## Early American Wars:
# Yorktown

## OPPOSING FORCES

**British:** Approx. 8,000 troops, including Germans and Loyalists, commanded by Lt. Gen. Charles Earl Cornwallis (Cornwallis reported to Lt. Gen. Sir Henry Clinton, Britain's Commander of the American theater). The Royal Navy's American and part of the Caribbean Squadron (19 ships of the line) was commanded by Rear Admiral Thomas Graves. (Admiral Hood became subordinate when they joined forces.)

**American and French:** The combined army of approx. 17,300 troops (9,500 Americans and 7,800 French) was commanded by General George Washington. French forces were commanded by Lt. Gen. Jean-Baptiste Donatien de Vimeur, Comte de Rochambeau. Key subordinates included Maj. Gen. Marie Joseph Paul Yves Roch Gilbert du Motier, Marquis de Lafayette (Light Division); Maj. Gen. Benjamin Lincoln (2nd Division); and Maj. Gen. Freidrich Wilhelm August von Steuben (3rd Division). The French Naval Squadron (28 ships of the line) was commanded by Admiral François Joseph Paul, Comte de Grasse. He was supported by Admiral de Barras (eight ships of the line, plus frigates and transports).

## HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

In 1781, after six years of fighting, the future of the American colonies was far from resolved. The British were still dominant on land and sea, and except for a few bright spots like Trenton and Saratoga, the Americans had been unable to match the skills of the strongest army of the time. The British still held the important commercial center of New York, as well as the important strongholds of Savannah and Charleston in the South. The Royal Navy still dominated at sea, providing their commanders with important strategic interior lines from which to support land operations.

Yet, despite these advantages, several factors were working against the British. The conflict had unexpectedly

weariness had begun settling over the British Parliament. Against this backdrop, the brilliantly executed Yorktown campaign, in the autumn of 1781, was a resounding American victory. This climactic battle would finally convince the British that their cause was lost, and result in formal American independence two years later at the Treaty of Paris (1783).

## STRATEGY & MANEUVER

**Actions by the British** – By the summer of 1780, Britain's war in the Colonies had become a stalemate. The nature of the war was different than British leadership had initially expected. Instead of cutting off the head of the rebellion in Boston and quickly subduing the Colonies with superior British force, America's determination only hardened. The British tried new strategies, like dividing the colonies along the Hudson River, and later, trying to crush the rebellion by seizing Philadelphia – but they went nowhere. Meanwhile, England faced growing pressure from France and Spain in Europe, India, Africa, and the Caribbean. This led to reductions in troop levels in America and further tied British forces closer to fortified bases accessible by sea.

Clinton could hold New York, but he was tethered to his sea lines of communications. Searching for alternatives, he began to look south. With a lower concentration of Continentals on the ground, and a higher percentage of Loyalists, he decided to try a different strategy to divide the colonies. By using southern Loyalists to help reestablish British rule, he thought he could isolate the rebellion in the north by cutting off southern support. After successfully capturing Charleston in the summer of 1780, he left Cornwallis behind to execute his plan, while he focused his attention on defending New York from an attack from Washington and the French that he was sure would come.

But things didn't go as planned. As Cornwallis pursued rebel forces and seized their supplies, strong Loyalist support never materialized. At the same time, Nathanael Greene, who Washington