Chapter One: Now or Never

- [Narrator] As the Revolutionary War's fifth year came to a close, the prospects for American independence never seemed so bleak.

The euphoria brought on by the victory at Saratoga New York and the French commitment to aid America both financially and militarily, had long since died out. American defeats to the south at Savannah, Charleston and Camden only furthered the growing sense of despair. Morale was low. Mutiny lurked within Washington's ranks. Ex-American general Benedict Arnold, whose defection and treachery seemed to signal a broader problem among the population, now led British forces raiding unchecked into the heart of Virginia. Inflation and shortages of hard money meant Congress could not even pay the soldiers defending their cause. And rumors swirled that the French, pouring what amounted to billions in current dollars into the American war effort, were having second thoughts about their involvement in what had become for them an expensive global conflict. At his headquarters in New York, commander in chief George Washington saw the present crisis unfolded and observed, "We're at the end of our tether and now or never, our deliverance must come."

Chapter Two: The Tide Turns

The long streak of British victories would end as they continued their advance into the Carolinas. A recently formed American army under Nathaniel Greene harassed Lord Charles Cornwallis's troops as they marched endlessly through the rough Carolina back-country. The British were stung with losses at Kings Mountain and Cowpens, coupled with devastating casualties suffered at Guilford Courthouse. Tired of the inconclusive fighting in the Carolinas, Cornwallis made the fateful decision to march his army north to Virginia.

It is here in the home colony of Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Patrick Henry, that Cornwallis hopes to not only stop the flow of supplies into the deep south, but to also make Virginia the seat of war, even at the expense of British control of New York. General Sir Henry Clinton, Cornwallis's superior in New York is angered by the move into Virginia. Not only is it a blatant disregard of orders, it risks wiping away the hard-fought British gains in the Carolinas. Plus, with the news of the French fleet's operation in American waters, Clinton is no longer certain that he can safeguard Cornwallis's position in Virginia or transport him safely elsewhere. Despite these doubts over his strategy, Clinton sends reinforcements south to his aid. By May 1781, Cornwallis unites the British forces at Petersburg, 7,200 strong.

Chapter Three: The French Alliance

As Cornwallis moves into Virginia, George Washington and his French allies consider their options. Since the arrival of French forces in 1778, the Allies have yet to produce a significant victory. Repeated failures had created confusion and distrust amidst the Franco-American alliance. And by 1781, there's little reason to think the present campaign will yield different results. Washington believes that Clinton has made himself vulnerable by sending troops south to Cornwallis. With French military and naval cooperation, he thinks a combined allied strike against the British stronghold in New York could end the war.

But Comte De Rochambeau, commander of the French forces, doesn't agree. Though a more experienced officer than Washington, Rochambeau has orders to obey the American general's chosen strategy. At a strategic conference with Washington in Connecticut, Rochambeau makes the case that New York is too difficult a position to attack. Both commanders are aware of a large French fleet sailing in the West Indies and that it's available to operate off the American coast before returning to France. Washington wants it to sail to New York. Rochambeau has another idea.
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In the waning moments of their conference, the French commander secures a vital concession from Washington, who agrees to move his army elsewhere provided that the French fleet arrives upon the coast. But what Washington doesn't know is that Rochambeau has already written the fleet's commander, Admiral Francois Joseph Paul Comte de Grasse, with a strong directive for him to sail not to New York but toward Cornwallis in Virginia for the Chesapeake Bay. It's a move that will reap significant Allied advantages in the months to come.

Meanwhile, Washington's plans for an attack on New York remain frustrated. Much-needed men and supplies for the attack have failed to materialize. Amidst the ongoing stalemate, Washington learns on August 14th that De Grasse's French fleet has been directed to the waters off Virginia. He confides to his diary that matters have now come to a crisis. Stay the course for the attack on New York or gamble all on this new opportunity in Virginia. He faces a crucial strategic choice that must be made quickly. To take advantage of Cornwallis's precarious position, he must move his and Rochambeau's armies overland to Virginia and give up his aims for New York. The march south is filled with risk. Can the French fleet and the small American army in Virginia hold Cornwallis in place long enough? Will Clinton at New York even allow his French and American forces to move south? Despite these great concerns, Washington decides to change course. He will move south and attack Cornwallis.

