

Southern Strategy:
The regular and partisan campaign of Nathanael Greene
By
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After George Washington, General Nathanael Greene was the best officer in the Continental Army. When Washington needed a general to rescue the desperate southern situation, he chose the already battle-hardened Rhode Island Quaker. Upon taking command of the Southern Department, Greene waged a unique campaign, using his army of regulars to screen the various partisan forces operating in the Carolina backcountry. Without winning a pitched battle, Greene exhausted Cornwallis's army, leading him in a fruitless chase across the Carolinas and forcing him to fight a series of bloody battles of attrition. Then, over the course of a three-month-long campaign, Greene's partisan forces annihilated the Tory presence there and systematically eliminated the British forts running from the coast to the Appalachians. General Greene destroyed British power in the south and set the stage for victory at Yorktown.

The situation had been far different when Greene took formal command of the Southern Department on 2 December 1780. During the summer of 1779, Savannah fell to the British, and a joint American-Franco assault on the town had ended in bloody failure. Next, Charleston and an army of 4,000 Continental soldiers capitulated after a long siege. Finally, General Horatio Gates' 'Grand Army' had been crushed at the battle of Camden (16 August 1780). As summer turned to autumn, most of the major towns were in British hands, and Tory partisans roamed the countryside at will.^[1] After their tremendous victory, British forces fanned out across South Carolina, and despite increasingly ferocious partisan activity culminating in the Tory disaster at Kings Mountain (7 October 1780), the British had a solid grip on the state.

Cornwallis reached deep into the interior, following the course of South Carolina's many rivers. On the South Carolina/Georgia border, a string of posts ran up the Savannah River to Augusta, which was within supporting distance of Ninety Six, about 50 miles to the north on the Saluda River. From Ninety Six, British fortifications ran back to the Atlantic -- Fort Granby, Fort Motte, and Nelson's Ferry--ending at Georgetown on the coast. South of Fort Motte, on a branch of the Edisto River, was Orangeburg. About 50 miles from where the Wateree River branched from the Saluda at Fort Motte lay Camden, where Cornwallis built a strong base, including a supply depot and a jail. Sallying out from these bases, Cornwallis occupied Wilmington, North Carolina, and threatened Charlotte, in the interior.

Cornwallis's army was small but battle tested and confident. Under his personal command he had the 7th Royal Fusiliers, the 23rd Royal Welsh Fusiliers, the 33rd Regiment of Foot, and the 71st Highlanders infantry regiments, which were augmented by Tory regiments, the Volunteers of Ireland and two regiments of North Carolina Tories. There was also Bose's Hessian regiment and a contingent of 600 *Jagers*. Supporting Cornwallis was Banastre Tarleton, with what amounted to a mobile field force, which included the British Legion or 'Green Dragoons', itself a mostly Tory outfit, and depending on the situation, interchangeable light infantry contingents.^[2] Cornwallis' force totaled about 4,000 men. Greene was confronting a formidable, competently led army.

Greene's first task was to get the Southern Department's commissary in order. Having served as Quarter-Master General for more than two years, Greene knew what must be done. Political bodies, wealthy merchants, and fellow generals must be begged, cajoled, and shamed into supplying the army. The effort would not be pretty. Greene, one of the best generals in the army, who had led from the front, must go before the petty political bodies of small states with hat in hand. With this in mind, in mid-October Greene left the Hudson River Valley for the Carolinas.

Greene's first stop was Philadelphia. He consulted with Congress and begged them for weapons and provisions. They could supply little. 'Congress are by no means alarmed with their critical situation,' a frustrated Greene wrote.^[3] He asked for 5,000 muskets from Joseph Reed, President of Pennsylvania's executive council and close friend. Reed gave him 1,500. He wrote Washington, requesting he make up the difference. Greene wrote to General Henry Knox asking for cannon, as reports said guns in the south were in a 'wretched, deranged state.'^[4] He scoured the Philadelphia region for wagons and found about 100.^[5]

Having done all he could in Philadelphia, Greene rode on. In early November he arrived in Annapolis and immediately pressed the governors of Maryland and Delaware for weapons and supplies.^[6] After haranguing the Maryland legislature, he acquired a small quantity of supplies and squeezed a little more out of Delaware. But of course, what Greene received was not enough. From Maryland he continued south.^[7]

On 12 November, Greene checked in on Mrs. Washington at Mount Vernon. After enjoying her hospitality, he reluctantly continued and on 16 November reached Richmond. Here Greene found a bankrupt government and a populace panicked with the prospect of British invasion. Greene conferred with Governor Thomas Jefferson, who promised supplies but could deliver little.^[8]

