

Implementing Britain's Southern Strategy

- Capture of Savannah, December 1778 -

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In order to discuss the Capture of Savannah or the opening battle of Britain's Southern Strategy, I will first discuss the conditions that led the British to develop their Southern Strategy, then explain that strategy, and then describe the battle.

Military, Political and Economic Conditions

First, we need to understand the series of complex military, political and economic conditions that existed which led the British to develop a southern strategy.

On November 16, 1776 the American ship Andrew Doria was given an 11 cannon salute by Fort Orange on St. Eustatius, a Dutch held island in the Caribbean thereby recognizing us as an independent nation. We are now engaged in a world war.

On October 17, 1777 Gen. Burgoyne surrenders his army at Saratoga. One month later on November 20, 1777 William Pitt a former British Prime Minister and well respected politician and anti war advocate proclaimed:

“I know that the conquest of English America is an impossibility. You cannot, I venture to say it, cannot conquer America. If I were an American as I am an Englishman, while a foreign troop was landed in my country, I would never lay down my arms --never --never --never.”

Five months later on February 6, 1778 the French sign a treaty to assist the Americans and de facto recognize us as an independent nation. The British no longer rule the seas along the coast of the

colonies. The British must also send ships and soldiers to the West Indies to protect their interests there against the French.

In April 1778 England sends the Carlsile Commission to America to negotiate peace, but to no avail as the King refuses to meet our precondition of recognizing us as an independent nation.

April 22-23, 1778 John Paul Jones aboard the Ranger raids Whitehaven, England -- the Homeland-- destroying three British ships and spiking the cannons that guard the port. Parliament is furious.

June 1778 the British evacuate Philadelphia and march to New York. The war has been going on for 3 years and the British now only hold New York and Newport, R.I. otherwise the war is at a standstill.

June 28, 1778 Washington's Army takes the field after the British withdraw at Monmouth. Our Army stands up to the British!

The British are at war with the Maratha Confederacy in India.

As a result of all these events Prime Minister, Lord North and the Secretary of State for the American Department, Lord Germain are under intense pressure to achieve a military breakthrough and subdue the rebellious colonies. The anti-war members of Parliament are demanding a new strategy to break the stalemate.

British Southern Strategy

Since the war started, sentiments were expressed that most of the people in the Southern Colonies were loyal to the King. In June 1775 Josiah Martin, the Royal Governor of N.C. sent a letter to Lord Dartmouth, who was then Secretary of State for the American Department, stating that with only minimal assistance he could

"...reduce to order and obedience every colony to the south of Pennsylvania." He believed that 2/3 of the backcountry people were Loyalists -- an interesting thought since most of the backcountry people were Scotch-Irish, Scotsmen whom the British had forced to move to Ulster in Ireland. Hard to believe the English thought they would rally to the British side.

Also in 1775, John Murray, the Earle of Dunmore and Royal Governor of VA said that with only a few hundred regulars he could "...reduce without the smallest doubt the whole of this southern continent to a perfect state of obedience." The Royal Governor of S.C., William Campbell echoed these thoughts when he said, "Three regiments, a proper detachment of artillery with a couple of good frigates ... would do the whole business here." Former Royal Governor Wright of GA and Campbell of S.C. also informed Lord Germaine that "From our particular knowledge of those provinces it appears very clear to us that if a proper number of troops were in possession of Charleston ... or if they were to possess themselves of the back country thro' Georgia and to leave a garrison in the town of Savannah, the whole inhabitants of both Provinces would soon come in and submit." Major General James Robertson, a veteran of the war in America also insisted that Tories below the Potomac were just waiting for the help that would "... enable the loyal subjects of America to get free from the tyranny of the rebels."

In March 1778 Sir Henry Clinton replaced General Howe as the Commander-in-Chief of the British Army in America. He believed, as did General Charles Grey that Loyalists were capable of taking a leading role in overwhelming the rebels.

The King's Attorney General for S.C. was sent to the South to gage the strength of loyalist support. He reported, "...whenever the King's troops move to Carolina they will be assisted by a very considerable number of the inhabitants." The British also believed

that the south, being farther from New England, would have fewer rebels.

In addition to all the loyalist support in the south the British knew the south had many slaves and if they could be armed along with Indians on the frontier a slave insurrection and Indian raids along the frontier would keep southern militia home to defend their families and farms.

Finally, the south was thinly settled and had weak governments.

With all this reported loyalist support and other factors, Germain had what he needed -- a new strategy for a breakthrough in the stalemate. He sent a secret letter to Sir Henry Clinton in March 1778 outlining this new strategy and stating that the King considered the conquest of the south to be "...an object of great importance in the scale of the war." Germain told Clinton that the capture of Georgia, Virginia, and the Carolinas would destroy the rebel's economy as they would no longer be able to export rice, tobacco, and indigo to obtain funds to buy war supplies in Europe.

Based on information he had received about loyalist sympathies in the backcountry Germain reasoned that once the subdued loyalists were allowed to reassert their loyalty to the King and those who had left returned to their allegiance to the King, civil government could be reestablished. Other rebellious colonies would then see the blessings of restored British rule and return to it -- or so he reasoned.

Germain's strategy also urged Clinton to take Savannah first as it required fewer troops. Once Savannah was taken and contact was made with the loyalists in the backcountry rebels on the coast would be isolated. When more troops were available Charleston would be taken. Clinton was also urged to have Indians attack the backcountry in Virginia so they could not send troops to aid South

Carolina and Georgia. Finally Germain suggested that Clinton begin his campaign in the winter as the climate in the south made operations there easier during that time of year and troops in the north would not be used in the winter.