Chapter Four: The Roads to Yorktown

Since his arrival in Petersburg Virginia on May 20th, General Cornwallis's combined army of 7,200 men had been unable to bring the Marquis de Lafayette wily American force to decisive battle. The Frenchmen turned American general was Washington's favorite. In Virginia, he described his role as one reminiscent of the terrier baiting the bull. But his small army bought Washington needed time.

As he ponders his next move, Cornwallis received a set of contradictory and confusing orders from Clinton. In one, a nervous Clinton requests reinforcements for his threatened position in New York. Then another, proposing a march toward Philadelphia. And then a third, ordering him to stay put in Virginia. Ultimately, the two British commanders decide that Cornwallis's army will remain along the Virginia coast. Cornwallis settles upon Yorktown as its future base.

Situated atop a high bluff over the York River, Yorktown is a strong position. Deep ravines and swampy creeks limit access and Gloucester Point controls river traffic. Cornwallis believes his position is a strong one so long as the British Navy maintains control of the waters in and around the Chesapeake. It is this assumption that will prove disastrous for the British.

Chapter Five: The Battle of the Virginia Capes

Armed with Rochambeau's directive, De Grasse sails north from French-controlled bases in the Caribbean on August 15th. Using Virginia pilots and sailing the smugglers route, he arrives at the Chesapeake two weeks later. His fleet is 29 ships of the line, four frigates, and 3,200 French soldiers.

The British quickly realize that it will take a victory by their Royal Navy to reopen any escape by water. Sailing south from New York, British Admiral Thomas Graves and a fleet of 19 ships of the line arrive on September 5th to find the larger French fleet blocking the entrance to the Great Bay. By 4:00 p.m. the two lines begin to exchange blistering cannon broadsides at a range more suited for pistols. A change in the wind direction forces Graves to stand off. With the sun beginning to set, damage to his fleet mounting rapidly, Graves makes the fateful decision to disengage. Though inconclusive tactically, the Battle of Virginia Capes was the first major naval defeat of the British by the French since 1690. Graves's retreat to
New York leaves control of the Chesapeake and Cornwallis's escape route firmly in the hands of De Grasse's French fleet.

**Chapter Six: The March South**

Washington is in a race for time. Not only must he reach Virginia before De Grasse's fleet departs the Chesapeake in October, he must also deceive Clinton long enough to allow the Allied force to reach Yorktown before Clinton can respond. As the American and French Army is prepared to march away from New York, Washington sets in motion a plan of deception. False papers ordering an attack on New York are purposely lost so the British can find them. Fake camps complete with telltale bakeries are produced within view of Clinton.

Washington's ruse works. As he moves south, Clinton waits for an attack that never comes. Despite the hot sun and endless marching, hopes of a decisive action grow within the Allied ranks.

Washington rides forward to Mount Vernon, his home that he had not seen in more than six long years. There, he and Rochambeau refine their war plan. By September 26th, all their armies have assembled just 13 miles from Cornwallis's line. Despite the Allies' great fortune so far, Washington must act quickly to dislodge Cornwallis from around Yorktown before the French fleet retires to safer waters.

**Chapter Seven: The Siege Begins**

The British are well dug in, with earthen redoubts protected by sharpened poles called fradies and pallicies, to protect the defenders. Cornwallis's artillery is arranged to harass Washington's army and keep them at bay. Reduced by sickness and wounds, Cornwallis is still able to place 5,500 veteran British and Hessians into the fortified lines, some of the best soldiers in the world.

Despite these defenses, Cornwallis is soon in a perilous position. By October 3rd, the Yorktown and nearby Gloucester positions are surrounded by the growing Allied force. Augmented by the recent arrival of heavy siege guns, Washington has 18,000 French and American soldiers ready for action.

Relying on Rochambeau's experience in classic siege warfare, Washington orders the Yorktown operation to commence. The plan is for American and French forces, in the dark of the night, to dig parallel trenches, inching ever closer until their artillery is in range to begin breaking down Cornwallis's earthen defenses. The siege and victory, claims Rochambeau, is now reducible to calculation.

**Chapter Eight: The First Parallel**

Ever since arriving at Yorktown, hundreds of French and American soldiers had been on constant rotating duty, building the massive infrastructure needed to support the planned half-mile siege line. On October 6th, Rochambeau's design is set in motion. Under the cover of a rainy night, 1,500 men fan out to begin digging along a line marked by pine boards. 2,500 men move ahead to defend them from attack. 1,000 yards from the British, this first parallel line is 10 feet wide and four feet deep. It will house 13 artillery batteries and four manned redoubts. Going exactly to plan, most of this line will be filled with troops by sunrise. General Washington is among the first to break the earth with a pickax, symbolically beginning the siege of Yorktown.

