

*United States Marine Corps  
Command and Staff College  
Marine Corps University  
2076 South Street  
Marine Corps Combat Development Command  
Quantico, Virginia 22134-5068*

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THE SOUTHERN CAMPAIGN OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION: THE AMERICAN  
INSURGENCY FROM 1780 TO 1782

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LIEUTENANT COLONEL BRIAN W. NEIL

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Mentor and Oral Defense Committee Member:

Approved: J.W. Gordon

Date: 4/23/09

Oral Defense Committee Member: LTCOL D. DEWING

Approved: [Signature]

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## Executive Summary

**Title:** The Southern Campaign of the American Revolution: The American Insurgency from 1780 to 1782.

**Author:** Lieutenant Colonel Brian W. Neil, United States Marine Corps

**Thesis:** An analysis of the Southern Campaign of the American Revolution in South Carolina from 1780 to 1782 provides exceptional insights into timeless characteristics of counterinsurgency theory and the failed British operational design that bear significance on modern military campaigns.

**Discussion:** Following the British defeat at Saratoga, New York in 1777, the British government developed a strategy to mobilize loyalists in South Carolina and reestablish royal authority in the American southern colonies. In the early winter of 1779, Lieutenant General Sir Henry Clinton conducted an offensive military campaign intended to control the southern colonies from the bottom up, from Georgia to the Chesapeake. In the absence of French naval support to the colonies, Clinton conducted an expeditionary operation to seize Charleston and commence operations throughout the interior of South Carolina. Although enjoying early success with the capture of Charleston in May 1780, the British force found itself engaged in a bloody and protracted conflict with American guerrilla fighters, militia, and semi-organized Continental Army units for the next two years.

Following Clinton's departure, Major General Lord Cornwallis executed Clinton's Southern Campaign in the Carolinas with a stream of tactical successes; however, within two years, the campaign to restore the crown's authority in the American Southern Colonies resulted in cataclysmic operational and strategic failures. The British strategy and offensive campaign was defeated by militarily inferior force, in a rural territory, through a hybrid form of conflict that directly contributed to the British defeat at Yorktown in 1781.

The rebel effort led primarily by General Nathanael Greene, Commander of the Continental Southern Department, and local leaders, Francis Marion, Thomas Sumter, and Andrew Pickens, implemented a form of hybrid warfare that exhausted British resources and eroded British will to fight. While Lord Cornwallis' operational design missed the mark, each of General Greene's tactical defeats contributed to his operational success.

**Conclusion:** British defeat in South Carolina had a decisive effect for the rebellion. The effects of hybrid warfare demonstrated the flaws in the British strategic and operational design. The Americans demonstrated classic insurgent tactics through a protracted campaign that contributed to strategic objectives, and their methods and intentions follow suit with modern counterinsurgent and revolutionary warfare models. Despite our focus on contemporary counterinsurgency theory, the British Southern Campaign and General Nathanael Greene's operational art provide an excellent case study that is extremely relevant in countering today's global insurgent efforts.

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## *Preface*

The following thesis is a result of the author's interest in the Southern Campaign of the American Revolution. With tours as a Company Commander and Battalion Operations Officer in Iraq, followed by a tour as a Recruiting Station Commanding Officer, the author had little time to reflect on his participation in counterinsurgency warfare. An examination of the American insurgency during the American Revolution bears striking similarities to counterinsurgency warfare the author faced during Operation Iraqi Freedom II in 2004. During instruction and seminar during Operational Art, Lesson 5102, the author developed an interest in British campaign design and the American insurgent methods against the British in South Carolina from 1780 to 1782. The intent of this study is to highlight the complexities of conventional versus irregular warfare, challenges in operational design, and the timeless and unchanging methods of insurgents and counterinsurgents in hybrid warfare. This thesis represents the culmination of learning that would not have been possible without leadership of Lieutenant Colonel Darrin Denny, Dr. Eric Shibuya, Professor Erin Simpson, and my mentor Dr. John W. Gordon.

*"For my part I am convinced that ... though we may conquer, we shall never keep. How the experiment has failed in the Carolinas I cannot judge." - Lieutenant General Sir Henry Clinton<sup>1</sup>*

## Introduction

In the fall of 1779, the American Revolutionary War was well under way in the northern colonies, and the British Commander-in-Chief for North America, Lieutenant General Sir Henry Clinton, began a military campaign to mobilize loyalists in South Carolina and reestablish royal authority in the American southern colonies. The bustling colony of South Carolina had been free from British authority for three years, and in the spring of 1780, the organized resistance in Charleston, South Carolina, would suffer a devastating defeat and subsequently surrender to British forces. Despite this great victory at Charleston, the British southern strategy, approved by Lord George Germain from London, caused an unforeseen and protracted conflict with American guerrilla fighters, militia, and semi-organized Continental Army units for the next two years. Major General Lord Cornwallis executed Clinton's Southern Military Campaign in South Carolina with a stream of tactical successes; however, within two years, the campaign to restore the crown's authority in the American Southern Colonies resulted in cataclysmic operational and strategic failures. The British strategy and operational design were defeated by a militarily inferior force, in a rural territory, through a hybrid form a conflict that directly contributed to the British defeat at Yorktown in 1781.

