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**Winning the South: Nathanael Greene's Use of Diplomatic, Political, and Economic Power  
during the Southern Campaign of the American Revolution**

by

**Stephen MacLeod  
Department of State**

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**Winning the South: Nathanael Greene’s Use of Diplomatic, Political, and Economic Power during the Southern Campaign of the American Revolution**

by

**Stephen MacLeod**  
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**A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Joint Advanced Warfighting School in partial satisfaction of the requirements of a Master of Science Degree in Joint Campaign Planning and Strategy. The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Joint Forces Staff College, the Department of Defense, or the Department of State. This paper is entirely my own work except as documented in endnotes. (or appropriate statement per the Academic Integrity Policy)**

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## **Abstract**

During the southern campaign of the American revolution, Major General Nathanael Greene used political, diplomatic, and economic instruments of national power, in addition to the military, to successfully defeat British and Loyalist forces. Despite the changes in warfare across the centuries, Greene's concepts and tactics continue to provide useful lessons for today's military commanders and strategists. By examining several of the key issues Greene grappled with including pillage and plunder, working with local militias, confiscation of property, local governance, and diplomacy, a solid picture of Greene's achievements becomes clear. Greene's strategy and tactics echo today, especially in counterinsurgency doctrine and the law of war.

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## Chapter 1 - Introduction

On October 23, 1780, General George Washington wrote to John Mathews, a member of the South Carolina delegation to the Second Continental Congress, to inform him that Nathanael Greene had been appointed the new commander of the southern campaign. Washington had served with Greene since the earliest days of the revolution in Boston, through the disastrous defeat in New York and the ensuing New Jersey campaign, followed by the challenging days at Valley Forge, so Washington knew Greene well. Mathews, like many others, were concerned about the situation in the south after the Continental army's annihilation at Camden, South Carolina, by the British. Washington assured Mathews, "You have your wish in the officer appointed to the Southern command; I think I am giving you a General..."<sup>1</sup> Washington was correct; Greene turned out to be one of the most talented and skilled generals in the Continental army, but Greene also proved to be much more than a general. Greene displayed an ability to see problems from multiple perspectives, which led him to apply not just military power, but comprehensive solutions to problems. Today, we might call his approach 'whole of government,' but regardless of name, Greene's strategy helped the Americans win the south and it continues to resonate today.

During the southern campaign of the American revolution, Major General Nathanael Greene leveraged his experience and background to use the political, diplomatic, and economic instruments of national power, in addition to the military, to successfully defeat British and Loyalist forces. Despite changes in the characteristics of warfare across the centuries, Greene's understanding, concepts, and tactics continue to provide useful lessons for today's military commanders and strategists.

Little in Nathanael Greene's background indicated he was destined for greatness as a military commander. He was born into a wealthy Rhode Island family that emphasized learning the family trade and embracing the role of merchant in the maritime economy of Rhode Island. When given command of the Southern Department of the Continental Army in 1780, he faced the daunting task of re-building the decimated force. Under Greene's leadership, the Continental army in the south lost all four battles they fought against the British but nonetheless won the war.<sup>2</sup> How was it possible for a self-taught general from New England to lead the American force to victory against a powerful British enemy in a region he knew little about?

Greene's advantage was that he understood winning the war in the south wasn't just about winning on the battlefield. He recognized he had to find ways to navigate the tricky local political climate, cajole Congress and state authorities to do their job and fund the war, and win over the public. He also needed to apply his understanding of economics, politics, and diplomacy to bring about a total victory for the American Revolution; one that would foster democracy and lasting peace.

### **Biography of Nathanael Greene**

Nathanael Greene was born into a Quaker family of wealthy merchants in the colony of Rhode Island. His father owned a foundry among other business ventures, and was an active member of the religious community. His family facilitated a basic education for their son, who made the most of the tutors provided and sought out books and additional sources whenever possible.<sup>3</sup> Greene embraced self-education and was a lifelong learner, but his lack of formal education, especially when compared to some of his compatriots, could sometimes

be a sore point. Greene, drawn to military history, taught himself everything he could about the subject. He sought out classic texts including Caesar, but also contemporary works by Frederick the Great and Maurice de Saxe, popular military strategists of their day. Like his contemporary, Henry Knox, Greene largely educated himself on military theory and history. His father passed away in 1770 and Nathanael, along with his brothers, took over the family foundry in Coventry. In 1774, Greene cemented family connections that would serve him well by marrying Catherine Littlefield, the cousin of a leading Rhode Island politician, Samuel Ward, who would later become governor. The new couple made their home in Coventry but events leading to revolution in the colonies would soon change their lives.

Coming of age in pre-revolutionary New England, Greene was immersed in the issues of the day. Rhode Island was founded by Roger Williams, who had been exiled from the Massachusetts Bay Colony for his extreme religious views and this rebellious spirit persisted. The Rhode Island economy heavily depended on seafaring, especially the molasses trade. Boston, the birthplace of the Revolution, lay roughly a day's ride away and the events taking place there resonated across Rhode Island. The controversial series of parliamentary acts, which colonists found objectionable, including the Stamp Act, Townshend Act, and Sugar Act, were real issues for Rhode Islanders, especially merchant families like the Greenes. It would take a specific series of events, however, to set Nathanael on the path to revolution.

In 1772, Greene was involved in a significant episode that revealed his growing frustration with British authorities. Rhode Island merchants and seafarers were famous for their ability to navigate around British revenue authorities or in other words, smuggle. Greene, together with his brothers, owned a sizable cargo of rum loaded on the merchant ship, *Fortune*, which was confiscated by a British revenue ship, *Gaspee*, off the coast of

Rhode Island. The *Fortune* was impounded and the matter was shifted to Boston, which angered its owners because they felt the dispute should have been resolved in the jurisdiction of Rhode Island, where they could get a fairer resolution of their grievances.<sup>4</sup> Greene sued and successfully secured compensation for the lost cargo but that did little to calm the public animosity that remained between Rhode Island merchants and British revenue and customs authorities. In June 1772, when the *Gaspee* ran aground off the coast of Rhode Island, a group of Providence men seized the vessel, detained its crew, and burned the ship. While no evidence suggests Greene himself was involved in the violence, he was sympathetic to the sentiments of his fellow Rhode Islanders.<sup>5</sup>

The *Fortune* and *Gaspee* episodes marked a turning point for Greene. The threat of financial losses coupled with a baseless accusation that he was part of the raiding party offended his sense of right and wrong and highlighted the arbitrary authority of the British. He disclosed to a close friend in 1775 that “There appears such a universal declension of Publick and Private Virtue throughout the Nation, that I fear the (Priviledges) and Liberties of the People will be Trampled to Death by the Prerogatives of the Crown.”<sup>6</sup> Greene’s frustration and anger stemmed from his perceptions about the unfairness and dysfunction of civil authorities, in this case, the British customs authorities and courts. Thus, before the revolutionary war began, Greene’s sentiments about how civil authorities and government should treat citizens were established. As a result of the affair, Greene set his sights on joining a militia, something he had dreamed of since childhood.

