Were Generals John Burgoyne and William Howe responsible for the British defeat at Saratoga?

Viewpoint: Yes. Burgoyne was overly confident, while Howe failed to support operations in Upstate New York adequately.

Viewpoint: No. Responsibility for the defeat rests mostly with colonial secretary Lord George Germain, who failed to coordinate British armies and who grievously underestimated American forces.

Many students of the American Revolution (1775–1783) believe that Britain lost the war as early as 1776 and 1777, during which time the British made many blunders that prevented them from crushing the rebellion when it was weakest. The greatest blunder that the British made during the war was the disastrous campaign of 1777 that ended in the defeat of a British army at Saratoga, New York. This defeat proved to be a turning point in the struggle. After Saratoga France openly supported the Americans, thereby turning the war into a world conflict that ultimately concluded with Britain’s defeat. An analysis of who was ultimately responsible for this disastrous campaign is instructive.

The planners of the campaign were Generals John Burgoyne and William Howe, while Lord George Germain, secretary of state for the American colonies, approved, tailored, and coordinated overall strategy for their plan. Burgoyne proposed a strategy that involved a three-pronged assault on Albany, New York: one army under the command of Burgoyne was to move South from Canada through the Lake Champlain corridor, while a second force commanded by Colonel Barry St. Leger marched toward Albany from the West through the Mohawk River valley. At the same time, an army led by General Howe was to move up the Hudson River from New York City to join Burgoyne at Albany. The larger objective was to isolate New England, seen by British officials as the hotbed of rebellion, from the rest of the states before invading and reconquering the region. Howe also submitted a plan to Germain, one that called for him to attack the American capital of Philadelphia. Although the two plans appeared inconsistent, the secretary of state approved both of them. Still, the overall British strategy might have worked—if everything went according to plan. Unfortunately for the British, almost nothing went as they planned.

Who was most responsible for its failure—generals in the field or officials in London? Over the past two centuries British officials and military historians on both sides of the Atlantic have debated this question. Even as the Revolution still raged, politicians and military officers in Britain blamed each other for Burgoyne’s defeat at Saratoga. A parliamentary inquiry in 1779 failed to place blame conclusively. Since then, historians have had no better success in agreeing on the individual(s) most at fault. A few students of the Revolution have placed equal blame on all the major planners and participants of the campaign. Although there was plenty of blame to go around, such a conclusion is unsatisfactory. Because Britain’s military campaign of 1777 is a watershed of the American Revolution, and because it reflects general political circumstances in England and military difficulties in America, accurately
determining ultimate responsibility for its failure is important if one is to understand why Great Britain, in the end, failed to crush the rebellion. Of course, an element that one must not forget is the critical role that the American Patriots played in foiling British strategy. Thus, to complicate the issue further, one might argue that Britain’s 1777 campaign failed not because of poor planning in London or improper implementation in America but because of a superior American military strategy. If nothing else, though, the British campaign illustrates the difficulty of conducting a war three thousand miles away from the mother country and the oftentimes pernicious role politics and personal egos play in planning and implementing military strategy—important lessons from which all policy makers can benefit.

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The British defeat at Saratoga in October 1777 marked the turning point of the Revolutionary War (1775–1783). The capture of Major General John Burgoyne’s entire army in Northern New York greatly lifted the colonists’ morale and helped induce France to enter the war as America’s ally. With French military and economic assistance, the American colonists continued their struggle for independence, while Britain increasingly diverted its strength to other areas, as the war became a global conflict. Burgoyne’s surrender also set off a series of recriminations in Britain that still echo among historians as they assess who was responsible for the disaster. There was plenty of blame to go around, and Lord George Germain, the British colonial secretary, became an obvious target. Although he failed to coordinate adequately the various British forces taking part in the 1777 campaign, the secretary of state does not bear the final responsibility for the defeat. Blame for the military disaster most properly belongs to the two generals who conducted the operations, Burgoyne and Major General William Howe, the British commander in America. Both generals lacked clear strategic objectives and made tactical blunders while implementing their plans, resulting in an important American victory of the Revolutionary War.

