ. Accessed 20 January 2025.

[27]James Gabriel Montrésor and John Montrésor, p. 518.

[28]Julie Flavell, *The Howe Dynasty: The Untold Story of a Military Family and the Women behind Britain's Wars for America*, First edition (New York: Liveright Publishing, 2021), p. 3.

and battlefield leadership. While preserved in General Clinton's papers, it is hard to believe that Clinton or his secretaries would have withheld this vital information from the Commander's purview. As a result, Howe's knowledge of Washington's army likely provided extra confidence in campaign planning, aided unit identification during battle, and highlighted opposing generals' character flaws or other exploitable weaknesses. The British commander was confident enough in his understanding of Rebel adversaries to conduct a bold incursion into New Jersey and execute a risky flanking manoeuvre at the Brandywine battle. Despite possessing precise intelligence, the British officers were not counting on such inexperienced Rebel generals to command so successfully against a professionally led army. Actionable and accurate leadership and force composition intelligence are necessary and often decisive, but other factors can trump even the most reliable information about the enemy.