Greene began his military career by the Kentish Guards, a private militia that was later incorporated into the Rhode Island state militia. Rhode Island’s militia was like other colonial militias of the time and relied on members who were citizens first and soldiers

second. Officers were elected by members who were drawn from all walks of life. Greene's ambitions met early disappointment when he was initially passed over when members selected officers.<sup>7</sup> It was into this environment that a young Nathanael Greene embarked on his military career against the wishes and desires of his late father and family.

When news of the battles at Lexington and Concord reached Greene, he pushed to join the fight in Massachusetts despite orders from the Rhode Island governor to desist. In response to the crisis, Rhode Island lawmakers decided to raise a new fifteen hundred-man 'Army of Observation' and chose Nathanael Greene to lead this unit with the rank of general. Greene likely was chosen due to his family connections and revolutionary ideals, but nonetheless it was a remarkable achievement for someone who, like other militia commanders, had limited military experience. Greene immersed himself in militia business and his leadership abilities were on display. He quickly learned the inherent limitations of militias because they relied on the sponsorship of civil authorities or private benefactors. He gained experience in dealing with the political powers and advocating for support, skills that would serve Greene well in his later leadership positions in the Continental army.

When revolution broke in 1775, Greene led Rhode Island forces to join the siege of Boston. During this time, Greene distinguished himself as a diligent and talented officer who was led troops effectively and enforced discipline. As a result, when the Continental Congress named George Washington commander in 1775, Greene, along with seven others, was appointed to the Continental army as a brigadier general by the Second Continental Congress.<sup>8</sup> His appointment and service with Washington would have a profound impact on Greene's life. Washington was not only Greene's commander, but also his mentor, teacher, confidant, and revolutionary brother. Greene served in several major early campaigns of the

American Revolution in the northern colonies, including the defeat in New York. Late in that battle, as Continental forces were preparing to withdraw, Greene misjudged the capabilities of both his own forces and the enemy's and advocated for the defense of Fort Mifflin. Greene's decision proved disastrous and resulted in needless casualties and a close call for the army's senior leadership as they narrowly escaped British capture by crossing the Hudson River to New Jersey. Washington, however, didn't lose faith in Greene as a result of the defeat or demote him. Undoubtedly, it was a valuable lesson for Greene to understand that failure in battle wasn't the end of the war and highlighted the importance of living to fight another day. Greene later played important roles in the battle of Red Bank and throughout the New Jersey campaign where he learned to work closely with New Jersey militias. Greene was regarded by fellow officers as a talented strategist and leader and these traits, along with his growing close relationship with Washington, positioned him for greater roles as the war continued.

In the winter of 1778, as the Continental army struggled at Valley Forge, the sitting quartermaster general quit his job, leaving his post empty at a critical juncture. Washington and members of Congress, who had visited the army encampment and witnessed the energy and skill that Greene displayed in foraging and organization, decided Greene was an ideal candidate to fill the job. Congress, with Washington's blessing, offered Greene this important post but it was one he didn't want. Greene, like most eighteenth century commanders, strongly preferred to win glory leading men into battle instead of figuring out how to provide them the shoes, horses, weapons, and wagons they needed. Adding to the challenge was the difficult relationship between the quartermaster and the Second Continental Congress, the de facto government of the colonies that carried out both

legislative and executive functions. Congress, who had the sole power to pay for the goods and services the army needed, consistently struggled in this role as they had no corresponding power to tax. Instead, Congress relied on loans and contributions from constituent colonies, an unreliable system plagued by delay. As quartermaster, Greene had to routinely convince and cajole Congress to do its job by drawing on his diplomatic skills. He was in constant communication with leaders in Congress apprising them of the army's needs and the consequences of failure to act. Greene was in a delicate position because Washington was his commander, but Congress controlled the actual purse strings. Greene was able to manage these overlapping and confusing lines of authority and command by communicating effectively and remaining true to the cause, traits that would serve him well in the southern campaign.

In addition to relations with Congress, Greene dealt with the economic challenge of finding vendors able and willing to supply the Continental army with the things they needed. Suppliers were caught in the same loyalty conflict between American patriots and the British that plagued all citizens. Apart from ideology, many potential vendors were simply reluctant to supply the army because they might not get paid on time and in full and feared retribution from the British and Loyalist forces. Greene's interactions with Quaker vendors during his time as quartermaster shed light on his understanding of the economic and social aspects of the Revolution and reflected his diplomatic skills.

Greene's upbringing and Quaker values were as much a part of his identity as his beliefs in the Revolutionary ideals of championing liberty and economic freedom. At times, he naturally struggled to reconcile his background with waging a violent war against the British and Loyalist Americans, especially when civilians suffered.<sup>9</sup> In 1777-1778, Greene clashed

with wealthy Quaker merchants in Pennsylvania who were reluctant to supply the Continental army because of their pacificism and, more importantly, the devaluation of Continental script.<sup>10</sup> Greene strongly criticized the merchants, which seemed harsh in light of the suffering that Quakers endured throughout the Revolution, often at the hands of Patriots, for their beliefs. Greene's frustration stemmed from the Quakers' reticence to see and accept his view that the British no longer served as fair arbiters and guarantors of free trade and commerce. If the Quaker merchants only saw what he saw about the state of British rule, they would understand that the only path to a prosperous future was by supporting the Revolution. Ultimately in 1777, Greene severed ties with the Quaker Meeting in his home state of Rhode Island as his role in the military expanded. His Quaker background, along with his experience as a merchant, remained the foundation of his nuanced understanding of the economic facets of the revolutionary struggle. This understanding would help him later in the southern campaign as he struggled to win over the loyalty of local populations.