Over two hundred years later, as the United States military continues worldwide operations against regional and global insurgencies, there is little awareness of the theory and practice of irregular warfare from our own colonial history. An analysis of the Southern Campaign of the American Revolution in South Carolina from 1780 to 1782 provides exceptional insights into timeless characteristics of counterinsurgency theory and failed British operational design that bear significance on modern military campaigns. Through this analysis

of our own insurgent history, today's warfighter can gain an understanding of modern insurgent and irregular warfare theories that assist in framing contemporary operational design and tactics to combat their adversaries. Although there are no "boiler plate" solutions for waging irregular warfare, properly framing unique problems, utilizing operational art as the basis for operating concepts, and identifying tasks and objectives to achieve the strategic endstate remain the essence of operational planning and execution.<sup>2</sup> The intention of this paper is to examine and analyze:

- British execution of the Southern Campaign during the American Revolution.
- The context of counterinsurgency theory in South Carolina from 1780 to 1782.
- Contemporary application of campaign design for counterinsurgency operations.

### Strategic Setting

#### (a) British Strategy.

Carl Von Clausewitz describes strategy generally as, "the use of an engagement for the purpose of war... and will determine the series of actions intended to achieve it; he will, in fact, shape the individual campaigns."<sup>3</sup> Following the defeat and surrender of Major General John Burgoyne's forces at Saratoga, New York in October 1777, the British strategy in the American Revolutionary War entered a new phase, which required a new approach with supporting military and naval campaigns. In the previous British actions, military force was unable to destroy the Continental Army and consolidate territorial gains.<sup>4</sup> By 1780 and five years into the American rebellion, the military requirements of the British Empire were stretching military and naval forces thin. The British Army and Royal Navy were required to garrison, patrol, and protect its interests and established colonies worldwide; further, the British government now faced a protracted rebellion in the American Colonies that required additional attention from

London and resources to sustain American theater requirements. Lastly, Britain's long-standing adversary, France, presented a greater threat to British possessions in America and the West Indies through its navy and eventual military support to continental forces.

In early 1778, the British entered this new phase of the war facing a stalemate with Washington's continentals in the north. The British leadership's primary strategic objective was to restore British sovereignty by conducting an offensive strategy to defeat the American rebels. The Whitehall Ministry and Lord George Germain, the Secretary of State for the Colonies in London, recognized that a decisive victory in the northern colonies was unlikely, and decisive action was required to defeat the rebellion and restore the crown's authority elsewhere in the American Colonies. If the British Army could not destroy Washington's Continental Army outright, Germain's strategy provided the following solutions: consolidating military gains, targeting the political and social structure of the colonies - loyalists, and reintegrating the Americans into the Empire's political process.<sup>5</sup>

Lord Germain's strategic design was reinforced by reports from exiled British officials that indicated a vast majority of loyalists in the south could be mobilized and organized to fight against rebel groups. These bands of southern loyalists would assist in seizing control of the Southern Colonies, as the resistance in the middle colonies grew tired. Additionally, the absence of the French Fleet, presented an opportunity to shift military forces from New York to the south. A well-executed military campaign could seize the American Southern Colonies from Georgia to Virginia, from the bottom up, in order to wrest control from the rebels and leverage control of the Chesapeake for later negotiations or cause a collapse in the rebel effort.<sup>6</sup>

Previous failures in British efforts had been blamed on General William Howe, and following his relief, Lieutenant General Sir Henry Clinton was appointed as the theater

commander. Despite Clinton's own designs for the strategic shift, Lord Germain would continue to control the American theater from London, and General Clinton would execute the southern strategy through military means in late 1779. The British Government's assumptions of its American subjects, and its national strategy for the American Rebellion would soon prove hopeful but shortsighted.

(b) American Strategy.

In the absence of British forces and royal authorities, in the south, for more than three years, many American subjects in South Carolina failed to realize the advantages of British Sovereignty as indicated in Lord Germain's strategy. In addition to the British Government's doomed strategy, its leaders fundamentally misunderstood why the "upstart rebels" would seek resistance against British Constitutionalism. Back to the origins of the revolution, the American grievances primarily surrounded the issues of self-government and the coercive actions of Frederick Lord North's Ministry under King George III.<sup>7</sup> These actions unified the American provinces and resulted in the formulation of the Continental Congress that would serve the interests of all Americans. By 1780, the impetus of the revolutionary government, forces, and militia was driven by both national survival and local interests.

As the British government and its forces planned and redeployed to execute its new strategy, the outlook of American leaders and their forces was bleak. The winter season of 1779 to 1780 was particularly discouraging for General George Washington and his continental forces. The Continental Army enjoyed little materiel support, and its members and supporting militia were primarily subsistence farmers who faced issues of their own survival. Both American and British forces were in competition for the use of militia for their causes; however, neither side could rely nor expect the militia to serve away from their homes for indefinite periods. Low

morale and accounts of mutiny within continental units did not assist in the readiness of the Army heading into a new phase of the war.