At least in Virginia there was work besides begging intransigent legislatures for help. Greene put Baron Von Steuben in charge of the state's military establishment. 'You must talk one language to the State and one to the Officers,' he advised. 'The State must be pressed to provide, and the Officers to obey.'^[9] The Prussian immediately set about the task of establishing magazines in Virginia. Von Steuben did such a good job that many Virginians described him as arrogant and accused the Prussian of having an 'imperious contempt of natives.'^[10] Greene took other steps to improve the logistical situation. Because North Carolina was traversed by rivers, Greene arranged for the construction of boats specially outfitted with wheels so they could easily transported on the march. Once he was satisfied he did all he could do in Virginia, Greene rode south to take command of the army.

At Charlotte the army greeted its new commander. Perhaps glad to be rid of his now decrepit 'Grand Army', Gates graciously turned over command to Greene. The army consisted of 2,307 men on paper. It was battered and demoralized as well as ill-fed, -clothed and -equipped. Worse, less than 1,000 were actually Continentals, the rest being militia whom Greene loathed and distrusted.^[11] Greene did have some solid units under his command, however. These were Kirkwood's Delaware regiment and the Maryland Line consisting of the 1st and 2nd Regiments. Greene also had the best cavalry in the Continental Army--William Washington's 3rd Dragoons and Henry Lee's Legion. Even with professional units to round out his shattered army, Greene's situation was desperate. He was outnumbered, outgunned, and about to be on the run.

Greene's overriding goal was the preservation of his army as a coherent fighting force. He feared that the British would simply entrench themselves at key points and from these sortie into the countryside. He did not want to expend his meager strength in bloody frontal assaults, since

doing so ‘affords but a poor prospect for success’ and ‘to make an attempt and not succeed will not only bring upon us disgrace, but will be attended with the loss of our best troops.’ [12] But as things stood, Greene stood little chance of defeating Cornwallis in open battle. If Greene could not immediately make himself stronger, he would weaken Cornwallis.

In an effort to even the odds Greene sent Daniel Morgan west with 400 Continentals and 600 militia. Greene told Morgan, ‘The object of this detachment is to give protection to that part of the country [the western backcountry] and spirit up the people, to annoy the enemy in that quarter; collect the provisions and forage out of the way of the enemy.’ [13] Christopher Ward points out that by dispatching Morgan west, Greene accomplished several things. First, Greene made it easier for both the main army and Morgan’s force to live off the land, as they could forage through different areas. Second, Greene threatened Cornwallis’ interior strongholds at Ninety-Six and Augusta. Third, by sending Morgan west, he insured that whichever direction Cornwallis decided to go, after Greene or after Morgan, there would be an American army threatening his flank. Fourth, should Cornwallis choose to detach a force to deal with Morgan, this created an opportunity to defeat a portion of Cornwallis’ army without risking an all-out battle of annihilation. ‘So, with all those reasons to justify him, he carried out his plan,’ concludes Ward. ‘The proof of its validity is that it worked.’ [14]

Cornwallis sent Banastre Tarleton in pursuit. Tarleton commanded his own ‘Green Dragoons’, a battalion of the 71st Highlanders, a battalion of the 7th Regiment, 50 of the 17th Light Dragoons and some Tory militia. He was aggressive in the field and a sound organizer in camp who looked after the welfare of his men. [15] By sending a hard-charger like Tarleton after the Morgan, however, Cornwallis sowed the seeds of his own defeat.

Morgan ran away from Tarleton, bringing him further and further into the patriot interior, which drew him away from Cornwallis. Tarleton raced to overtake him, which he finally did on 17 January at Cowpens, or so he thought. Morgan was not caught so much as he was tired of running. He turned to fight, and his combination of infantry and cavalry, the best in the Southern Department, utterly crushed Tarleton. Though a small battle, the importance of this victory is not to be underestimated, says W.J. Wood. ‘The news of Cowpens was a boost to American morale that spread across the colonies from south to north...Cowpens was seen as a victory of an American combination of regulars and militia over veteran British regulars in a stand-up fight.’ [16]

Morgan was too good a general to stand pat and rest on his laurels. Knowing that Cornwallis still lurked, Morgan hurried to unite with Greene’s main army, accomplishing a union at Guilford Courthouse on 8 February. The race to join Greene had worn out General Morgan; his medical ailments forced him to ask for leave to return home and recuperate.