Ultimately, Greene was a successful quartermaster and his contributions to sustaining the Continental army during some of the most difficult times were invaluable. Moreover, he learned the importance of equipping the troops and hounding Congress, state politicians, and vendors to get the army the supplies they needed. He returned to service on Washington's staff but his desire to lead units in combat still burned. In 1780, his wish would be fulfilled as the focus of the war turned to the south, where not only his growing military skill, but also his diplomatic, economic, and governmental skills would be needed as he waged an all-out war with the British.

## **Situation and Strategy in the South**

As the war in the north played out 1776-1780, the British and Continental forces fought a series of campaigns and battles in New York, Rhode Island, and New Jersey, but neither side achieved the elusive decisive victory. In 1777, the Continental army won a remarkable victory against British and Loyalist forces at Saratoga, New York, which opened the way for France to enter the war. The hero of Saratoga was General Horatio Gates, a former British officer, and as a result of Saratoga, he was named commander of the Southern Department of the Continental Army.

The war in the south was unlike the north in significant ways. The Southern Command consisted of the colonies of North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and Virginia. The south was less densely populated and settlements were spread far apart. Although Charleston was the fourth largest city in the colonies, its population of twelve thousand was only one fourth of the colonies' largest city, Philadelphia. Distances between populated centers were great and on a different scale than in the north. For example, the distance between New York and Philadelphia was about one hundred miles and took less than a week to travel. The distance from Charleston to Richmond, however, was over four hundred miles and could take up to a month to travel. Roads were less developed so travel by boat along rivers or coastal waterways was preferred, which heightened the importance of coastal ports. Greene summed up the geographic challenges in a letter to Alexander Hamilton in January 1781: "...The Enemy cannot maintain a large force in this quarter, neither can we. The resources of the Country are too small to subsist a large body of troops at any one point; and to draw supplies from a distance through such long tracks of barren land, will be next to impossible, unless the

business can be aided by a water transportation...”<sup>11</sup> The greater distances heightened the importance of local civil authorities over the power of central governments in state capitals.

The southern economy was based on agriculture and relied on the export of products into the British markets. Key seaports, including Charleston and Savannah, played outsized economic, political, and social roles. Southern land-owners relied on slave labor and the institution of slavery was entrenched deeply across the south. The nature of the southern economy led the British to believe that the majority of southerners supported the British cause and when pressed would abandon the revolution. Exiled colonial governors and the slow exchange of information fed this misconception among British decision-makers.

Based in part on this belief, the British shifted forces and attention to the south. The British strategy was to extinguish the rebel forces and once they had been defeated, the British believed existing Loyalist sentiment would take hold and prevail. The British occupied coastal Georgia and South Carolina and controlled the ports of Charleston and Savannah. The British strategy was to expand their control across South Carolina and into North Carolina and ultimately Virginia, thereby cutting off the southern colonies from the north. If successful, they would split off the southern colonies to keep them under British rule and abandon the northern colonies. The two men at the heart of this strategy were Sir Henry Clinton, who was overall commander of British forces in North America, and Lieutenant General Charles, Earl Cornwallis, the commander of the southern forces. Clinton and Cornwallis clashed frequently and this divergence of opinion and strategy was one of major reasons for the British defeat.

General Clinton wanted to focus on British dominance in South Carolina and Georgia, areas closer to the sugar trade and key British holdings in the Caribbean. He instructed

Cornwallis to secure the lower Carolina position.<sup>12</sup> Cornwallis on the other hand, was intent on pursuing and destroying Continental forces and their militias across the great distances and waterways of the south. He believed that inhabitants would abandon the revolution once they were convinced of British superiority in the field. The strategy looked to be entirely successful after the British victory at Camden in August, 1780. At Camden, the American commander, Gates, had suffered a costly defeat when he attempted to beat the British in a pitched set piece battle. Gates fled in defeat, only stopping his retreat hundreds of miles from Camden, as his forces were annihilated. He was swiftly relieved of command, opening an opportunity for Greene to receive the field command he long sought. All that stood between the British and control of the south was a decimated Continental army and several local militias, whose effectiveness was hard to predict.

The American strategy in the south was a variation of what had been successful in the north; avoiding decisive defeats, wearing down the British, and surviving to keep hope alive. The American strategy reflected the reality that the Continental army and the state militias could not match the British in open, large-scale battle. The British forces consisted of professional units deployed from England or the Caribbean, along with mercenaries and Loyalist units made up of colonists. On the other side, American forces were citizen soldiers fighting for ideals on their home soil. The war was costly for both sides but the British effort was especially difficult to sustain because it required a navy, soldiers, mercenaries, and government officials deployed far from home fighting a counter-insurgency with shifting objectives.

When Greene was appointed commander of the Southern Department of the Continental army on October 14, 1780, he fulfilled his personal dream of becoming a senior officer in the

field, but it was a bittersweet achievement. The British had the upper hand and were expanding their military campaign into the backcountry of the Carolinas. The bulk of the Continental Army, commanded by George Washington, was hundreds of miles away in the northern states and unable to assist in any meaningful way. Washington understood the challenges Greene was facing but could offer him little more than sound advice and faith in his appointment: “Uninformed as I am of the enemy’s force in that quarter, of our own, or of the resources which it will be in our command for carrying out the War, I can give you no particular instructions but must leave you to govern yourself intirely according to your own prudence and judgment and the circumstances in which you find yourself.”<sup>13</sup> Washington’s instructions reflected the depth of the challenge and that Greene would have to draw on his own personal skills more than ever. They also reflected Washington’s confidence in Greene’s ability to succeed.

Once Greene assumed command, he learned what he already suspected; that the Continental Army was in tatters, lamenting to a member of Congress that: “The Army exists more in name than in substance. There are but a few ragged Soldiers together, and those in greatest distress imaginable, and no prospect of increasing their numbers or bettering their condition.”<sup>14</sup> Greene understood the gravity of Gates’ mistake and the magnitude of the task that it was to equip a renewed Continental army. He reported to Washington that he saw “...little prospect of getting a force to content with the enemy upon equal grounds and therefore must make the most of a kind of partizan war untill we can levy and equip a larger force.”<sup>15</sup> Apart from a military strategy, Greene realized that to achieve total victory over the enemy, he needed a comprehensive approach that employed multiple levers of power.