Burgoyne bears the primary responsibility for the defeat at Saratoga. His “Thoughts for Conducting the War from the Side of Canada” became the basis for British strategy in 1777, with only slight variation. Similar to what Canadian governor Guy Carleton had tried the preceding year, Burgoyne proposed to lead an army South from Canada to Fort Ticonderoga. After capturing this key position, Burgoyne intended to seize Albany and “put himself under the command of Sir William Howe,” who was in New York City with the main British Army in America. Simultaneous with Burgoyne’s advance, a second British force would move East down the Mohawk Valley from Oswego on Lake Ontario. This maneuver would divert American troops from Burgoyne’s approach by threatening Albany from the East.

While “Thoughts” and its subsequent variation had much merit, it also possessed several serious shortcomings. First and foremost, the plan lacked a clear objective. It never explained what Burgoyne would do once he reached Albany and how this goal would end the American rebellion. The general was to place himself under Howe’s command, but then what? Would he remain in Albany or advance toward New York City or possibly New England? Also, how would the army be provisioned, especially as it moved farther away from its Canadian base? Burgoyne never addressed these issues. Furthermore, the plan required a high degree of coordination between British forces, but it failed to order Howe to advance up the Hudson River to assume command of Burgoyne’s force. In fact, Howe had decided to go on the offensive in New York in 1777 and move against Philadelphia. This strategy again calls into question the primary goal of Burgoyne’s plan as well as Howe’s. Finally, while having multiple columns converge on Albany would force the Americans to divide their troops, it might also allow them to defeat the separate British detachments before they could support each other.

In fairness to Burgoyne, he was not responsible for coordinating British movements by ordering Howe to advance up the Hudson. This task belonged to Germain, and many of his critics, both then and today, have justly criticized him for not doing so more directly. Still, Germain informed Howe of Burgoyne’s intentions on several occasions during the spring of 1777. Furthermore, on 2 April, Howe agreed to have troops attack the American forts blocking shipping on the lower Hudson later in the season. He then added that this “corps may afterwards act in favor of the northern army.”

Having designed a plan that lacked clear strategic goals, Burgoyne then made tactical mistakes in implementing it. He left Canada in mid June with 7,213 combat troops (half of whom were German mercenaries) and approximately 1,100 Canadians, Loyalists, and Native Americans. On 6 July, Burgoyne forced the Americans to evacuate...
Fort Ticonderoga, but he made a critical error in failing to recall his men to Ticonderoga after they pursued the rebels toward Vermont and up Lake Champlain to Skanesboro, New York. Ordering the troops to return to Ticonderoga would have allowed them to advance South by way of Lake George. Instead, Burgoyne unwisely ordered his men to make the more difficult march overland to Fort Edward on the Hudson.

This decision to march his army overland was problematic because Burgoyne received only one-third the number of horses that he had requested, and therefore he lacked adequate transportation for his forces. He also lacked sufficient wagons and carts, many of which were too poorly constructed to withstand Northern New York’s rugged terrain. The Americans further compounded the British transportation problem by felling trees across the road, destroying bridges, and damming nearby streams to flood the land. As a result, Burgoyne’s advance slowed to a crawl, at times covering only a mile a day.

Why Burgoyne chose to advance overland is difficult to understand, because in his “Thoughts” he wrote that the Lake George water route was superior to an overland march. He had even correctly anticipated the American delaying tactics if he moved by land. Burgoyne apparently did not recall his troops to Ticonderoga because he believed that any retreat—even a temporary one to facilitate the advance—would hurt his army’s morale and encourage the Americans. This concern might explain why he issued an order to his troops early in the campaign that stated, “This army must not retreat.” Regardless of his reasoning, Burgoyne’s decision to march to Fort Edward was one of the turning points in the campaign. It gave the Americans time to regroup after their disheartening loss of Ticonderoga and dissipated any momentum that the British had gained.