In addition to Washington's internal problems in the north, the Southern Department experienced manpower and resource shortages in South Carolina and Georgia. Critical naval support from French Admiral Charles Hector Comte d'Estaing evaporated when his forces departed back to France following its assistance to the American's failed attempt to retake Savannah, Georgia, in the fall of 1779. By May of 1780, Washington's materiel shortages and low morale of the Continental force were summarized in his personal diary: "We have nothing and instead of having the prospect of a glorious offensive campaign before us, we have a bewildered and gloomy defensive one...unless we receive a powerful aid of ships, land troops, and money from our generous allies and these, at present, are too contingent to build upon."<sup>8</sup> In the spring of 1780, General Washington contemplated the troubles of Continental forces from his base at West Point and hoped for external support from France. Since he was unable to muster the force to seriously threaten British forces in New York City, General Clinton's redcoats embarked on naval shipping and initiated their Southern Campaign.

In the Continental Southern Department, Major General Benjamin Lincoln, with over 5,000 Continental Army and militia, executed the only operational strategy the American leadership could muster: defend the south from the British invasion while Washington waited for external military and naval support from France. Lincoln surrendered his Army on May 12, 1780, in Charleston, South Carolina, and the Continental Army and revolutionary cause suffered the greatest defeat to that point in the war.<sup>9</sup> With the only organized force in the American Southern Department now defeated, British policies and actions caused rebel forces in South Carolina to execute a protracted, irregular military resistance to British authority. Their

resistance levied the only strength available to them through an amalgam of guerrilla forces from the low, back, and upcountry areas of South Carolina.

### Operational Design

#### (a) British Design.

*The importance of Campaign design...is to achieve a greater understanding, a proposed solution based on that understanding, and a means to learn and adapt.*<sup>10</sup> -MCWP 3-33.5

As General Clinton prepared for operations in the Southern Colonies, he believed more in the method of defeating the rebels through an economic and military situation against which they could not win; and he believed less in the assumption that was popular back in London, that the consolidation of loyalist efforts in the south were decisive to achieving Germain's strategy.<sup>11</sup> His early designs included sequenced operations in the north while isolating rebel economic activities in the Chesapeake and to secure the south in order to drive the rebels to submit to the King's terms. General Clinton also began to feel the demands placed on British forces elsewhere as he designed the force he required to maintain his positions in New York and deploy a capable expeditionary force to the Southern Colonies.

In the fall of 1779, Major General Augustine Prevost's expeditionary force from Florida retained its hold on Savannah, and the assumptions of the British government were validated with the ineffective rebel resistance in Georgia, the departure of the French Fleet, and the apparent fact that the Continental force was at its lowest readiness level since the war began. General Clinton with his second in command, Major General Lord Charles Cornwallis, sailed from New York to execute the Southern Campaign against their first military objective, Charleston, South Carolina. Clinton's first objective was chosen in order to defeat and occupy the state's capital, but also to attack the south's center of revolutionary "disaffected" elements.<sup>12</sup>

Clinton's combined naval and military siege of Charleston would yield the largest British victory of the war with General Lincoln's surrender of Continental forces defending Charleston. Lastly, with British possession of the south's largest port, the lifeline of war materiel to the rebels, would be interdicted and Charleston's political leadership under British control or running from them.

Clinton's victory in Charleston was uncontestable and validated the British strategy against the resistance in the south. Resistance to crown appeared defeated and the superior military forces defeated the rebel Army with few casualties.<sup>13</sup> Despite the favorable conditions initially created by the victory, true success, as defined by Germain's strategy, was far from achieved. In fact, several actions initiated by Clinton would cause the reverse effect of what was intended and desired to meet British strategic objectives. Fewer loyalists were encountered in the Charleston area and most "back country" folks remained neutral or indifferent as they waited to see which side served their interests. Further, Clinton offered pardon to all Americans who took an oath of allegiance to the king. His proclamation and offerings were backed by threats to confiscate estates of those who continued to resist; he also offered the opportunity for South Carolinians to form a militia to suppress the rebellion against fellow Americans.<sup>14</sup> This action, along with a failure to restore civil government in South Carolina and others, would cause some South Carolinians to choose sides. In many circles, these actions galvanized the commitment to resistance of royal authority.

In early June 1780, Clinton returned New York to determine French and continental intentions in the north, and he placed Major General Cornwallis in charge of the southern campaign. Prior to his departure, Clinton began sowing the seeds of continued resistance in South Carolina, and his vision of subsequent operations leading to North Carolina and Virginia would provide the prelude to disaster at Yorktown in 1781. Leaving four thousand troops with

Cornwallis, Clinton expressed his designs of controlling the south and Virginia with the intention of damaging the rebel economy at the Chesapeake and assisting in Lord Cornwallis' pacification efforts.<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately for the British strategic goals, Clinton's initial policies and Cornwallis' actions over the next year would cause the departure of tactical and operational actions from the strategic goals of Lord North's Ministry in London. Lastly, Cornwallis' fatal design was the pursuit of his enemy's conventional forces in the Carolinas, as the enemy's strength instead of the fluid, hybrid enemy he faced all over the state- irregular enemy forces.