## **Chapter 2-Analysis and Discussion**

As Greene struggled to rebuild forces and defeat the British, he grappled with several complex issues that affected the outcome of the campaign. By looking closely at several of these issues, we get a better idea of how Greene understood these problems and how he developed successful solutions. Greene relied on his experience and skill to overcome these complex challenges including pillage and property rights, working with militias, establishing local governance, and practicing diplomacy with various key actors. The solutions he developed provide solid lessons even today.

### **Pillage and Property Rights**

Respect for personal property rights was a major issue for Americans before the war and served as a rallying cry for Revolutionary leaders. Through a series of acts, the British Parliament had introduced policies in the American colonies that were widely perceived as unfair and punitive. Many colonists felt that since they did not have a voice in Parliament to represent their interests, the taxes levied against them were unjust. The Virginia Declaration of Rights of 1776 enshrined property rights by ensuring: "...the enjoyment of life and liberty, with the means of acquiring and possessing property, and pursuing and obtaining happiness and safety."<sup>16</sup> Respect for personal property rights also underpinned the Declaration of Independence, although without the specific language of the Virginia declaration. The leaders of the American Revolution were men who owned property so naturally the issue was important for their cause. Greene was one of those leaders and his views on respect for property during the southern campaign is revealing, especially when compared with the British approach.

Greene understood that the forces under his command, both the Continental army and the militias, were watched closely by southern populations. The people evaluated not just who won the battles but also how the soldiers conducted themselves. Greene had learned well that when soldiers stole personal property without a clear military necessity, it tested the loyalty of the very people the Revolution was trying to win over. While serving in New Jersey in 1780, Greene's concern about the problem was evident in a letter to Washington when he sought swift punishment for soldiers caught plundering local residents: "There has been committed some of the most horrid acts of plunder by some...that has disgraced the American Arms during the War. The instances of plunder and violence is equal to anything committed by the Hessians." Greene went on to relate that the soldiers had threatened inhabitants to cover up the affair and carried out their crimes in front of officers, who they threatened in order to prevent their intervention. Greene was deeply offended by the episode and felt so strongly about punishing the perpetrators that he requested Washington's permission to immediately hang one of the accused without a trial and display his body for all to see as the army marched by.<sup>17</sup>

Unfortunately, stamping out pillage and plunder proved more difficult, despite public punishment. Eighteenth century military laws and customs were quite different; pillage was commonly practiced and often seen as part of payment for services rendered by soldiers. Many commanders either condoned or ignored the problem so why did Greene fight tirelessly to root out the practice? He rightfully understood that theft and pillage conflicted with the tenets of the Revolutionary cause but more importantly, it turned local populations against the army and militias that were fighting for the cause.

In the trying winter of 1778 at Valley Forge, as the Continental army withered from lack of food and basic supplies, Greene learned a hard lesson about having to adjust his principles to avoid the starvation and the destruction of the army. At Washington's request, Greene led efforts to forage for food and other needed supplies in the countryside around Valley Forge, which was largely populated by Loyalists. Greene knew the cost of the foraging campaign was estrangement from the local population and tried to document what the army took so farmers and merchants could later seek compensation.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, when his cavalry units needed horses, Greene allowed them to be taken from local farmers but forbid removal of valuable stud horses and instructed that meticulous records be kept so the farmers didn't perceive they were the victims of simple theft.<sup>19</sup>

The British also struggled with the issue of plunder despite their reputation as a disciplined, well-supplied, professional force. Clinton understood the problem and tasked two senior officers, John André and Patrick Ferguson, to draft plans to address the growing issue in the ranks because of the negative effects it was having on local populations.<sup>20</sup> Ferguson's plan called for a crackdown on wanton marauding by soldiers and allowed for the taking of food only in necessary amounts. His plan authorized confiscating the property of rebel leaders to be split among the men as spoils, provided it was sanctioned by an officer.<sup>21</sup> When Cornwallis took command of British forces in the south, he continued to grapple with the problem as troops moved across the backcountry. Cornwallis reminded subordinate commanders that marauding was having such a negative effect on the local population that it was driving them into the hands of the rebels.<sup>22</sup> For both the British and the Americans, the issue was particularly pronounced among militias, who weren't subject to the same command structure and discipline as the regular forces.

The British drew a distinction between theft by rank-and-file soldiers and the confiscation of property from rebels by British authorities. After the capture of Charleston in May 1780, Clinton published a proclamation that made it clear that anyone who supported the Revolution or prevented others from exercising loyalty to the Crown would be treated as a criminal and "...their estates will be immediately seized, to be confiscated."<sup>23</sup> Cornwallis later solidified the process for confiscation of property by selecting John Cruden, a Loyalist merchant, as the Commissioner of sequestered property. Cornwallis made his reasons for the decision quite clear in the commission: "...it appears to me to be a measure dictated as well by justice as good policy to seize the estates real and personal of all such rebels...for the publick benefit and advantage..."<sup>24</sup>

Both the British and American commanders shared the same frustrations as the soldiers and militias under their control marauded the countryside, often out of real need to feed themselves but also for the basest of reasons. Commanders from both sides tried to enforce discipline to prevent theft and, in some cases, meted out harsh punishment to set an example. Tellingly, both Greene and the British commanders, Cornwallis and Clinton, understood pillage and plunder had a direct effect on the very people they needed to win over. In contrast, the British embarked on a systematic process for confiscating the estates and property as an economic and legal tool to be used against the rebels. Ultimately, the British failed to subdue the south and their harsh policy of property confiscation was partly the reason they failed to regain the loyalty of the inhabitants.

The Americans were in many ways fighting a guerilla war in the south; one that today's military commanders and Mao Zedong would recognize. Mao exhorted guerilla fighters to adopt a model of behavior that would endear them to the public, forbidding them from theft

and other bad acts because doing so would estrange them from the communities in which fighters operated.<sup>25</sup> Greene took the same approach, especially with regards to militia who often operated autonomously. Mao's advice shows a nuanced understanding of how soldiers' behavior affects public sentiment similar to Greene's understanding.