Burgoyne made yet another damaging mistake in his use of Indians and propaganda. On 2 July he issued a bold and inflammatory proclamation declaring that his army came to restore peace and tranquillity to loyal subjects but that his Indian allies came to destroy the Crown’s enemies. Instead of intimidating the Americans, this threatening proclamation only served to enrage them, especially when Burgoyne’s Indians killed many civilians. American propagandists made good use of this “massacre” of innocent noncombatants to mobilize thousands of militiamen. So rather than meeting many Loyalists, as Burgoyne had originally expected, he was surprised to find that “The great bulk of the country is undoubtedly with the Congress, in principal and zeal; . . . Wherever the King’s forces point, militia, to the amount of three or four thousand, assemble in twenty-four hours.”

Burgoyne received a vivid example of this patriotic sentiment in mid August when the Americans aggravated his growing supply problem by implementing a scorched-earth policy. As the Brit-
ish Army moved farther South, farmers burned their ripening crops and drove their livestock out of the reach of British troops. To alleviate this problem, Burgoyne sent a detachment of 1,200 men under Colonel Friedrich Baum to seize a large quantity of provisions and horses supposedly located at Bennington, Vermont. He also charged the German officer with enlisting Loyalists and dispersing American militia that were reportedly gathering on the army’s flank. However, Burgoyne made a poor selection in choosing Baum for this important mission because he was unable to speak English. Communication problems, among others, allowed the American militia on 16 August to maul Baum’s troops and a second column of 642 men sent to reinforce him. The raid on Bennington not only cost Burgoyne more than 900 soldiers and a large amount of military equipment but also prevented him from obtaining badly needed provisions. The defeat further encouraged American efforts against Burgoyne and increased desertions among his Indian allies.

Burgoyne made his biggest mistake of the campaign in the weeks after Bennington. Previously, on 17 July, he had received dispatches from Howe that he was not advancing on Albany. Six weeks later Burgoyne learned that Colonel Barry St. Leger’s command had returned to Canada after unsuccessfully besieging Fort Stanwix in the Mohawk River valley. Despite knowing that he was now alone and facing mounting supply difficulties, the British general decided to continue South with his weakened army. He later argued that his orders did not allow him the latitude to do otherwise. This excuse was an extremely narrow interpretation of his instructions, however, because they specifically authorized him to “act as exigencies may require.” After spending several weeks accumulating supplies, Burgoyne crossed to the West side of the Hudson River on 13 September for his final advance on Albany. By doing so, however, he placed a major river between himself and his only escape route.

Already having made several costly errors in his march South to Albany, Burgoyne continued this folly in the face of a growing enemy. As Burgoyne’s army floundered in the wilderness, American major general Horatio Gates blocked its path by entrenching more than seven thousand American troops on Bemis Heights near the village of Stillwater. On 19 September the British tried to break Gates’s line but were thrown back with six hundred casualties. Burgoyne planned to renew the attack on 21 September, but Major General Henry Clinton, the British commander in New York City, reported that he would attack the American forts on the lower Hudson as soon as reinforcements arrived. Burgoyne therefore canceled his attack, hoping that Clinton’s operation would compel Gates to send many troops to combat the new British threat.

This decision proved to be Burgoyne’s last major mistake, as Gates failed to take the British bait. Instead, over the next two weeks Gates’s army swelled to more than eleven thousand as militia continued to stream in. Meanwhile, Burgoyne’s beleaguered troops consumed much of their remaining provisions. Finally, on 7 October Burgoyne decided that he could not wait any longer and made a last, desperate attempt to disperse the Americans. Again, the Patriots repelled the attack and inflicted an additional six hundred casualties at the Battle of Bemis Heights. Having suffered heavy losses and with his supplies nearly exhausted, Burgoyne attempted to retreat. By then it was too late. Gates’s army encircled Burgoyne’s weary troops and forced him to surrender near Saratoga ten days later.

