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General Charles Lord Cornwallis and the British Southern Strategy

Anne Midgley

General Charles Lord Cornwallis's temper snapped—as did the sword blade upon which he was leaning—as he listened to a humbled Lieutenant Colonel Banastre Tarleton relate to him the details of his defeat at a backwoods pasture known as Hannah's Cowpens. The American rebels, led by Brigadier General Daniel Morgan, had trounced the British. Tarleton's losses were appalling, perhaps as high as eighty percent of the men he had led into battle, which represented nearly twenty-five percent of the army led by Cornwallis. Tarleton left behind over one hundred dead and nearly eight hundred men whom the Americans captured following the brief, but intense, battle. Tarleton's report left Cornwallis desperate to overtake Morgan and the rebels, wreak his revenge, and retrieve his men. The British loss at Cowpens on 17 January 1781 set in motion a series of events that culminated in a Pyrrhic British victory at the Battle of Guilford Courthouse on 15 March 1781, and eventually led to Cornwallis's own defeat at Yorktown, a loss which sealed the American victory for the War of Independence.¹

Charles, Lord Cornwallis

Born in 1738, the future 1st Marquess and 2nd Earl Cornwallis was the sixth child and first son born to Charles, 1st Earl Cornwallis and his wife, Elizabeth Townshend. Young Cornwallis received an excellent education, studying at Eton College and Cambridge University. He attended the prestigious military academy at Turin, Italy and fought for Frederick the Great of Prussia during the Seven Years' War. Upon inheriting his father's earldom, Cornwallis became active in British political affairs, sitting in the House of Lords, where he frequently sided with the opposition to the Crown. Cornwallis opposed the Stamp Act and voted against the Declaratory Act of 1766.²

Despite his opposition to a number of the British policies that led to the American rebellion, Cornwallis was loyal to the Crown and offered his services to King George III when hostilities broke out in 1775. Cornwallis became the highest-ranking member of British nobility to serve in America. His aristocratic rank posed problems for his relationship with General Sir Henry Clinton, who became commander-in-chief following the resignation of General Sir William Howe. Cornwallis's close relationship with George III and with Lord George Germain, the

British minister responsible for the war effort, meant that Cornwallis often corresponded directly with Germain on matters related to military strategy, undercutting his superior, Clinton.

Despite modern portrayals of Cornwallis as an effete aristocrat such as found in the Hollywood blockbuster, *The Patriot*, much the opposite is true of his character. He was an aggressive, hard-charging commander and a leader who often shared the deprivations of his men. Cornwallis's penchant for action placed him at odds with the more restrained Clinton. Cornwallis chose to interpret broadly Clinton's orders and sent troops throughout South Carolina to pacify the state, rather than use his limited resources to protect British interests in the wealthy coastal areas surrounding captured Charleston.³

Following the war, Cornwallis continued to serve Britain as a high-level military commander and government leader—acting as a talented trouble-shooter in hot spots throughout the realm. He chalked up the most successful post-war career of the senior British commanders who had fought in the War for America. In 1786, he became the governor-general and British commander-in-chief in India. He brought a hitherto unknown level of stability to British India, and enacted the Cornwallis Code in 1793, which remained the framework of government in British India until 1833.⁴ During the Irish rebellion of 1798, Cornwallis returned to the British Isles to become the lord lieutenant and commander in chief of Ireland. According to historian Andrew Jackson O'Shaughnessy, Cornwallis “led his troops



Figure 1. Pen-and-ink and wash design of a proposed mausoleum for Lord Cornwallis by Thomas Fraser (1776-1823), c.1805.

into battle and defeated a French invasion force . . . the first time in a century that a lord lieutenant had commanded troops in war in Ireland.”⁵ In Ireland, Cornwallis championed the rights of the Catholics, and supported Catholic emancipation in opposition to the King. After serving in Ireland, Cornwallis returned to India to serve a second term as governor general in 1805. He died shortly after returning to India. He is buried “on a bluff overlooking the River Ganges” and his grave is marked by a magnificent mausoleum with the inscription “This monument, raised by the British inhabitants of Calcutta, attests their sense of those virtues which will live in the remembrance of grateful millions, long after it shall have mouldered in the dust.”⁶