Under modern military law pillage is defined as "...taking of private or public movable property (including enemy military equipment) for private or personal use."<sup>26</sup> As noted, both American and British commanders spent great efforts ordering their subordinates to ensure soldiers didn't needlessly enrich themselves through plunder. Sadly, the problem of soldiers enriching themselves is sadly timeless as seen through the behavior of Russian soldiers who've indiscriminately looted their way through Ukraine.<sup>27</sup>

The lesson for modern commanders is to remain vigilant to ensure local civilian populations do not become the victims of pillage and plunder from the forces under their control or they risk losing the support of local populations. The risks are even greater during insurgencies or revolutions when winning the support of the people is a critical objective. A distinction should be made between pillage and deliberate confiscation of property as a tool for combatting insurgency, which has distinct and higher risk. As demonstrated in the American Revolution, respect for property rights, especially land, can be deeply ingrained in a society so policies that sanction re-distribution should always take into account the long-term effects they will have on the populace and local institutions.

### **The Promise and Problems of Militias**

Greene's approach to the South Carolina militias while leading the southern campaign further demonstrated his diplomatic skills, which allowed him to use those forces in

successful ways. Greene had served in a Rhode Island militia, and worked with militias as a commander in the Continental army in the north, so he knew the promise and problems they presented. As early as 1776, he noted some of his opinions in a letter to the governor of Rhode Island: “The Philadelphia and Pennsylvania Militia turn out with great Spirit but the Jersey Militia behaves scurvily and, I fear, are not deserving the freedom we are contending for.”<sup>28</sup> Greene’s frustrations and hopes with militias continued to play out during the southern campaign.

Militias were different from regular army units in important ways. Militia enlistments were typically short-term and couldn’t be relied on for more than a few months because militia members were needed in their local communities, especially farmers and skilled tradesmen. Training consisted of basic military skills and leadership was inconsistent as officers were chosen through voting or based on family and social connections instead of merit. Militia ranks were inflated and their equivalencies in the Continental army were a thorny subject throughout the Revolution. Militias, like the Continental army, were also plagued by a lack of equipment and unprofessional behavior.

Militias consisted of part-time soldiers drawn from local communities across the colonies. Militia members maintained strong links with their families and communities even as they fought in campaigns and battles far from their homes so they played a key economic and political role apart from their military service. After the war, these same men would return to their communities as leaders so keeping them in the fold of the revolution was important. Militia members constituted a network that spread information about the successes, failures, and workings of the Continental army so they also played a significant role in forming public perception and swaying loyalties.

Greene understood their importance. In the summer of 1781, criticisms from Pennsylvania about his alleged disregard for militias reached Greene. He refuted the allegations, noting that he considered militias the defenders of American liberty.<sup>29</sup> Greene's response reflects the tension of the time. The Americans needed a professional army to defeat the British but such an army presented a threat to the very liberty they were fighting for. Militias were part of this tension because they represented a model of citizen soldiers rather than professionals. Greene grasped the complexity of the situation.

When Greene took over command of the southern campaign, he quickly sized up the South Carolina militias and their principal leaders: Francis Marion, Andrew Pickens, and Thomas Sumter. Greene didn't have command authority over the militias like other army units because they answered to civil authorities and the governor of South Carolina. Moreover, the militias were led by influential men who had their own interests, plans, and opinions so they maintained their distance from Greene and the army. This allowed militia leaders the freedom and autonomy to operate as they wished. Because the army was in tatters when he assumed command, Greene had little choice but to find a way to work with the militias until he could field a capable army. To do so required all of Greene's diplomatic skills including persuasion, flattery, deference, collaboration, empathy, and a sophisticated understanding of the men who led the militias and their motivations.

Greene's relationship with Thomas Sumter and his militia is indicative of his skillful approach. Sumter was a wealthy merchant and landowner who had served in the Continental army early in the Revolution but later resigned his commission and returned to his business ventures. In May 1780, however, British forces burned his estate prompting Sumter to petition the South Carolina assembly to form a militia, which was approved in June 1780.

When Greene took command, Sumter was convalescing after a serious injury he had suffered in a previous battle. Greene recognized Sumter's influence and communicated directly with him, along with parallel correspondence through South Carolina Governor John Rutledge. Greene challenged and urged Sumter to rejoin the fight despite his serious injuries. In a telling episode, Greene ordered one of his officers to directly command members of Sumter's militia to source supplies for a Continental army unit. Sumter's men balked at the order and Greene was forced to back down and smooth over the seemingly inconsequential dispute.<sup>30</sup> This pattern repeated itself over the course of 1780-1781 as Greene waged a campaign that he succinctly described: "We fight get beat rise and fight again."<sup>31</sup> Throughout this campaign, Greene tried to work with Sumter, requesting him to operate in coordination with Continental army units, urging him to collaborate and synchronize with other militia commanders, and keeping him apprised of Greene's own plans and intentions. It wasn't entirely successful but it was necessary. Greene's challenge was further illustrated in a controversy over using captured slaves as enlistment bonuses.

In 1781, Sumter struggled to fill his militia ranks due to the short-term enlistments which lasted only four to six months. To secure longer ten-month enlistments, Sumter decided to offer militia members slaves who had been captured from Loyalists as compensation in what would become known as Sumter's Law.<sup>32</sup> The program was problematic in several ways. First, all the militias struggled with short-term enlistments so other commanders, especially Marion, worried Sumter would entice his soldiers away from his ranks.<sup>33</sup> Second, Sumter's Law amounted to sanctioned confiscation and re-distribution of property in the worst of its forms, human bondage. Finally, the policy marked a distinction from British policy, which largely allowed slaves who had escaped their rebel masters to live free behind British lines.

Greene had misgivings about Sumter's Law but relented and provided his tacit approval. Ultimately, Sumter's plan failed to fill the ranks and was abandoned when the South Carolina governor prohibited confiscation later in 1781.