If Burgoyne bears most of the responsibility for the defeat, Howe certainly shares part of it. Like his counterpart, Howe lacked clear strategic objectives and made errors trying to achieve them. Throughout the winter of 1776–1777 and into the spring, Howe requested massive reinforcements to continue his operations against New England and New York. When he learned that these troops were not available, he changed his focus and concentrated on Philadelphia, the largest city in the American colonies. Philadelphia’s capture would have great economic and symbolic value as it was a major seaport and the home of the Rebel Congress. A British attack might also force George Washington, the American commanding general, to risk his army defending it. Furthermore, Howe had received reports that eastern Pennsylvania contained large numbers of Loyalists, who would welcome the British Army’s presence.

Howe’s decision to attack Philadelphia was strategically unsound. It committed him to a “war of posts”—seizing key geographic sites but not necessarily destroying the opposing army. While this strategy might work in a traditional European war, its validity was uncertain in an ideological conflict such as the American rebellion. Similarly, Howe could not guarantee that Washington would defend Philadelphia or that this strategy would result in a decisive battle. Just as problematic, Howe’s proposed attack would have dispersed British strength as he moved away from Burgoyne’s and St. Leger’s advances rather than toward them. Even if he succeeded in capturing the capital, Howe probably could not send troops to support Burgoyne because garrisoning Philadelphia and the surrounding countryside would require his entire force. This reality would have forced Britain to maintain large troop concentrations in Philadelphia, New York City, and Canada—all too far apart to allow the British generals
to assist each other if needed. Interestingly, Howe suspected that his Philadelphia strategy would not be decisive. As early as 2 April 1777 he informed Germain that "my hopes of terminating the war this year are vanished." Still, he proceeded with the operation.

If moving against Philadelphia was a questionable decision, Howe's method of implementing it was even more egregious. His first mistake was opting to transport his army by sea rather than marching it across New Jersey to the Delaware River. Not only was the land route much shorter and more direct, but it also would have allowed Howe to keep his army between Washington's and Burgoyne's. If the British general moved by sea, however, it would have allowed Washington to attack either New York City or Burgoyne's army before Howe could intervene. Howe compounded the mistake by not sailing until 23 July. He remained at sea for thirty-two days before landing at Head of Elk in Chesapeake Bay. Howe initially intended to proceed up the Delaware, but he received intelligence that it was heavily fortified. Once ashore, Howe marched Northeast and defeated Washington at Brandywine Creek on 11 September. He did not take Philadelphia until 26 September, though. By leaving so late in the summer and then requiring another two months to achieve his objective, Howe had effectively taken himself out of the campaign for much of the season.

Howe's seaborne move against Philadelphia caused problems not only for Burgoyne but also for Major General Clinton, whom he left in New York City with seven thousand British and Loyalist troops. Clinton had the important job of keeping Washington from recapturing New York City while Howe moved against Philadelphia. Once Howe was at sea, though, Washington's army far outnumbered Clinton's forces. Furthermore, with Howe gone, Clinton did not know if Washington would strike him, Burgoyne, or Howe. The latter compounded Clinton's intelligence problem by not informing him of the situation near Philadelphia from late August until early October.

This lack of communication was critical because Howe also charged Clinton with assisting Burgoyne by advancing up the Hudson. Clinton believed that he lacked the strength to make this trip until he could confirm that Washington had gone to Pennsylvania. Even then, Clinton had to wait for additional troops to arrive from Britain before he could attack the heavily fortified American positions on the Hudson River. Clinton finally departed on 3 October with his reinforcements and stormed Forts Montgomery and Clinton three days later. He then dispatched a force to continue North, which advanced to within forty-five miles of Albany.

At this point Howe intervened one last time by ordering Clinton to send him four thousand troops. When Clinton received this order on 17 October, neither he nor Howe knew that Burgoyne had surrendered that day. Howe knew that Clinton was mounting a relief effort, though, and must have realized that his call for reinforcements would prevent him from continuing. Howe issued the order anyway, demonstrating little concern for Burgoyne's army. Clinton therefore abandoned the captured forts, retreated back down the Hudson to New York City, and sent Howe the soldiers he had requested. Although Clinton's expedition could not have saved Burgoyne at that late date, its failure was symbolic of Howe's faulty planning.