(b) American Design.

In July 1780, Cornwallis immediately began operations to subjugate the interior of South Carolina in order to pacify the population, defeat remnants of rebel forces, and organize loyalist forces. South Carolina's rebel leaders began to organize in order to counter Cornwallis' operations and inflict pain upon loyalist Americans that joined militias in support of the British military. What the British did not understand was the rural, American social dynamics throughout the State of South Carolina. The choices that the British forced upon the citizens of the eastern low country, central back country, and the rural upcountry or western portions of the state would incrementally turn the tide from a series of future tactical successes into a protracted struggle ultimately leading to an operational defeat.

Revolutionary leaders certainly understood the strengths and weaknesses of the British military, and General Washington's model consisted of defeating the British through an eventual decisive military campaign utilizing continentals, militia, and external support of the French Army and Navy. Despite these conventional designs, the leadership in South Carolina was forced to consolidate their strengths and apply them to the weaknesses of Cornwallis' military force through a protracted method of guerrilla tactics. In addition to ousted Governor John

Rutledge's support, the state's resistance was primarily led by Francis Marion in the low country, Thomas Sumter in the state's mid-section, and Andrew Pickens in the upcountry areas. These rebel leaders were not operating under centralized control to execute a national strategy; however, their previous service in the French and Indian War made them well suited to fight from the areas they lived in which is linked to the final outcome between the American resistance and British forces.<sup>16</sup>

While the growing civil strife between loyalists and rebels continued in areas across the state, partisan and guerrilla warfare harassment attacks continued against Cornwallis' formations, lines of communication, and against loyalist bands in the second half of 1780 at places like Tearcoat Swamp, Long Canes, and Halfway Swamp. Concurrent to these partisan actions, General Washington, with the approval of the Continental Congress, appointed Major General Nathanael Greene to Command the Continental Southern Department. After arriving to the Carolinas in December 1780, General Greene's initial estimate deemed that the few continentals available, militia, and supporting equipment was in a poor state of readiness. Further, he assessed partisan methods as a critical capability; however, not decisive in defeating British regulars. Greene quickly identified that his critical requirement was the time he needed in order to build a conventional force to match against Cornwallis.<sup>17</sup>

Following Greene's initial estimate of the situation, his subsequent operational design for the near term campaign cut to the heart of the British threat. He identified Cornwallis' military force as the center of gravity; Cornwallis' ability to take any continental or rebel formation to battle on his own terms would be devastating to the limited resources of the resistance. Greene's subsequent campaign plan, into 1781, consisted of splitting his force and exploiting the methods of irregular formations across the state. Greene's method would cause Cornwallis to split his

forces, protect dispersed loyalist outposts, dilute his combat power, and exhaust his resources through attrition; this allowed the budding continental force to gain a future operational decision by sacrificing mass to enhance maneuver.<sup>18</sup> With Cornwallis' aggressive style and conventional methods, he acted as predicted by splitting his force three-ways and seeking decisive tactical actions against dispersed groups of militia and partisans throughout central and northern South Carolina. Exhaustion of British resources and the absorption of casualties that could not be replaced began to erode the British Campaign design at the convenience of rebel leadership.

### Hybrid War 1780-1782

The leadership of the Continental Army did not possess the labels we place on modern military warfare with regard to unconventional threats, guerrilla warfare, or counterinsurgency theory. Despite their respect for European military methods, the American leadership devised local tactics, techniques, and procedures to counter British military operations with resources available to them by way of geography, support from the local population, hit and run tactics, and semi-organized militia formations. Many of these engagements resulted in limited achievements or outright defeat; as General Greene wrote, "We fight, get beat, rise, and fight again."<sup>19</sup> During the nineteen months following British victory at Charleston, the tactical losses resulted in an operational and strategic victory.

From May 12, 1780, the day Major General Lincoln surrendered at Charleston until December 14, 1782, the day the last British forces evacuated Charleston, the American hybrid forces participated in more than forty engagements across more than 30,000 square miles with General Cornwallis British Regulars and loyalist forces. Many of these engagements were damaging to the British on both moral and physical battlefields and did not contribute to British operational goals of pacifying the local population and consolidating geographic gains.

