

INVETERATE REBELS: NATHANAEL GREENE'S
NORTH CAROLINA CAMPAIGN, 1780-1781

by

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"[I was] amongst timid friends, and
adjoining inveterate rebels . . ."

Earl Cornwallis to Lord George Germaine,
17 March 1781

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PREFACE

The Patriot cause in the American Revolution reached its nadir during the twelve months between the Springs of 1780 and 1781. The Continental treasury was empty, its currency worthless, and the Congress was bankrupt. A series of mutinies rocked the Continental Army. The Connecticut Line rebelled in May, and in January, in the midst of one more terrible winter, the Pennsylvania and New Jersey Lines mutinied. The latter had to be put down by armed force, and its ringleaders were summarily executed. The Revolution was shaken to its roots by the treason of the Army's finest combat commander and by the loss in the South of two states and the capture or destruction of two Southern Armies. In the North, Washington's army and the British were at a stalemate. The brightest hope, the arrival in July 1780 of a French expeditionary force at Newport, Rhode Island, was dashed when the Royal Navy successfully blockaded the port and rendered the French ineffective for eleven months. French-American relations suffered through a series of misunderstandings, and only Washington's leadership prevented a serious rift. To the British, time at last seemed to be on their side.

Hard times make hard men; and in the South, now the decisive theater of operations, one of the most remarkable figures in American military history was literally reversing the course of the war during its darkest days. Nathanael Greene's whirlwind campaign in the Carolinas lasted only nine months. With his small army, and assisted by some

equally remarkable and tough subordinates, he recaptured the two southern states and in the process destroyed the finest army in the British Empire.

The critical phase of Greene's campaign occurred during his initial months of command, when British strength in the South appeared overwhelming and their success seemed inevitable. Greene's task looked impossible. It was to take the remains of a shattered army and somehow stop the British juggernaut which had swept through Georgia and South Carolina and was now poised to resume its advance. The decisive battle in the campaign, perhaps in the war, would be fought in North Carolina.

This paper concentrates on two aspects of those first critical months. First, the theater of operations. Warfare in the South was far different from what either Greene or his principal opponent, Charles, Earl Cornwallis, had experienced in the North. Several factors were responsible. Settlement patterns and social and political relationships between groups prior to the war created a divisiveness in the population that both sides exploited. An early, blundering campaign by the British exacerbated local conditions by exposing Loyalists and alarming Whigs into a vigorous defense of their frontiers and coasts and a severe repression of internal dissent.

The second British campaign occupied Georgia and South Carolina and employed a new strategy that deliberately set American against American. The strategy was based on false estimates of Loyalist strength, and the British were opposed by a powerful resistance movement organized around a militia system ideally suited to its task. These conditions resulted in a vicious civil war that dominated all other aspects of the campaign.