How to explain Greene's lack of opposition to Sumter's Law in light of his background and beliefs? The most likely explanation is that he simply had to set aside his objections because he needed Sumter and his militia too much to start another quarrel with him at a key point in the campaign. Tellingly, Greene's beliefs about slavery re-appeared in 1782 when he threw his support behind a renewed proposal by John Laurens, a former South Carolina representative to Congress and special emissary to France, to form several Continental army regiments of black soldiers recruited from former slaves of Loyalist masters.<sup>34</sup> Laurens had proposed similar plans, with the consent of Congress, as early as 1779 but he had failed to overcome strong opposition from South Carolina legislators. Laurens' latest proposal failed again due to deep opposition to the concept of arming slaves and granting them freedom for military service. Greene's support of Laurens' proposal reveals some of his true feelings about slavery. Greene didn't need the new units out of military necessity because Laurens' proposal was made several months after the British defeat at Yorktown at a time when the war was winding down and the American victory was clear. More likely is that Greene agreed with Laurens' opposition to slavery and opposed wholesale restoration of the institution because it offended his ideals about the Revolution.

Greene's overall strategy with the militias was to provide militia commanders a great deal of deference and respect, treating them as partners rather than integral units of the Continental army. At the same time, he consistently pursued coordination, urging militia commanders to engage as part of greater objectives, and made his strategy and intent clear.

Greene had come to believe that winning the war required a professional army, but that assumption changed in the south, where militia played a necessary part of the victory.

Greene's struggles with Sumter resonate today especially in the context of partnerships with units or countries whose values diverge. Greene's dilemma over Sumter's law presents a difficult question--how should commanders respond when the ethics of a partner unit clash with their own? Greene's immediate response to Sumter's Law seemed weak but his later support of Laurens' concept reveals a rational approach. Greene had made a difficult choice contrary to his own beliefs out of exigency but didn't let that decision change his core beliefs. From an ethics standpoint, commanders and soldiers will continue to grapple with the question of when they should intervene and when they should stand aside and that is never easy.<sup>35</sup> These types of questions will occur frequently as nations seek military partners from across the world, bringing divergent values and ethics into conflict.

### **Establishing Local Governance**

Without a doubt, Greene was a gifted military commander but as the Americans gained the advantage on battlefields in 1781, Greene showed a keen understanding of the political nature of war by pushing for the establishment of effective local governance by civil, rather than military, authorities. A root cause of the revolution was the British failure to provide adequate security for colonists, who were threatened by attack from outsiders on the western frontiers or left to suffer in ungoverned spaces, plagued by lawlessness and conflict. Moreover, the colonists chafed at having to comply with laws made in parliament, hundreds of miles away in London without their representation. By establishing local governments that represented the interests of citizens through elections at the lowest level, Greene could

demonstrate the wisdom of the Revolutionary cause. Additionally, there was a distinct risk for Greene in using the Continental army to govern, even in an expediency. First, he simply didn't have the requisite number of forces to do the job. Second, the army consisted in part of troops drawn from other states, mainly Maryland, Delaware, and Virginia and he himself was from Rhode Island. There had to have been a real concern in Greene's mind that governing the southern colonies with troops from elsewhere would be a daunting task.

In July 1781, Greene learned of a peace plan under discussion in Europe that spurred his efforts to establish civil authorities. Under the peace plan, areas that were determined to be not under the control of civil authorities would be deemed to be under British military jurisdiction. Consequently, large areas, if not all, of North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia would have been determined to be under British control. In response, Greene urged the governor of South Carolina to establish a civil government as soon as possible as Georgia had already done.<sup>36</sup> Greene's urgency echoed earlier pushes to maintain civil authority in North Carolina even when their governor and several ranking legislators were captured by the British.

Later in the summer of 1781, Governor Rutledge returned from exile to South Carolina as governor and joined Greene. Soon after his return, he picked up Greene's zeal for stamping out pillage and plunder by issuing a proclamation prohibiting the act and ordering the restoration of property to those from who it was stolen. He also pushed justices of the peace to resume their duties and provide a rudimentary functioning judiciary in local communities.<sup>37</sup> Greene was motivated by pragmatism along with democratic ideals. He knew that his forces were inadequate for governing the vast south so he pushed the governors

of Georgia and South Carolina to re-establish civil order and quell the violent settling of scores by armed groups in the ungoverned space.<sup>38</sup>

British efforts to re-establish civil authorities were different and based on mistaken beliefs about the loyalties of the southern colonies. The British believed, based on outdated reports, that Loyalist support was widespread in the south and that once British forces had demonstrated military success, rebel sympathizers would quickly switch sides and return to the fold.<sup>39</sup> In the aftermath of Charleston's capture, Clinton issued a proclamation offering pardon for those who had taken up arms against the Crown. The proclamation reflected a sentiment that winning for the British meant bringing things back to the way they were before the revolution: "...to such of his deluded Subjects, as have been perverted from their Duty by the Factious Arts of self-interested and ambitious Men, That they will still be received with Mercy and Forgiveness, if they immediately return to their Allegiance, and a due Obedience to those laws and that Government which they formerly boasted..." This same sentiment underpinned British efforts to re-establish Crown authority, but they had misjudged the sentiments of the people and success would prove elusive.

Modern counterinsurgency theory reflects Greene's understanding about the importance of local civil governance. According to the U.S. Government's Counterinsurgency Guide, "The perceived capacity of local government to provide for the population is critical to national government legitimacy."<sup>40</sup> Re-establishing a credible local government that can provide needed services, such as law enforcement, dispute resolution, and basic services, is key to ensuring public support. Indeed, by one estimate, donors spent two billion U.S. dollars in Afghanistan over twenty years in a failed attempt to establish local governance and secure the loyalty of the people for the Kabul central government over the Taliban.<sup>41</sup>

Greene's work to establish new forms of local governance during the American revolution reflected his political skills. He understood that the stakes of failing to provide a legitimate, credible alternative to British authority would be failure in the south even if he were somehow able to defeat the British on the battlefield. He also well understood that winning the public perception of the struggle and the armies involved, what many today refer to as part of the information warfare, was essential. In a letter to Henry Knox after he took command, Greene famously noted: "Every Thing here depends upon opinion, and it is equally dangerous to go forward as to stand still for if you lose the Confidence of the People you lose all Support..."<sup>42</sup> Greene's assessment of the how to win the fight in 1780 remains valid to this day.