From the jump-off of Cornwallis' campaign, the vengeful actions of loyalists and harsh treatment of the local population by subordinate commanders, such as Lieutenant Colonel Banastre Tarleton, galvanized the rebel agenda in the rural areas of the state. During the Waxhaws Fight, on May 29, 1780, Tarleton pursued Colonel Alexander Buford's only remaining continental force near the border of North Carolina and defeated them with ease while sustaining few casualties. Despite Tarleton's hard ride and magnificent defeat of the last organized continental force in the south, British forces suffered a tremendous public relations and informational defeat through emanating stories of atrocities committed against rebel soldiers begging for quarter; anti-British sentiment voiced through the cry of "Tarleton's quarter" plagued British efforts to pacify the region.<sup>20</sup>

The origin of bitter partisan warfare and civil war amongst the population choosing sides was found in smaller actions, such as Williamson's Plantation in July 1780. Loyalist forces under Captain Christian Huck, on a mission to dissuade backcountrymen from interfering with the administration of loyalty oaths to the crown, abused local farmers, and had taken prisoners to hang without trial.<sup>21</sup> His actions resulted in the reverse effect of what he was sent to accomplish; he was killed, and his force defeated by several hundred local militia. Again, the local populations previously indifferent to both sides were directly encouraged through British and loyalist actions to choose the rebel cause. British authorities would immediately begin to see difficulties in restoring British authority in areas previously assumed to be favorable.

Despite the lack of decisive action in the Northern Colonies, the Continental Congress sent Horatio Gates with a newly formed Continental Army for the South to reinforce efforts against Cornwallis in South Carolina. Gates rapidly moved south to meet British forces, and in mid-August 1780; he met Cornwallis in Camden with a larger but tired force. Despite being

outnumbered, Cornwallis' demonstrated superior tactical skills by routing the flank of rebel militia and inflicting hundreds of American casualties and sent Gates retreating with a force in disarray. Cornwallis' tactical victory demonstrated his tactical superiority; however, the victory at Camden contributed to his flawed design of seeking battle with only conventional forces and disregarding the cumulative effects of guerilla actions in future plans and engagements.

### Insurgents Organize

Immediately on the heels of Camden, Tarleton pursued the midlands rebel leader, Thomas Sumter, to a place called Fishing Creek. The surprise attack by Tarleton's force against an unsuspecting Sumter caused the loss of 450 men killed and captured. Sustaining minimal casualties, Tarleton's actions caused the defeat of last organized fighting unit in South Carolina. By late summer of 1780, British tactical successes were impressive in the Southern Theater, and those Americans still willing to fight for national survival had one choice - fight as insurgents.<sup>22</sup>

As Thomas Sumter and Andrew Pickens were gathering men throughout the back and up-country areas, Francis Marion, known as the Swamp Fox, conducted harassment attacks on British and loyalist forces during August and September 1780. At Nelson's Ferry, Marion attacked a convoy carrying supplies and prisoners taken during the battle at Camden; he inflicted casualties on isolated British soldiers, captured weapons and supplies, and liberated American prisoners. With Marion's use of terrain and his local bands of insurgent fighters, he continued to avoid Lieutenant Colonel Tarleton and loyalist pursuit as he used the terrain and captured weapons to harass his opponents, inflict casualties, and build local support for the anti-British cause.

Into the fall of 1780, General Cornwallis' campaign to consolidate gains and pacify the midlands and upcountry areas were underway. With news of recent victories reaching London,

officials back home expected Cornwallis to extend his campaign into North Carolina.<sup>23</sup> Cornwallis dispatched Major Patrick Ferguson, in the western part of the state, towards Charlotte, North Carolina. As Ferguson conducted a swing through the upper Saluda River and Blue Ridge areas, he intended to disperse rebel groups and rally prospects to join the loyalist militia. Unfortunately, his message to residents of this relatively hostile area on the west side of the Appalachians to "declare for the King or face attack from the king's forces" was not well received.<sup>24</sup> Ferguson's loyalist force, over one thousand men, were pursued by local backcountry men reacting to his loyalist message, and on October 6, 1780, he decided to conduct a position defense at King's Mountain in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains. During the battle between Americans, Ferguson, the only British officer present, was killed and his force was defeated as they were killed or captured. Ferguson's defeat added to General Cornwallis distress resulting from low supplies, inability to raise adequate loyalist forces, and increasing partisan attacks across the state against lines of communication and outposts.<sup>25</sup> During the fall of 1780, Lord Cornwallis was suffering the unexpected effects of Hybrid War in South Carolina.

#### General Greene Arrives

Following the disaster at King's Mountain, Cornwallis abandoned his plans for North Carolina and returned to Winnsboro, South Carolina. From October to December 1780, Francis Marion and Thomas Sumter continued to harass loyalist and British forces while being chased by Tarleton and Cornwallis. During this time, the American insurgents accomplished no great tactical successes; however, their gains were reflected by inflicting materiel and personnel losses the British could not sustain. Concurrent to insurgent operations, General Greene arrived from the north, and the design of the rebel campaign received improved direction while his opponent, General Cornwallis, surrendered the initiative. Concurrent to rebel actions, Cornwallis devised a

plan to systematically defeat Daniel Morgan's force and move on to complete the destruction of Greene's Army.