In sum, both Burgoyne and Howe made strategic and tactical mistakes that resulted in the most decisive American victory of the Revolutionary War. Burgoyne never fully developed his plans, and he moved his army far too slowly. He also continued his march South even after its success was unlikely. Howe took himself out of the campaign by sailing to Philadelphia, and he left Clinton too few troops to assist Burgoyne. Although Germain could have coordinated British movements more closely, the generals in America must bear the responsibility for the defeat at Saratoga. They alone made the decisions and directed the troops once London officials established broad objectives.

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Viewpoint:
No. Responsibility for the defeat rests mostly with colonial secretary Lord George Germain, who failed to coordinate British armies and who grievously underestimated American forces.

British secretary of state for the colonies Lord George Germain viewed 1777 with optimism and a sure confidence that, if military affairs were conducted properly, this year would be the one in which Great Britain achieved final victory in the American Revolution (1775–1783). It had become a running joke in Britain that 1777 would be "the year of the hangman," a double entendre reference to the resemblance of the number seven to a gallows pole, and the belief that the American rebels would all be swinging from nooses before the year was out. Germain was determined to bring this conclusion about and made no secret of what he would do with the
Rebels and their leaders when Britain won the war, as he believed it most assuredly would.

The massive military campaign he had organized the previous year against the Continental Army had produced impressive results and, he believed, brought the American rebellion to its knees. British forces under General William Howe had captured New York City, one of the largest cities in the colonies, and in spite of daring attacks by American general George Washington at Trenton (26 December 1776) and Princeton (3 January 1777), still brought much of New Jersey and Eastern Pennsylvania under their control as well. Further North, events had begun well for the British but did not finish that way. A British army under Guy Carleton had pushed South from Canada and penetrated deep into the Champlain valley, nearly succeeding in...
severing New England from the Mid-Atlantic colonies before Rebel resistance and bad weather forced him to turn back. Carleton ended up retreating all the way back into Canada, pursued by a motley collection of militia and Continentals that, Germain believed, should never have been able to defeat a British army. Germain did not hold a high opinion of Carleton (a sentiment that was warmly reciprocated by Carleton) and believed that only poor planning and Carleton's failure to follow up successes had stopped the British campaign. Germain was dismissive of Rebel resistance in the wilderness of Upstate New York, believing them capable of nothing more than delaying and harassing British forces.

The fact that these "delays" by Continental and militia forces, along with the rugged terrain and early arrival of winter this far North, had prevented a successful conclusion to the campaign did not sway his opinion. He believed that a larger British army under a more capable commander would easily accomplish what Carleton had failed to do. Thus, he was already envisioning a decisive stroke in this region when General John Burgoyne approached him with his own scheme for winning the war quickly in the same area.

Burgoyne had served in America since 1775 and had been with Carleton during the recent failed offensive in the Champlain valley. He spoke disparagingly of what he believed were Carleton's many mistakes during the 1776 campaign and confidently informed officials in London that he could accomplish what Carleton had not. He asserted that he could easily penetrate the New York wilderness, recapture Fort Ticonderoga, and then push on and take Albany. Burgoyne stated that while this goal was being accomplished, Howe would move North up the Hudson River valley with his army from New York City and effect a junction with Burgoyne at Albany. He then stressed his belief regarding the critical importance to the Rebels of the Champlain valley-Hudson River line and the disastrous consequences that would befall the Rebel cause should the British succeed in seizing and holding this vital area. British control of the region would destroy the American rebellion once and for all, Burgoyne argued, and Germain shared this sentiment.