### **Practicing the Art of Diplomacy**

As the senior commander in the south, Greene understood he was also the chief diplomat. Some of his efforts centered on diplomacy with foreign powers. Spain was aligned with the French in supporting the revolution and Greene was empowered by Congress to negotiate with them as needed. Greene engaged with the Spanish as they conducted military expeditions along the Mississippi river and attempted to coordinate their activities against the British. He maintained regular correspondence with French military leaders, along with French diplomats and envoys. Greene understood European politics and adeptly responded to an Austrian initiative to broker a peace agreement between France and Britain.

Greene also employed great diplomatic skill in dealing with Congress. As quartermaster, Greene had cooperated with many in Congress. Over time, he came to understand the constraints Congress faced and developed working relationships with the leaders and

members of the body which allowed him to effectively advocate for his forces. Greene understood that Congress was the key to victory: “Money is the Sinews of War, and Without a Military Chest, it is next to impossible to employ an Army to effect...”<sup>43</sup> At the same time, he recognized the primacy of Congress as the leading civil authority and was committed to Revolutionary principles including subordination of the military to the elected civilian leaders. When appointed commander of the Southern Department, Greene made a point of stopping in Philadelphia for long consultations with Congressional leaders, despite the urgency of proceeding southward. Greene consulted and coordinated with General Washington to ensure unity of effort as they cajoled and convinced the Congress to fund the revolution.

Any person who attains high rank will gain enemies and Greene was not spared. Criticism and inquiries from his time as quartermaster persisted and the vanity, jealousies, and back-stabbing that was pervasive in the higher echelons of the Continental army echoed in the halls of Congress. Greene was able to manage these difficult relationships and keep Congress focused on the business of the day, paying for the war. Greene regularly apprised leaders of Congress about the progress of events along with constant requests for support. He cultivated close relationships with lawmakers from the southern colonies, including men such as John Laurens, who later joined his Southern command and played a key role in restoring civil authority.

In a similar way, Greene adeptly managed relationships with key governors, Thomas Jefferson of Virginia, Caesar Rodney of Delaware, and Thomas Sim Lee of Maryland. At the time, individual states bore the burden of equipping their units that had been assigned to the Continental army. States struggled with this responsibility especially since the units were

located far away from the state capitals themselves. When traveling southward to take command, Greene stopped in Annapolis where he met with both houses of the legislature. During a later stop in Richmond he found matters to be "...in the greatest state of confusion imaginable; and the business of government at a stand for want of money..."<sup>44</sup> In response, Greene ordered Baron von Stueben, one of his most trusted commanders, to remain in Richmond to organize matters and liaise with the governor and legislature. Greene recognized the importance of shoring up support in Virginia and put one of his most talented officers on the task. Similarly, Greene left General Mordecai Gist in Maryland to coordinate support from both that state and Delaware while he was further south.

Throughout the southern campaign, Greene maintained active, regular correspondence with state leaders to make sure they well understood the situation on the ground and to secure their continued support. Greene summed up the importance of ensuring this support from state houses and congress in a plea to Washington for his continued support with Congress and Virginian authorities: "I believe the views and wishes of the great body of the people are entirely with us. But remove the personal influence of a few; and they are a lifeless and inanimate mass, without direction or spirit, to employ the means they possess, for their own security."<sup>45</sup> Greene would take his own advice and spent countless hours convincing legislators to carry out their responsibilities to support the army as they intended. He was relentless in this effort and well understood his role in applying pressure to ineffective partners.

Greene displayed a nuanced political understanding of the national political climate beyond the south. In late 1781 as the tide turned in favor of the Americans, the Continental army and civil authorities grappled with the problem of how to treat Loyalists, especially

those who had taken up arms. Policies differed across the colonies and even within each colony. Greene understood that this was a serious problem and suggested that the states should work together to develop a consistent, unified approach. Greene recognized the solution had to be civil not military and urged moderation in treatment of former combatants to avoid fostering a culture of retribution. Greene's understanding of the pitfalls associated with demobilization and reintegration of former combatants in 1781 largely mesh with modern frameworks for approaching the problem.<sup>46</sup>

Greene reached out to broad group of civic actors and advocated for their support of his effort to defeat the British. In March 1781, Greene approached a Moravian Protestant community that espoused pacifism with a heartfelt plea to assist wounded American soldiers who were abandoned and suffering near to their settlement. Greene reminded the Moravians about his own Quaker upbringing and emphasized the respect he had for their belief in non-violence. He went further to state that prejudices among the people and the acts of some of the Moravian community had unfortunately led some to categorize the group broadly as Loyalists but that Greene held no such sentiments. In response to British misinformation, Greene took the opportunity to remind the non-violent believers passionately about why the revolution was being fought: "Do not be deceived. This is no religious dispute. The contest is for political liberty, without which cannot be enjoyed the free exercise of your religion."<sup>47</sup>

Greene's willingness to engage with a broad set of actors showed great diplomatic skill, one that modern military commanders would recognize and should embrace.<sup>48</sup> Greene's strategy and approach for getting what he needed for his forces from the states of Virginia, Maryland, and Delaware by assigning experienced professional officers who had his trust as liaisons has similarities to modern liaison officer programs. Greene recognized he had

important equities with those states so he put trusted people in place to build the relationships and monitor progress, exactly what modern military liaison officers should do. Finally, Greene's approach with Congress serves as a lesson on how to zealously advocate with legislators to get what your forces need. Greene was tireless in his efforts and sometimes went too far in his criticism but ultimately, he was successful and his dedication to thankless task serves as a useful model even today.

## Chapter 4-Conclusion

Major General Nathanael Greene displayed a depth of understanding and sophistication on diplomatic, political, informational, and economic matters in addition to military skill. His unique, effective set of skills allowed him to achieve victory despite numerous daunting challenges.

In a eulogy to Greene, Alexander Hamilton summed up the severity of the situation that Greene faced when he took command in the south:

...Georgia and South Carolina subdued and overrun, the spirit of their people dejected and intimidated, the flame of resistance scarcely kept alive by the transient gleams of a few expiring embers: North Carolina distracted by the still recent effects of internal commotion, dreading the hostility of a considerable part of its own citizens, the depending for its exertions on the tried valour and patriotism of the rest more than on the energy of a feeble and ill organised government: Virginia debilitated by the excessive efforts of its early zeal and by the dissipation of its revenues and forces in domestic projects...<sup>49</sup>

Despite this daunting challenge, Greene succeeded and remains a hero of the Revolution.