Britain’s Southern Strategy

Britain suffered a devastating defeat at Saratoga when General John Burgoyne surrendered his army on 17 October 1777. Although the terms of the convention he signed with the victorious American general, Horatio Gates, permitted the British soldiers to return to England, the Continental Congress overruled Gates’s terms and the “convention army” remained prisoners on American soil. After news of Saratoga reached France, the French officially entered the war as an American ally. France had already lent crucial support for the American cause out of a vengeful determination to humiliate Britain. The French military and naval support now provided to the American cause, however, proved crucial to the rebels.⁷

Facing their ancient enemy, France, and a conflict that endangered British holdings from the home islands to the West Indies, Minorca, Gibraltar, and India, Britain developed a new strategy to defeat the American colonists. Britain’s focus shifted to the southern colonies and the presumed Loyalist strength that lay therein. Based in part on reports from the exiled royal governors of the southern colonies and Loyalist refugees, George III, his Prime Minister Lord North, and particularly Lord George Germain, Secretary of State for America believed that the Southern colonies contained a significant population of Loyalists. They reached the hopeful, but seriously flawed, strategic assumption that numerous Loyalists would flock to support the British cause, providing men, material, and logistical support.⁸

The British believed that southern Loyalists support would not only overwhelm local rebels but would also dissuade the large population of neutrals from actively supporting the rebels. They assumed that the rebels would lose the battle for the hearts and minds of the southern population, and that the rebel network of support, material, and field intelligence would wane, shifting the

advantage to the Crown forces and their Loyalist allies. This shift to Britain's favor would then convince the substantial neutral element of the population that their best interest lay in returning to firm allegiance to the Crown, and it would cause the less fanatical among the rebels to seek their own self-interest, abandoning the radical few to their fate. The Southern provinces would remain within British fold, alienating them from the Northern colonies, and putting the entire rebellion at risk. However, the Southern strategy rested on inflated claims from interested parties and ministerial daydreams. It proved infuriatingly elusive—and though initially successful—was not sustainable. It is true that self-interest and ideological inclinations drove the southern colonists' allegiance. Some southerners were indeed staunchly devoted to the Crown—others shifted their allegiance with the whims of war. Many simply desired to remain aloof from the fight.⁹

The initial results of the British campaign in the South were spectacular. Savannah, Georgia fell to the British on 29 December 1778. Continental Army Major General Benjamin Lincoln surrendered Charleston, South Carolina, the



Figure 2. *Charles Cornwallis, 1st Marquess Cornwallis* by Thomas Gainsborough (1727–1788), National Portrait Gallery, London.

largest city in the South, to the British on 12 May 1780 after a lengthy siege that overwhelmed Lincoln's Continental Army and militia forces. This forced him to turn over thousands of men and enormous quantities of weapons and supplies to the British. However, complications almost immediately ensued. General Sir Henry Clinton, the British Commander in Chief, returned north to his headquarters in New York and left Cornwallis a powder keg. Prior to leaving, Clinton issued an amnesty proclamation, almost immediately complicated by a second proclamation, which mandated that all the rebels on parole take an oath to support the British. This oath required that if called upon, men were to take up arms against their former comrades—in effect, leaving no room for neutrality.¹⁰

Hoping to pacify the colony, Cornwallis sent his commanders and their men fanning out into the backcountry to establish strongholds and rally the Loyalists. However, the British seriously misjudged the temperament of backwoods North and South Carolina. Major Patrick Ferguson, the “inspector of militia,” threatened to lay waste to the homes of the “Over-mountain” rebels. His words and actions inflamed the backcountry and men gathered from what is now eastern Tennessee, North Carolina, and Virginia to track down and destroy Ferguson. The Battle of King's Mountain on 7 October 1780 resulted in Ferguson's death and the destruction of his Loyalists troops. King's Mountain proved to be a turning point, and afterward, far fewer Loyalists came forth to join the British troops. The British faced mounting obstacles and fewer Loyalists actively aided them, while the neutrals moved into the rebel camp. The Loyalist Strategy, built on misinformation and wishful thinking, quickly began to unravel.¹¹

