



1781: The Decisive Year of the Revolutionary War

Robert L. Tonsetic

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The Treaty of Paris in 1783 formally ended the American Revolutionary War, but it was the pivotal campaigns and battles of 1781 that decided the final outcome. 1781 was one of those rare years in American history when the future of the nation hung by a thread, and only the fortitude, determination, and sacrifice of its leaders and citizenry ensured its survival.

By 1781, America had been at war with the world's strongest empire for six years with no end in sight. British troops occupied key coastal cities, from New York to Savannah, and the Royal Navy prowled the waters off the American coast. The remaining Patriot forces hunkered down in the hinterland, making battle only at opportunities when British columns ventured near. But after several harsh winters, and the failure of the nascent government to adequately supply the troops, the American army was fast approaching the breaking point. The number of Continental soldiers had shrunk to less than 10,000, and the three-year enlistments of many of those remaining were about to expire. Mutinies began to emerge in George Washington's ranks, and it was only the arrival of French troops that provided a ray of hope for the American cause.

In a shift of strategy given the stalemate between New York and Philadelphia, the British began to prioritize the south. After shattering the American army under Horatio Gates at Camden, South Carolina, the British army under Lord Cornwallis appeared unstoppable, and was poised to regain the Carolinas, Georgia, and Virginia for the Crown. However, when General Nathaniel Greene arrived to take command of Patriot forces in the south, he was able to gradually turn the tables. By dividing his own forces, he forced the British to divide theirs, dissipating their juggernaut and forcing Cornwallis to confront a veritable hydra of resistance.

1781 was a year of battles, as the Patriot Morgan defeated the notorious Tarleton and his Loyal legion at Cowpens. Then Greene suffered defeat at Guilford Courthouse, only to rally his forces and continue to fight on, assisted by such luminaries as Francis Marion, the "Swamp Fox," and "Light Horse Harry" Lee. While luring Cornwallis north, Greene was able to gather new strength and launch a counterattack, until it was Cornwallis who felt compelled to seek succor in Virginia. He marched his main army to Yorktown on the Peninsula, upon which the French fleet, the British fleet, Greene, Washington, and the French army under Rochambeau all converged. On October 19, 1781, Cornwallis surrendered his weary and bloodied army.

In this book, Robert Tonsetic provides a detailed analysis of the key battles and campaigns of 1781, supported by numerous eyewitness accounts from privates to generals in the American, French, and British armies. He also describes the diplomatic efforts underway in Europe during 1781, as well as the Continental Congress's actions to resolve the immense financial, supply, and personnel problems involved in maintaining an effective fighting army in the field. With its focus on the climactic year of the war, 1781 is a valuable addition to the literature on the American Revolution, providing readers with a clearer understanding of how America, just barely, with fortitude and courage, retrieved its independence in the face of great odds.

REVIEWS

"...careful historical writing, very careful, and readers will be informed far more often than they'll be delighted ...there's a reassuring solidity to battlefield analyses made by a historian who's seen actual battlefields. 1781 saw the effective end of large-scale British warring in America, but the principal strength

of Tonsetic's book is that he never takes the victory at Yorktown for granted as so many Revolution writers do; he never writes 'backward' from the surrender of Cornwallis, nor should he: Americans need periodic reminders that they could just as easily have lost"

Open Letters Monthly

"...really clear, vivid writing style...brings just the right amount of human interest into the maneuvering of armies and the machinations of generals by picking out individuals and their actions (sometimes just simple soldiers, not just the great and the good) and timely quotes from accounts of the time. Also, in the manner of a classic Tom Clancy novel (well almost) he knows just when to leave the action in one location to bring the reader up to speed with what is happening elsewhere. ...a very easy to read but did not think that any of the detail or feel of the action was lost. "

Wargamer.com

"...a good story and Tonsetic tells it well...There is always tension in a survey like this about the ratio between the generalities and details. Similarly, in a book about one year of a long war, there is also tension between providing or assuming background knowledge about the historical and strategic setting. Authors grapple with what needs explanation and what the audience should already know. Tonsetic handles these tensions ably. He moves the reader nimbly from broad brush to detailed descriptions...covers matters that full histories of the war ignore or mention only in passing."

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