It's important to keep in mind that Greene was a man of his age and place. Eighteenth century ideals and ethics were quite different from our modern concepts. For example, as quartermaster, it was acceptable for Greene to take a commission, or percentage, of each contract he placed with vendors for the provision of goods and services. Under modern notions of ethics and business propriety, this would clearly be viewed as a conflict of interest and unacceptable, but it was a commonly accepted practice at the time. Similarly, Greene's advocacy for swift corporal or capital punishment of offenders, sometimes without due process, appears harsh and capricious, but commanders had those authorities at the time.

Despite the profound differences between the ages, Greene's strategy and concepts remain relevant.

Greene was not without faults. He was often overly sensitive to criticism, especially when it damaged his reputation. He demanded much from others in the way of commitment to the Revolutionary cause and standards of behavior, and didn't shy away from telling them they weren't living up to his expectations. His tendency to preach to others estranged colleagues and interlocutors, pushing them away from Greene rather than drawing them close. Finally, Greene like many others, suffered from vanity when it came to achieving glory on the battlefield and rank in the Continental army. In part, this vanity fed his frustration at serving as quartermaster, even though his service was vitally important for the Revolution. A complete picture of Greene is beyond this paper, but understanding his accomplishments and their lasting legacy in light of his personal challenges is only fair.

Military theorists will perpetually debate whether war actually changes over time and space or whether the face of war just shifts but its true nature remains the same. That debate will continue, but one thing is certain: war and conflict have always been a part of human condition. Understanding that war is inevitable, it's imperative to study the past to not only avoid mistakes others have made, but also to build on the successes they achieved. That is why Greene's approach during the southern campaign is important. He demonstrated a sophisticated understanding that victory meant not only winning on the battlefield, but also gaining the loyalty and respect of the population whose lives were turned upside down by conflict. Greene's military strategy was audacious, innovative, and ultimately successful and he was perhaps the most talented field commander in the Continental army. Greene's larger contribution, however, was the heart, intellect, and skill he showed to comprehend the true

nature of what was required to win, apart from the military struggle, and then lead others to achieve that victory. It's from this model that we, along with future generations, can learn much.

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## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> Washington, “George Washington to John Mathews, October 23, 1780,” n.d.
- <sup>2</sup> Waters, *The Quaker and the Gamecock*, 188.
- <sup>3</sup> Kashatus, *Conflict of Conviction*, 40.
- <sup>4</sup> Golway, *Washington’s General*, 34.
- <sup>5</sup> Golway, 37–38.
- <sup>6</sup> Greene and Showman, *The Papers of General Nathanael Greene*, 1976, 53.
- <sup>7</sup> Golway, *Washington’s General*, 44.
- <sup>8</sup> Golway, 56.
- <sup>9</sup> Kashatus, *Conflict of Conviction*, 43.
- <sup>10</sup> Kashatus, 46.
- <sup>11</sup> Greene, Nathanael, “To Alexander Hamilton from Major General Nathanael Greene, 10 January 1781.”
- <sup>12</sup> Andrew Jackson O’Shaughnessy, *The Men Who Lost America : British Leadership, the American Revolution, and the Fate of the Empire*, 239.
- <sup>13</sup> Greene and Showman, *The Papers of General Nathanael Greene*, 1991, VII:424.
- <sup>14</sup> Greene and Showman, VII:446.
- <sup>15</sup> Greene and Showman, VII:448.
- <sup>16</sup> “The Virginia Declaration of Rights.”
- <sup>17</sup> Greene and Showman, *The Papers of General Nathanael Greene*, 1991, VII:233.
- <sup>18</sup> Golway, *Washington’s General*, 162.
- <sup>19</sup> Buchanan, *The Road to Charleston*, 55–56.
- <sup>20</sup> Urwin, ““To Bring the American Army under Strict Discipline,”” 9.
- <sup>21</sup> Kulikoff, “Revolutionary Violence and the Origins of American Democracy,” 248.
- <sup>22</sup> Urwin, ““To Bring the American Army under Strict Discipline,”” 18.
- <sup>23</sup> *A History of the Campaigns of 1780 and 1781: In the Southern Provinces of North America*, 72.
- <sup>24</sup> Cornwallis and Saberton, *The Cornwallis Papers*, 2:320.
- <sup>25</sup> U.S. Marine Corps, “Fleet Marine Force Reference Publication (FMFP) 12-18, Mao Tse-Tung on Guerilla Warfare,” 92.
- <sup>26</sup> Office of General Counsel, U.S. Department of Defense, “Department of Defense Law of War Manual.”
- <sup>27</sup> “Russian Soldiers Send Home 58 Tons of Looted Items from Ukraine — Investigation.”
- <sup>28</sup> Greene and Showman, *The Papers of General Nathanael Greene*, 1994, V:362.
- <sup>29</sup> Buchanan, *The Road to Charleston*, 69.
- <sup>30</sup> Waters, *The Quaker and the Gamecock*, 42–44.
- <sup>31</sup> Greene, *The Papers of General Nathanael Greene*. 8, 168.
- <sup>32</sup> Waters, *The Quaker and the Gamecock*, 70.
- <sup>33</sup> Waters, 70.
- <sup>34</sup> Buchanan, *The Road to Charleston*, 293.
- <sup>35</sup> Kilner, “Divergent Ethics: Facing a Foreign Partner Who Has a Different Moral Code.”
- <sup>36</sup> Buchanan, *The Road to Charleston*, 191.

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- <sup>37</sup> Buchanan, 206–7.
- <sup>38</sup> Golway, *Washington's General*, 272–73.
- <sup>39</sup> Midgley, “General Charles Lord Cornwallis and the British Southern Strategy.,” 13.
- <sup>40</sup> Department of State, Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, “U.S. Government Counterinsurgency Guide,” 30.
- <sup>41</sup> Brown, *Aiding Afghan Local Governance: What Went Wrong?*
- <sup>42</sup> Greene and Showman, *The Papers of General Nathanael Greene*, 1989, VI:547.
- <sup>43</sup> Greene and Showman, *The Papers of General Nathanael Greene*, 1991, VII:436.
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