Small bands of partisan fighters also hampered British efforts to regain control of South Carolina. These insurgents continually harassed the British communications and supply lines as well as their troop movements, particularly hampering Cornwallis's men as they moved inland away from their coastal stronghold and naval-based supply chain. The rebel partisans also provided intelligence and support to Major General Nathanael Greene's Continentals, kept their Loyalist neighbors from gaining the upper hand, encouraged the dispirited rebels, and eliminated the threat of Britain's Native American allies.¹²

Britain's War for America became a world war when France joined the conflict. Spain, France's Bourbon ally, never joined with the American rebels but did declare war on Britain in 1779. For Britain, the war became extraordinarily complex, as the British now had to stretch their military and naval resources to the breaking point to defend their possessions in the valuable West Indies, as well as India, Gibraltar, and the home waters surrounding the British Isles.¹³ In September 1779, fear for the safety of Jamaica caused Clinton to order Cornwallis “to go with

another five thousand troops . . . to the defense of Jamaica.”¹⁴ Had the threat to Jamaica not passed, the British would have lost over twenty-five percent of their troop strength in the mainland colonies for the defense of a single island colony.¹⁵

Personality conflicts between Cornwallis and Clinton added to Britain’s troubles in the South. Clinton failed to exert overarching strategic initiative while he gave the aggressive Cornwallis too much operational leeway.¹⁶ Cornwallis communicated directly with Lord Germain, who preferred Cornwallis to Clinton, but left Clinton in overall command. Cornwallis did not communicate with his commander-in-chief for months following the British defeat at Cowpens. Clinton, for his part, issued frequent and conflicting instructions to Cornwallis, particularly during the summer of 1781, leading to Cornwallis’s occupation of Yorktown. Cornwallis did not maintain close contact with the Royal Navy and the Navy’s failure to attain control of the Chesapeake Bay paved the way for the American and French victory at Yorktown in October 1781.¹⁷

In addition to the challenges noted above, the British face unanticipated foes—yellow fever and malaria. British soldiers had no immunity to these lethal diseases, unlike the Southern rebels. Yellow fever’s mortality rate among populations with no previous immunity approached eighty-five percent and it was particularly deadly for young adult populations; precisely those represented by the typical British invasion force. Survivors receive a life-long immunity and large populations of immune people stop the transmission of the disease. Living with significant slave populations and their relative imperviousness to the disease protected the Americans colonists to a degree, while the British soldiers had no defense from the illness.¹⁸ Fear of disease influenced Cornwallis’s decision to not move northward along the coastline; he feared that the route was too disease-ridden for his troops and he elected to move further inland—away from his naval lifeline. At Yorktown, twenty five percent or more of Cornwallis’s troops “were too sick to fight, compared to roughly [five] percent of American and French troops.”¹⁹

The actions of Cornwallis, a faithful servant to the Crown, led to the greatest British loss of the American Revolution at Yorktown, Virginia. Yet Cornwallis shares the blame with a number of other British civil and military leaders who did not recognize—until it was too late—that winning the hearts and minds of the Southern populace would prove to be an insurmountable challenge. Without civilian support, the British could not hope to recapture the American Southern colonies, and British policies following the fall of Charleston assured that the rebels—not the Loyalists—would have the upper hand.

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Notes

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5. O’Shaughnessy, *The Men Who Lost America*, 283.

6. *Ibid.*, 285.

7. Don Higginbotham, *The War of American Independence: Military Attitudes, Policies and Practice, 1763-1789* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1971), 197. See pages 232-251 for the impact of foreign aid on the American cause.

8. Carpenter, “British Strategic Failure in the Southern Campaign,” 8; Higginbotham, *The War of American Independence*, 232-237; John S. Pancake, *The Destructive War: The British Campaign in the Carolinas, 1780-1782* (1985; repr., Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1992), 25-26.

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