Not everyone was convinced of the efficacy of this plan, including General Howe, the commander of British forces in America who was to be the southern pincer of Burgoyne's offensive. Between November 1776 and April 1777, Howe submitted four separate campaign plans to Germain, the first three arriving while Burgoyne was still in London and arguing for his own scheme. Howe's plans varied in their details, but all of them rejected the importance of an invasion from Canada in favor of a campaign against Philadelphia. Howe argued that there was nothing worth taking in Upstate New York, which seemed to explain why few Rebel forces were stationed there. But Philadelphia was the American capital, Howe argued, and, hence, Washington would have to deploy the bulk of his army to defend it. This response would provide the British with the opportunity to defeat the main Continental Army and take the Rebel capital as well. While Howe had no illusions that the mere loss of one city or one battle, no matter how important, would end the war, he believed it would so demoralize the Americans that the British could follow up with a diplomatic initiative offering amnesty and generous terms for peace. Broken and demoralized, the Americans would jump at the chance for a way out of their predicament and would quickly come to terms.

Germain believed Howe to be a good commander; indeed, he had appointed Howe to his current post. Germain also liked the idea of going for Philadelphia, but he despaired over the leniency that Howe was showing to the Rebels and intended to show once again. Germain believed that a policy of amnesty and conciliation would encourage other revolts throughout the empire. Instead, he emphatically argued that his commanders should ruthlessly crush the rebellion by destroying the Continental Army and state militias, not merely chastising them and then offering them peace. Burgoyne was much more sympathetic to Germain's view than Howe was, as he had nothing but contempt for the Americans and their military. This shared belief in a conqueror's peace did much to win favor for Burgoyne's plan over Howe's, and hence, Germain gave his full support to Burgoyne. At this point Germain made a series of mistakes that would lead to confusion, an uncoordinated campaign, and ultimately, the most costly British defeat of the war.

Howe outranked Burgoyne, and therefore Burgoyne had no authority to order Howe to coordinate his efforts with the advance from Canada. Only Germain could issue such orders. In addition, once Burgoyne moved his army South into the New York wilderness, he would be essentially isolated from all communication with Howe. How then was he to coordinate his movements? Again, only Germain had the authority to order Howe to comply, and only Germain would be able to insure that Howe's movements worked in conjunction with Burgoyne's. On 3 April 1777 Burgoyne sailed for Canada, confident that Germain had ordered Howe to comply with the plan and blissfully unaware that the campaign was already coming apart.

Although Germain had approved Burgoyne's plan over Howe's, he was nevertheless
eager to placate Howe, who he knew was offended that a subordinate’s plan of operations had been accepted over his own. Howe also had powerful political connections, and Germain feared that a direct confrontation with him might damage his political standing in Whitehall. Therefore, Germain attempted to placate all sides by also approving Howe’s latest scheme for capturing Philadelphia. Germain believed that American resistance was weak and Tory sentiment on the rise in America; therefore, Burgoyne’s army could function independently, at least for a time, because of the low level of resistance he expected Burgoyne would meet. Even if this result was not the case, Germain reasoned that if Howe moved swiftly, he would be able to defeat Washington and take Philadelphia in the spring, or by the summer at the latest, and then still have time to move his army Northward to support Burgoyne’s advance on Albany. Yet, nowhere in his initial instructions did Germain explicitly order Howe to do so, or even clearly explain what was expected of him in terms of supporting Burgoyne’s invasion from Canada.

On 18 May 1777, with Burgoyne already in Canada and readying his invasion force, a fourth plan of operations arrived in London from Howe. Having never been explicitly ordered to support Burgoyne, Howe had evidently decided to conduct his own campaign without regard for what Burgoyne did or did not do. He notified Germain that he would not be able to get his army under way until late in the summer instead of spring as originally forecast. Howe stated he would leave a small force in New York City under General Henry Clinton, who was scheduled to arrive in July, with authorization to operate North up the Hudson River valley if he deemed it prudent, but made no mention of Burgoyne. After the defeat at Saratoga, and as recriminations abounded, Clinton stated that he had been left with a skeletal force barely capable of holding the city, much less conducting offensive operations in support of Burgoyne’s army. Since Howe’s forces would not be able to start their campaign until midsummer, it was clear that it would be virtually impossible for Howe to wrap up his campaign quickly and shift his forces Northward to support Burgoyne. Indeed, Howe made no mention of even trying to do so in his message to Germain.