Capture (First Battle) of Savannah December 1778

The American army in the south was in the hands of General Robert Howe, Head of the Southern Department. Educated in Europe, Howe is considered a "ladies man" and replaced in September 1778 by General Benjamin Lincoln who was injured at Saratoga. However Howe remains in command until Lincoln arrives from New York.

To execute this new southern strategy Sir Henry selects Col. Archibald Campbell, a Scottish engineering officer, not a combat officer. Campbell was also a Member of Parliament who had been captured when his ship entered Boston Harbor a few days after the British army evacuated Boston. Recall that Washington was on Dorchester Heights with the cannons brought from Ticonderoga by General Henry Knox pointing down on Boston. Howe decided that it was time to leave! Campbell was subsequently exchanged for Ethan Allen.

Campbell was provided:

2 battalions of the 71st Scottish Regiment

2 Regiments of Hessians

1 detachment of artillery

2 Tory contingents --the Jersey Volunteers and the New York Provincials.

A total of about 3,500 men and accompanied by a naval contingent of war ships commanded by Commodore Hyde Parker.

The fleet set sail on November 12, 1778, but violent storms drove them back to Staten Island. They set sail again on November 27,

dropping anchor off Tybee Island, Georgia at the mouth of the Savannah River on December 23, 1778. On Christmas day Captain Sir James Baird is put ashore to reconnoiter the area. He captures two American deserters who tell the British of the defenses of Savannah and the size of General Howe's forces -- about 600-800 men. Although Campbell was to wait for General Prevost to move up from Florida, after hearing the size of Howe's force he decides to attack without waiting for Prevost.

A British deserter jumped ship and swam ashore providing us with the British plan to attack Savannah. Governor John Houstoun, a 27-year-old attorney is informed of this plan, but he and his council do nothing to prepare. On November 19th John Laurens had written Houstoun from Philadelphia also telling him "The British are coming!" Howe warns Houstoun of impending disaster if something is not done. He begs for troops and materials. Houstoun refuses to communicate with Howe preferring to only communicate with Lincoln who is in Charleston. Finally Houstoun sends Howe 100 Georgia Militia.

Men and supplies are taken up the Savannah River by the British and offloaded about 2 miles east of Savannah at a plantation levee at the end of a causeway traversing between flooded rice fields and swamps. Lt. Col. John Maitland an aristocrat who served in the House of Commons and is also a beloved Scott commands the men. The Patriots see the landing and open musket fire, but the Highlanders charge not giving us enough time to reload and give a second volley. The Patriots are chased into the woods and the British secure their landing site.

In preparation for the attack Howe places cannon on each side of the road, which is flanked by flooded rice fields on one side and a seemingly impassable heavily treed swamp on the other (the road is more like a causeway). He places three more cannons back a ways and pointed directly down the road.

Col Samuel Elbert, commander of the Georgia Continentals advises Howe to send a large body of troops to Brewton Hill, which is on a bluff overlooking the plantation rice fields and the causeway, and also to send an artillery battery there. Howe only sends 50 men and no artillery.

Col. George Walton warns Howe that there is a path through the swamp on our right, but Howe ignores this information.

The Highlanders are now facing our artillery at about 800 yards and Howe opens fire. The Highlanders stand firm and do not return fire. Howe has split his men with Col. Elbert with the Georgia Continentals on the left flank and Col. Isaac Huger with the first Carolina Rifles and Thompson's Rangers on the right flank. Farther back and to the right in some houses are Col George Walton and 100 Georgia militia, (about where Liberty and Bull streets currently intersect).

Campbell observed that we were aligned as expecting an attack on our left-- why not there was a seemingly impassable swamp protecting our right flank. -- he maneuvers his men to appear to attack on the left. His artillery is hidden behind a small rise behind his troops. This caused us to open fire on his troops, but the British do not return fire.

Earlier Campbell's troops find a slave Quanimu Dolly or Quash who informs them that there is a path through the seemingly impassable swamp. Campbell is delighted with this intelligence and sends Captain Sir James Baird with the light infantry and the New York Volunteers to follow the slave and attack the first body of troops with whom he comes in contact.

Baird follows the slave and comes out of the swamp at a point where he falls suddenly on Walton's men and sweeps them away

wounding Walton. Baird then turns quickly to the right bringing he and his men on the rear of our lines. Upon hearing Baird's musket fire Campbell brings out his cannon and begins firing. He also orders his troops to advance quickly. We were caught in crossfire.

The Americans are forced to retreat through Savannah and Col. Daniel Roberts is ordered to secure the causeway over Musgrove Creek on the Augusta Road. Huger and many of his men including Howe make it across the causeway, but the British quickly cut it off. Elbert and the men from the left flank are forced to take to the swamps and rice fields. At one point Elbert attempts to break through the British line at the weakest point, but a British shell breaks our formation into a disorganized mess. Many men are bayoneted in the streets of Savannah.

Commodore Parker, learning of the British victory, sails his armed vessels up the river and captures the shipping in the port and now commands the town from the South Carolina side.

The British and Hessians sack the town, bayoneting mattresses to find money and throwing official papers into the streets.

We lost 550 men killed or captured. The British lost 3 killed and 10 wounded.

Light Horse Harry Lee said: "Never has a victory of such magnitude been so completely gained with so little loss."

On the other side Col. Campbell said: "I may venture to say I have ripped one star and one stripe from the rebel flag of America."

Little did he know at the time that William Pitt was right -- We would never lay down our arms -- never -- never -- never!!!