Executing the Greene's campaign design Daniel Morgan, with half of Greene's small force, moved to threaten the British base at Ninety-Six, South Carolina. General Cornwallis split his force and reacted to Greene's move by sending Lieutenant Colonel Tarleton with over one thousand men to defeat the remaining part of Greene's Army. Morgan intended to buy time, draw Tarleton deeper favorable territory, wear him down, and fight him on ground of his choosing.<sup>26</sup> At a meadow west of King's Mountain called Cowpens, Morgan and his mix of Continental, militia, and backwoods riflemen executed a non-standard battle plan to lure Tarleton into battle. Morgan, Andrew Pickens, and his cavalry commander William Washington combined conventional tactics with irregular methods and defeated Tarleton's regular force in quick order. Tarleton retreated from the field; however, he sustained tremendous losses by escaping with only two hundred and fifty of his men. Following his second loss in ninety days and failure to raise an adequate loyalist force, Cornwallis turned to target Greene's Army for yet a decisive victory.

Following the victory at Cowpens, General Greene's Army continued to gain strength through the winter while loyalist support dwindled. As the spring approached, Greene looked to battle Cornwallis with a larger force than that of his occupier. Despite possessing half the force, both sides met again in mid-March north at Guilford Courthouse in North Carolina. Largely utilizing the Morgan's blueprint from Cowpens of successive lines of militia and continental forces, the fierce battle began with British forces attacking and militia firing and moving back to successive lines. Greene's force, lacking a dedicated reserve, reacted to Cornwallis' aggressive actions by withdrawing and ceding the ground to Cornwallis. The important factor of Guilford

Courthouse was not the tactical victory for Cornwallis, but the five hundred and fifty casualties he suffered. In the ten months since the capture of Charleston, the Southern Campaign had yielded the British with the loss of over four thousand casualties during four major battles and countless smaller engagements with American insurgents.<sup>27</sup>

Guilford Courthouse was the tipping point in General Cornwallis' campaign; he and his exhausted Army marched to Wilmington, North Carolina to refit. While the British strategy had not changed from its original objectives to: pacify the population, restore British authority, and control territory; Cornwallis reported to Clinton and Lord Germain in London to express his designs to focus his southern campaign on Virginia.<sup>28</sup> Rather than reinforcing his vulnerable outposts in the spring and summer of 1781, Cornwallis moved north to threaten economic interests in Virginia and prevent its reinforcement of the south. In doing so, Cornwallis encouraged insurgent bands and Greene's hybrid force to attack the primary British weakness in the south - its exposed outposts.

Despite Clinton's guidance to "assist in operations in Virginia only when the Carolinas are safe from attack," Cornwallis reported that nothing further was to be accomplished in the Carolinas.<sup>29</sup> Greene sensing an opportunity, weighed three options in his continued campaign to erode his adversary: seek indecisive conventional action with Cornwallis in the Chesapeake, confine him in Wilmington, or liberate the south by attacking outposts as Cornwallis sought actions well to the north. From May to September 1781, the hybrid forces of Greene, Marion, Pickens, and Sumter would systematically strangle British outposts in a British Area of Operations absent a commanding general.

By June 1781, rebel forces succeeded in taking numerous British bases across South Carolina and one in Augusta, Georgia. General Greene focused on laying siege to the loyalist

outpost at Ninety Six held by John Cruger. After four weeks of siege operations, Greene abandoned Ninety Six and returned to North Carolina. The tired but reinforced Lord Rawdon ordered Ninety-Six abandoned and consolidated towards Charleston. Throughout the rest of the summer and into the fall of 1781, as Greene retired to the High Hills of Santee, Marion and Sumter continued the attrition of British forces under Lieutenant Colonel Alexander Stewart. In early September 1781 and sixteen months after the surrender of Charleston, the British military effort culminated at Eutaw Springs, South Carolina. This action reflected the last pitched battle between consolidated forces under Greene against a capable but doomed British force of over two thousand. Despite heavy American losses, the British suffered over four hundred casualties and withdrew. Greene retired back to the High Hills, but despite losing his fourth pitched battle against British regulars and loyalist militia; he achieved operational and strategic success.

The British Army in South Carolina withdrew again towards Charleston after attaining another tactical victory they could not afford to sustain into the future.<sup>30</sup> After Eutaw Springs and several hundred miles to the north, Cornwallis met his fate at Georgetown as the combined American and French efforts executed the operations at Yorktown, Virginia that would ultimately lead to American Independence. Insurgent actions would continue in the low country of South Carolina into 1782, and the British military prepared for their eventual evacuation from the city they began their occupation - Charleston, South Carolina.

### Analysis

Lieutenant General Clinton, the Theater Commander, stated that he did not know how operations in the Carolinas failed in the end. Following the British defeat and loss of a field Army at Saratoga, the British government seemingly had strategic objectives, military and naval forces allocated to the American theater, and a campaign plan to attain a decision to end the

rebellion in the thirteen colonies. Unfortunately for the British, the Americans also had objectives in support of their own fledgling interests and survival that some argue developed over the previous decades leading up to hostilities. In the end, the American rebels failed to cooperate with British assumptions of how the colonies would respond to their actions, and the campaign in the Carolinas directly impacted the outcome of the war. A close examination of how the British Southern Campaign failed highlights lessons that apply to Americans today as we wage the Long War against our enemies.