Despite the Cowpens victory, Greene was still in no shape to fight. And with Cornwallis just 25 miles to the west at Salem, Greene was determined to get away fast. In a council of war, Greene and his officers decided that the best course of action was a headlong flight to Virginia. Here, the army could rest and refit and place a river between themselves and Cornwallis. Importantly, Greene already knew what it would take to traverse North Carolina. [17] Greene had already reconnoitered the Dan River (during his journey south), learning its fords and ferry points. While the upper fords were closer to Greene’s position at Guilford Courthouse and more hospitable to crossing, they were also closer to Cornwallis. Greene hoped Cornwallis would make for these fords, because he had no intention of crossing there. Instead, Greene

prepared the way to cross the lower fords near Dix's Ferry, Boyd's Ferry and Irwin's Ferry, assembling water transport there to augment his wheeled boats.

On 10 February the race to the Dan began with Cornwallis pointed in the wrong direction. Greene used his head start to gain a lead and keep his army just ahead of the British. Once Cornwallis realized his mistake, he corrected and pursued, Tarleton in the lead, harrowing Greene's rear guard. But Greene had a rock solid commander bringing up the rear, Colonel Otho Holland Williams, who used William Washington's dragoons and Harry Lee's cavalry to keep Tarleton at bay. Cornwallis was never able to catch up to Greene, who brought his main army across the Dan on the morning of the 14 February.[\[18\]](#)

In Virginia, Greene rested and refitted his army. Meanwhile, across the Dan, Cornwallis was far away from his base, at the end of a supply line more than 200 miles long and in a hostile countryside in the dead of winter that had already been picked clean. His army was at the end of a long chase for which they had nothing to show, and they were tired.[\[19\]](#) Greene grew stronger while weakening Cornwallis.

Greene was not going to lay low in Virginia. Having rested and re-supplied his army, on 22 February he re-crossed the Dan and lead Cornwallis around by the nose, luring him into another long and unproductive chase which ended on 15 March at Guilford Courthouse. Greene, having previously camped at Guilford, thought it a good place to fight, and fight he did. The two armies slashed away at one another in the most ferocious battle of the war. At the decisive moment, Greene may have been able to achieve victory had he been willing to risk everything. The wall of lead and bayonets thrown up by the Continentals inflicted heavy casualties on the British, so why risk the destruction of the only Continental army in the south? Rather than prolong the battle of attrition, Greene pulled back in good order, though he had to leave some guns and ammunition on the field. 'But the purchase was made at so great an expense that I hope it may yet affect their ruin,' Greene wrote to Thomas Sumter the day after the battle.[\[20\]](#)

Even British writers, prone to extol the virtues of British infantry in this battle, admitted Greene's accomplishment. Says Sir John Fortescue:

In truth, the victory, though a brilliant feat of arms, was no victory. Greene did indeed retreat, and the most part of his militia deserted to their homes, so that his losses were never actually ascertained; but Cornwallis had gained no solid advantage to compensate for the sacrifice of life, and he was now too weak farther to prosecute his mad design.[\[21\]](#)

For Greene, retreat was the right decision. Bloodied and battered, Cornwallis disengaged and withdrew to Wilmington where he could be re-supplied under the protection of the fleet. Cornwallis's withdrawal all but conceded North Carolina to the Continentals and opened the way for Greene to liberate South Carolina. The general was eager to take the field. 'Our troops are refreshing themselves [at Cross Creek, a few miles from Guilford] and I hope a few days will enable us to fight them with more decided advantage.'[\[22\]](#)

Now holding the momentum, Greene gathered his army and marched into South Carolina, where Francis Lord Rawdon waited with his army of redcoats and Tories. Six weeks after the bloody battle of Guilford Courthouse, Greene found Rawdon outside Camden at Hobkirk's Hill (25 April 1781). Again the field was hotly contested, and again the redcoats held it at the end of the day, and again, the British were too weak to maintain their presence in the

area. Not only did Rawdon leave Camden, he also ordered the abandonment of Fort Granby, the vital link between his westernmost outpost at Ninety Six and the supply base at Fort Motte. With Greene pressing hard, Rawdon gathered his troops and fell back further east to Nelson's Ferry.[\[23\]](#)

Greene positioned his army between the backcountry and Rawdon and unleashed his partisan forces on his interior strongholds. Thomas Sumter, the 'Gamecock', assaulted Tory works at Orangeburg, while Marion and Lee besieged and took Fort Motte. With these two nearby forts in enemy hands, Rawdon ordered the evacuation of Nelson's ferry, thereby doing Greene's work for him. Soon afterwards, Marion moved against and took the Tory base at Georgetown while Lee negotiated the capitulation of Fort Granby. With Tory resistance in the backcountry collapsing, Marion marched on and took Georgetown. By late May, outside of Charleston and Savannah, the only important posts still in British hands were Ninety Six, and Augusta, Georgia.[\[24\]](#)

