



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

Lieutenant Colonel Brian W. Neil

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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.

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.

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