(a) British Campaign Design.

Similar to most governments during conflict, the British Government reviewed its strategic objectives and analyzed the ways and means to arrive a favorable decision in the American Colonies while entering a new phase of the war. Not surprisingly, the result of their analysis was a subsequent offensive campaign in the American South in support of their national objective of restoring the crown's authority. History proved that the British Southern Campaign was an operational failure and directly contributed to ending the war for American independence. In order to understand the British Failures, it is helpful to examine and understand the flawed design of the British political, military process.

Debating a new strategy, future actions in the America were debated in parliament. In the upper house, William Pitt, the Earl of Chatham, stated to his peers, "...the conquest of America is an impossibility...If I were an American, as I am an Englishman, while a foreign troop was landed in my country, I never would lay down my arms, never - never - never!"<sup>31</sup> Lord Chatham's insight from his tenure as Secretary of State during the Seven Years' War provided cogent rationale to the American resistance - nationalism, self-government, and resistance to foreign occupation. Through their heated deliberations, the Lord North's Ministry

failed to understand what was at stake for their American subjects in continuing or submitting to the tenets of British Constitutionalism. The subsequent campaign design in support of this misguided strategy was doomed from its inception. Governmental control from London and the British military's operational design led the American resistance to its only likely course of action - a protracted defensive strategy to erode British will.

Based on modern models of operational and campaign design, the fundamental aspect of campaign design is framing and understanding the problem and developing plans that support the military purpose in attaining national objective(s).<sup>32</sup> Despite General Clinton's differing opinion on decisiveness of loyalists, he envisioned a plan to employ the theater military and naval forces to restore control to the southern colonies from the bottom up; unfortunately, early conventional successes indicated to the ministry and military leaders the opposite effect of what was to come. The lack of British manpower and loyalist support to control territory and the lack of control and availability of the British Navy were a detriment to Clinton's ability to carry out his vision. Additionally, Clinton's fixation of the Northern Theater prevented him from allocating appropriate resources to decisively execute an effective Southern Strategy.

Upon Clinton's departure, General Cornwallis failed to identify his adversary's true strength or center of gravity; this lack of understanding of his opponent's design was devastating in the first year of his campaign and directly led to his defeat. Cornwallis' focus on defeating organized forces in the field caused him to surrender the initiative, react unfavorably to his enemy's actions, and allowed the attrition of his own physical and moral strength. As Cornwallis, searched for a decision by moving his meager force north from North Carolina in the spring of 1781, his campaign in the south met defeat long before his surrender at Yorktown. Although his campaign objectives had not changed, he stated, "There is little prospect of

bringing to battle an adversary that did not wish to fight."<sup>33</sup> In addition to being a victim of his adversary's campaign of erosion, he was also a victim of his own lack of understanding of the nature of the problem in the Southern Campaign. The Americans had been fighting and winning the campaign through every battle they lost.

(b) Counterinsurgency Theory.

*"...an insurgency is an organized, protracted politico-military struggle designed to weaken the control and legitimacy of an established government, occupying power, or other political authority while increasing insurgent control."*<sup>34</sup> -MCWP 3-24

To place British and American actions in context, many modern counterinsurgency theorists have described the conditions that create an insurgent (and counterinsurgent) or revolutionary environment. In Mao Tse-tung's model of guerrilla warfare he states that a "...revolutionary situation exists in any country where the government consistently fails in its obligation to the majority of its citizens."<sup>35</sup> During the American Revolutionary War, this sense of American nationalism was in response to conditions created by British government arguably for many decades preceding the Declaration of Independence. These conditions in the colonies further progressed into what Mao also referred to as merging phases in revolutionary war. Specifically, the revolution organizes and consolidates its efforts, conducts a progressive expansion where attacks are conducted and supplies are acquired, and finally, a decision is achieved through the enemy's destruction or the guerrilla force transforms into an orthodox force.<sup>36</sup> The American Revolution and how it was fought was clearly a historical precedent to modern colonial insurgencies and communist revolutionary warfare.

Most counterinsurgent theorists would also agree that the nature of insurgencies is a competition for the people. It is a complex problem to analyze and determine that "the people"

are the sole source of strength in a revolutionary environment. In the case of South Carolina during the Southern Campaign, the local population was certainly a critical requirement in the conduct of the insurgents' agenda. Bard O'Neill's insurgent model highlights how insurgent leaders gain popular support through: ideology, grievances of the masses, terrorism, sensational violence to delegitimize the government, provocation of repression, overreactions by government, and meeting the needs of the people.<sup>37</sup> Each of these categories are not unique to modern post-colonial or radical Islamic insurgencies; rather, each helps to explain timeless concepts of how insurgent forces garner support for their cause and how counterinsurgent forces commonly and unknowingly support their enemies efforts.