By October 9th, all of the 73 allied cannons, mortars and howitzers have been hauled into battery positions along the line. General Washington fires one of the opening shots, as many as 1,700 rounds eventually crashing on the unfortunate town each day. Those citizens who remain are forced to seek
shelter along the river's edge. Even Cornwallis who had been occupying the home of former Virginia Governor Thomas Nelson, shelters in an underground bunker.

**Chapter Nine: The Second Parallel**

Although the cannons of the Allies were relentless, more pressure was needed. Digging zigzag approach trenches, the Allies begin construction of a second parallel on the night of October 11th. This second parallel is only 350 yards from the nearest British defenses, point-blank cannon range. By dawn, they had built a trench 750 yards long. As they build the second parallel line, two advanced British redoubts, number nine and number 10 block their path to the river. The Allies will make a direct assault against these stocked positions. Leading the American assault on redoubt number 10 is one of Washington's trusted aides, 24-year-old Lieutenant Colonel Alexander Hamilton. Facing the larger and tougher redoubt number nine, Count William de Deux-Ponts will lead the French assault, which includes 400 veteran grenadiers and sasoeurs from the regiments Gatineau and Deux-Ponts.

As night falls on October 14, the French unleash a diversionary raid on the Fusiliers' redoubt at the far end of the British line. The combined assault begins at 7:00 p.m. Hamilton leads his 400-man force toward redoubt number 10, illuminated by signal rockets. They must cross a quarter mile of open ground as fast as they can. Lieutenant Colonel John Lawrence leads 80 Americans around the back of the redoubt, while the remainder make a frontal assault. British grapeshot and shells fail to slow the Americans. After a few minutes of hand-to-hand combat they take redoubt number 10. The French have a tougher time with redoubt number nine and face intensive musket fire. But after a savage close-range fight, the French overwhelm the British and Hessian defenders.

At a cost of 24 men killed and nearly 100 wounded, Cornwallis is now trapped at Yorktown and he has few options. His attempt to slow the Allied bombardment with a sortie of 350 light infantry and grenadiers yields no lasting result. A desperate attempt to flee the lines across the river fails due to lack of boats and terrible weather. Surrounded by a sick and hungry army, the smashed houses of Yorktown and the rising stench of hundreds of dead and rotting horses, Cornwallis decides to seek the unthinkable. A surrender of his forces to the French and Americans.

**Chapter Ten: The Surrender**

Cornwallis seeks honorable terms which Washington rejects. He will give the British the same treatment they gave the Americans a year earlier at Charleston. Colors surrendered and Cornwallis's men, prisoners. The British commander has no choice but to accept or face further bloodshed. At 2:00 p.m. on October 19th 1781, the British march from the ruined remains of Yorktown. They stack their weapons and surrender their flag. Lord Cornwallis claims illness, leaving the formal surrender to Brigadier General Charles O'Hara.

O'Hara attempts to surrender to Rochambeau who directs him to General Washington. Washington in turn, has O'Hara surrender to his second-in-command, General Benjamin Lincoln who had been forced to ignobly surrender a year before at Charleston. With Cornwallis's sick and wounded, more than 8,000 prisoners are counted at Yorktown along with over 200 cannon, 8,000 muskets and 2,000 swords. The British suffer 556 killed, wounded or missing; the Allies, 389 - nearly two-thirds of which were French.

That evening, Washington notifies Congress, writing simply that, "A reduction of the British Army under the command of Lord Cornwallis is most happily effected." The evening of October 22nd, they issue a decree for a day and night of celebration. When Lord North, the British Prime Minister learns of the
defeat a month later, he blurts, "Oh God, it is all over." And while King George III continues to ask for further military actions, the war is essentially over.

The defeat at Yorktown and mounting costs of the war saps British public support for continued action. In April 1782, the British Parliament seeks out the American ministry in France to begin negotiations. 18 months later, The Treaty of Paris is ratified by Congress. Bringing about the end of America's war for independence and the beginning of a new nation.

With the war over, General Washington shocked the world in December 1783 by resigning his commission as commander-in-chief. Walking away from such a powerful position prompted King George III to call him the greatest character of his age. But his retirement from public service would be short-lived. By 1787, he was elected president of the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia. Two years later, he would become the first president of the United States.