It was not until he received this last message from Howe, and some would argue not even then, that Germain realized Burgoyne would receive no support whatsoever from Howe and that the two armies would be conducting separate campaigns instead of acting in concert with one another. Germain immediately wrote back to Howe: “His Majesty does not hesitate to approve the alterations which you propose, trusting however that whatever you may meditate it will be executed in time for you to cooperate with the army ordered to proceed from Canada.” It was the closest that Germain ever came to ordering Howe to support Burgoyne, and yet this last missive, even given the vagaries of eighteenth-century formality, was still not a direct order, and is indicative of the passive-aggressive approach that Germain used with Howe even when clear, concise, and direct orders needed to be sent to clarify that Howe was to coordinate his campaign with Burgoyne. As it turned out, it proved too late for any of that as by the time Germain’s politely worded missive arrived in New York, Howe had already sailed for Philadelphia along with his army.

In the end, the British waged two distinctly separate campaigns in 1777. Howe’s attack on Philadelphia went well for the British, as he defeated Washington at the Battle of the Brandywine on 11 September 1777 and swiftly moved to occupy the city. Yet, this victory did not have the expected effect on American morale that Howe had originally presumed. American resistance did not collapse, and Tory sentiment in Pennsylvania turned out to be much weaker than either he or Germain had originally thought. After repulsing a counterattack by Washington at the Battle of Germantown on 4 October 1777, Howe made no effort to continue his campaign from Philadelphia or send his army (or even a sizable contingent of it) North to support Burgoyne’s drive from Canada.

Yet, far to the North, Burgoyne’s army was blindly stumbling its way Southward, convinced that Howe was moving up from New York City in support. It was not until 3 August 1777 that Burgoyne, now far past the point of turning back, received information that Howe had moved against Philadelphia instead of Albany as intended in his original plan. Deciding that he had no other recourse, he continued on to Albany with the hope that Howe would move up in support once he captured Philadelphia.

On 19 September 1777, while Howe was approaching the outskirts of Philadelphia, Burgoyne’s army ran into and was defeated by a powerful American force two hundred miles away at the Battle of Freeman’s Farm. Burgoyne attempted to fight through the Americans by flanking their position and was again defeated at the Battle of Bemis Heights on 7 October 1777. With Rebel militia now swarming over his lines of communication to Canada, and no help coming from New York City, Burgoyne attempted to withdraw. When his forces reached Saratoga in October 1777, they were trapped and out of supplies. Burgoyne was forced to surrender his entire army in one of the worst defeats in British military history.
To be sure, both Burgoyne and Howe share blame for the British defeat at Saratoga. Burgoyne’s plan was complicated and depended to a great degree on coordinating the movements of different armies separated by great distance and unable to communicate with one another effectively. Howe never made any effort to support Burgoyne and purposely chose to interpret his instructions from Germain in a way that suited his own ideas rather than the overall plan of Burgoyne. Yet, ultimately the blame must rest with Germain.

Germain grievously underestimated the strength of American forces and their willingness to continue the war. Instead of attempting to use the slight advantage Britain had won in 1776 to work toward a negotiated settlement with the Americans, he sought to achieve a total victory by pursuing a risky and complicated military scheme. He failed to appreciate the serious problems that an army might encounter in the wilderness of Upstate New York if it was not properly supported. Having heard out the rival commanders on their views regarding the proper course of action for the 1777 campaign, Germain should have chosen one plan and stuck to it. Instead, he chose to avoid confrontation, failed to make a clear choice, and utterly failed to fulfill his obligation of strategically melding the movements of the British armies in America into a coordinated campaign. Even though Germain knew that Howe did not like having to comply with Burgoyne’s plan, Germain took no steps to insure that Howe would do so. Even when it was apparent that Howe was essentially ignoring the overall strategic concept for the campaign, Germain could still not bring himself to directly order Howe to support Burgoyne. The result was a disaster for the British military. Thus, in many ways, Germain lost the campaign of 1777 for the British before the operation had even commenced.

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