During 1780 to 1782, insurgent leaders in the south, Marion, Sumter, and Pickens, used each of these categories to slowly but decisively shift an indifferent population in the interior of South Carolina to full or passive support to the rebel cause. Additionally, the harsh reactions of loyalists under British officers such as Ferguson or soldiers under Tarleton against unorthodox rebel actions and non-military targets were predictable and helped to galvanize to the population. Through a hybrid form of warfare under General Greene, the American insurgents were able to buy time in harassing British outposts, attack lines of communication, and frustrate British forces in pursuit. Concurrent to the non-conventional methods, General Greene was able to strengthen his militia and continental forces, gain the initiative by causing a reaction from his opposing general, and meet opposing forces on terms; in short, he executed a protracted campaign that linked tactical actions to operational and strategic objectives.

### Conclusion

As stated in the thesis, the British Southern Campaign during the American Revolution demonstrates direct relationship between the operational and strategic levels of war.

Specifically, the British operational design was destined for failure, not only by the manner in which it was fought, but also by ill-devised strategic design and objectives from London. Further, the hybrid form of warfare waged by Continental units, local and interstate militia, and local insurgents in a thirty thousand square mile state of rural communities achieved an operational victory that contributed to the British defeat at Yorktown. These historical lessons in our own revolutionary history bear relevance to modern operational design as we conduct operations worldwide during the Long War.

Despite hundreds of irregular warfare case studies, military leaders tend to focus on modern examples of post-colonial or radical Islamic global insurgencies. Although there are many benefits to analyzing recent historical examples, it is important to examine and understand our own revolutionary history for timeless examples of how and why Americans fought as insurgents. Today, similar to the British during the Revolutionary War, the United States commonly retains conventional military superiority; however, there is a tendency at all operating levels to devise plans and implement actions prior to understanding the true nature of the operating environment, the enemy, and the means to achieve operational and strategic objectives. Lastly, the British demonstrated that their previous experience in Scotland prior to the American Revolution did not provide "the example" of how to defeat the American rebellion; but rather, it reinforced that history provides valuable lessons but not definitive solutions.

## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> John W. Gordon, *South Carolina and the American Revolution: A Battlefield History* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), 159.
- <sup>2</sup> Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Operations, Joint Publication 3-0* (Washington, DC: Joint Chiefs of Staff, September 17, 2006), IV-3.
- <sup>3</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. Michael Howard and Peter Paret, trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton University Press, 1884), 177.
- <sup>4</sup> Piers Mackesy, *The War for America: 1775-1783* (University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 252.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 253.
- <sup>6</sup> Gordon, 62.
- <sup>7</sup> John Ferling, *Almost a Miracle: The American Victory in the War of Independence* (Oxford University Press, 2007), 26.
- <sup>8</sup> Barbara W. Tuchman, *The First Salute: A view of the American Revolution* (New York: The Random House Publishing Group, 1988), 183.
- <sup>9</sup> Maurice Matloff, gen. ed., *American Military History* (Washington, DC: Office of the Chief of Military History, USA, 1969), 88.
- <sup>10</sup> Headquarters, Marine Corps Combat Development Command, *Counterinsurgency, MCWP 3-33.5* (Washington, DC: December 15, 2006), 4-1.
- <sup>11</sup> Mackesy, 269.
- <sup>12</sup> Gordon, 71.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.
- <sup>14</sup> John Fortescue, *The War of Independence: The British Army in North America, 1775-1783* (London: Greenhill Books, 2001), 167.
- <sup>15</sup> Mackesy, 342.
- <sup>16</sup> Gordon, 105.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.
- <sup>18</sup> Matloff, 91.
- <sup>19</sup> Tuchman, 203.

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<sup>20</sup> Peter N. Moore, *The Local Origins of Allegiance in Revolutionary South Carolina: The Waxhaws as a Case Study* (The South Carolina Historical Magazine 107, January 200), 31.

<sup>21</sup> Gordon, 89.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>23</sup> Christopher Hibbert, *Redcoats and Rebels: The American Revolution Through British Eyes* (New York: Avon Books, 1990), 279.

<sup>24</sup> Gordon, 113.

<sup>25</sup> Hibbert, 287.

<sup>26</sup> Ferling, 480.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 499.

<sup>28</sup> Gordon, 147.

<sup>29</sup> Ferling, 509.

<sup>30</sup> Gordon, 167.

<sup>31</sup> Hibbert, 202.

<sup>32</sup> Headquarters, Marine Corps Combat Development Command, 4-2.

<sup>33</sup> Ferling, 509.

<sup>34</sup> Headquarters, Marine Corps Combat Development Command, *Counterinsurgency, MCWP 3-33.5* (Washington, DC: December 15, 2006), 1-1.

<sup>35</sup> Headquarters, Marine Corps Combat Development Command, *Mao Tse-tung on Guerrilla Warfare, FMFRP 12-18* (Washington, DC: April 5, 1989), 5.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>37</sup> Bard O'Neill. *Insurgency & Terrorism: From Revolution to Apocalypse* (Dulles, VA: Potomac Books, 2005), 98-107.

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