Next Greene hit these strongholds. Against Augusta Greene sent Lee, who was supported by strong militia groups commanded by Andrew Pickens and Elijah Clarke. After a prolonged struggle, Augusta succumbed on 6 June. Meanwhile, with the main army, Greene assailed Ninety Six which held on despite everything Greene could throw at it, even a frontal assault. Rawdon marched to the relief of Ninety-Six's garrison, but seeing his resources stretched so thin, Rawdon chose to abandon the outpost. Once again, the British lost for winning. By the first week of June, he had lost the entire backcountry, making Greene stronger in the process.[\[25\]](#)

Having abandoned the interior, Rawdon used his consolidated force to retake Orangeburg. Greene cautiously moved into the area and on 8 September, met the British, now under Colonel Alexander Stewart, at Eutaw Springs. It was a bloody battle in which Greene took nearly 25 percent casualties; the British lost even a greater percentage. But Greene could replenish his losses while the British could not. Three days later, the British pulled back to Monck's Corner, about 20 miles north of Charleston, where they could not even threaten the interior. With the exception of a few coastal strongholds, the Carolinas were back in Continental hands.

Greene won the campaign by maximizing his strengths. These were his militia commanders, supported by regular officers like Lee and Washington, and his superior logistics, helped by the fact that he was fighting on his home turf. More importantly, he exposed British weakness, their long supply lines, and their diminishing resources. With Greene shielding them from Cornwallis, militia commanders like Francis Marion and Thomas Sumter could operate against British outposts, and to ensure that Cornwallis or Rawdon did not sweep in and surprise the irregulars, Greene interposed his army between the two. Lastly, Greene led the British onto ground of his choosing. Of course, the biggest threat was the British army. Greene never beat Cornwallis, Rawdon, or Stewart, but at each major battle he savaged them and compelled their strategic withdrawal. Despite heavy casualties, Greene preserved his army's fighting ability. Wrote Greene, 'We get beat, rise and fight again.'

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- [1] See Edgar, Walter. *Partisans and Redcoats*. New York: Harper-Collins, 2001.
- [2] Ward, Christopher. *The War of the Revolution, Vol. II*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1952, 753.
- [3] Anderson, Lee Patrick. *Forgotten Patriot: The Life & Times of Major-General Nathanael Greene*. USA: Universal Publishers, 2002, 257-263.
- [4] *The Papers of Nathanael Greene Vol. VI.*, Showman, Richard K, et al., ed. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994, 473 and 475.
- [5] Anderson.
- [6] *Papers of Nathaniel Greene*, Vol. VIII, 11.
- [7] *Ibid.*
- [8] *Ibid.*
- [9] *Ibid.*
- [10] The supply situation had indeed improved. On 5 January Colonel Edward Carrington remarked, ‘...The very great Quantities of Stores at this place [Petersburg] induced Baron Steuben to claim my personal attention to getting them off...’, see *The Papers of Nathaniel Greene*, 52. See also the entry under Von Steuben in Boatner, Mark. *Encyclopedia of the American Revolution*. Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1994.
- [11] Ward, 749.
- [12] *Papers of Nathanael Greene, Vol. VIII, Letter to the North Carolina Board of War*, 7 December 1780.
- [13] *Ibid*, 589.
- [14] Ward, 751.
- [15] For a reinterpretation of Tarleton, see Scotti, Anthony J. *Brutal Virtue: The Myth and Reality of Banastre Tarleton*. Bowie Maryland: Heritage Press, 2002.
- [16] Wood, W.J. *Battles of the Revolutionary War*. New York: Da Capo, 1995, 226.
- [17] *Papers of Nathanael Greene*, 261.
- [18] There are many accounts of the Race to the Dan. See Davis, Burke. *The Cowpens-Guilford Courthouse Campaign*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003; see also Lee, Henry. *The Revolutionary War Memoirs of General Henry Lee*, Robert E. Lee, ed. New York: Da Capo, 1998.
- [19] See Davis, 117.
- [20] *Papers of Nathanael Greene*, Vol. VII, 442.
- [21] Fortescue, Sir John. *The War of Independence*. London: Greenhill Books, 2001, 231.
- [22] *Papers of Nathanael Greene*, Vol. VII, 442.
- [23] See Ward, 802-808; also Lumpkin, Henry K. *From Savannah to Yorktown*. New York: toExcel, 2000, 176-185.
- [24] See Ward, 809-815; also Lee, Chapter 29.
- [25] See Ward, 816-822.