
LEADERSHIP LESSONS FROM THE PAST: THE ABILITY TO INSPIRE GREATNESS TRANSCENDS TIME

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Great generals are scarce. There are few Morgans to be found.

—Nathanael Greene

A cold winter morning in January 1781 in a cow pasture in the South Carolina backcountry became the setting for one of the most unexpected—and pivotal—battles of the American War for Independence. In less than an hour of intense fighting, Daniel Morgan, in command of the American rebel forces, decisively trounced his opponent, Banastre Tarleton. His victory became known as the American Cannae, for it was the only case of double envelopment in the war. Morgan, with a personal grudge to bear against the British, led a motley mix of Continental soldiers, cavalry, and militia against one of the most feared commanders in the British Army. Morgan's success was due in large part to his personal leadership.

The essential characteristics of a great leader transcend time; the qualities of an exceptional leader that motivates men to achieve seemingly impossible tasks or to triumph over what appear to be insurmountable odds are on display in leaders as diverse as George Washington, Winston Churchill, and Brigadier General Daniel Morgan of the Continental Army. The same characteristics that brought out the best in the men under Morgan's command at the Battle of Cowpens on 19 January 1781 are still effective in the twenty-first century and include the capability to inspire others through a combination of vision, foresight, drive, and adaptability.¹

It is worthwhile to compare the leadership qualities of Morgan and his adversary at the Battle of Cowpens, British Lieutenant Colonel Banastre Tarleton. Before doing so, it is important to define the scope of their command responsibilities and identify which characteristics were most appropriate for that level of authority. Both Morgan and Tarleton were field commanders; neither man was responsible for policy or overarching strategy, the province of political

leaders and senior generals. As field commanders, each man was responsible for a limited level of strategic leadership and for “tactical acumen,” which is defined as “the capability to employ one’s forces in a manner that destroys the enemy’s ability to wage war.”² To succeed in this realm, the leader must clearly understand and communicate goals and objectives and create a sense of vision and mission for his men that ensures they understand the purpose of the actions called for and the end results to be attained. It is critical that the leader gather and act upon sufficient knowledge of his enemy, the prospective battlefield terrain, and his own resources. The leader must prepare as best he can for the conditions he is likely to face in battle and evidence the adaptability and creativity needed to meet challenging and ever-changing conditions. The successful leader translates goals into understandable and achievable objects for his men and does so in such a manner that takes into account their potential as well as their limitations—he takes the measure of the men under his command and assesses both their strengths and weaknesses. Above all, the leader must inspire trust; men will follow a leader who demonstrates integrity, courage, clear thinking, and who has established a reputation for success.

With these standards in mind, pausing for a brief character sketch of both Morgan and Tarleton is in order. By January 1781, Morgan was forty-four years old and had the benefit of an extensive and varied career as a wagoner, soldier, and military leader. As a young man, he participated in the French and Indian War as a teamster serving under British Major General Edward Braddock during Braddock’s ill-fated 1755 campaign



Figure 1 *Daniel Morgan*. Oil on canvas by Charles Wilson Peale, c. 1794.

against the French and their Native American allies. At some point during that earlier war, Morgan gained a cause for his personal hatred of the British; he lashed out in anger at a British officer and in return, received what was then common punishment for such an indiscretion—he was severely whipped. Morgan carried the marks of the lash the remainder of his life.³

When the simmering dispute between Great Britain and her thirteen mainland American colonies broke into armed rebellion on 19 April 1775, the outburst was largely confined to Massachusetts. However, radical Whig elements in the other provinces quickly galvanized support for the beleaguered colony. Militia from other New England provinces raced to assist those already in Massachusetts to surround and besiege the British troops quartered in Boston. Control of the massed militia exceeded the capabilities of the Massachusetts Provincial Congress—and it soon reached out to the men of the Second Continental Congress gathered in Philadelphia for aid. Congress responded by voting to provide funds for the troops and by establishing a structure to govern them, including appointing George Washington as Commander in Chief of the nascent Continental Army. Congress also issued a call for companies of “expert riflemen;” Morgan responded with alacrity, traveling the region near his home in Virginia to raise marksmen.⁴

Morgan and his Virginia riflemen played a significant role in several major Revolutionary War battles, including the rebel invasion of Canada in 1775-1776 and the pivotal Battle of Saratoga in 1777. Early in the war Morgan was reckless and extremely aggressive; in the battle to seize Quebec, he almost singlehandedly drove back the enemy from Quebec’s Lower Town. His headlong attack stalled when he was overruled by other officers and forced to await reinforcements. The moment lost, Quebec was saved for Britain as the British reinforced their weak defensive position and held off the Americans. By 1781, Morgan was already a legend as a fighter and a captain of men in battle, a man whose mettle had been tested. However, his health was failing him, he suffered from severe attacks of sciatica and at the time of Cowpens, even riding his horse at a walk was a pain-filled experience for him.⁵

In 1781, Tarleton was in some ways a younger Morgan although he came from a vastly different social background and upbringing. Like Morgan, he was headstrong and aggressive; he did not, however, have the benefit of Morgan’s years of experience. The son of a wealthy merchant family, he had been raised in affluence and was well educated. He purchased a commission as a Cornet in April

1775 and swiftly rose through the ranks. At the age of twenty-four, Tarleton was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel of the British Legion, a Loyalist regiment raised in New York.⁶

France entered the conflict as an American ally shortly after the Battle of Saratoga, which saw British General John Burgoyne surrender almost six thousand men to the victorious Americans. France's entry significantly changed the nature of the war; Britain was stretched to the breaking point to defend her home islands against possible attack, to protect her rich West Indies islands and her colonial holdings in India and Canada, as well as her strategic positions on Minorca and Gibraltar. Britain re-evaluated her strategy to reclaim the American colonies and looked to the southern colonies, especially South Carolina and Georgia, seeking to regain a foothold. The British were enamoured of the idea that a substantial Loyalist population

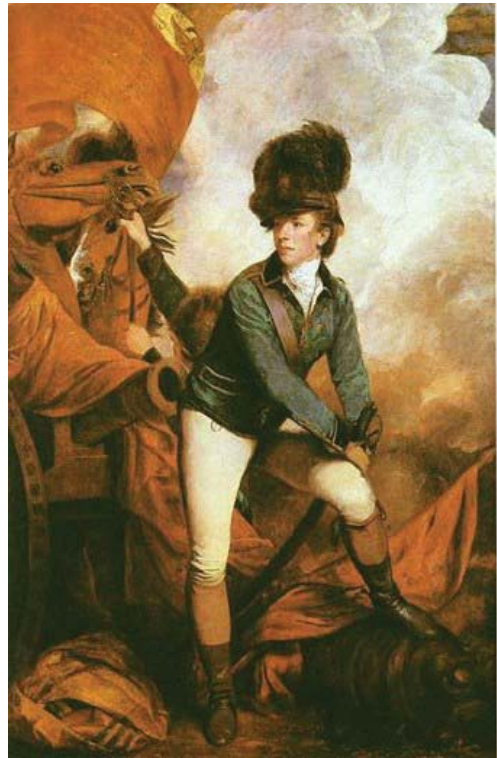


Figure 2 Banastre Tarleton. *Portrait of an Officer*" by Sir Joshua Reynolds. National Gallery, London.

existed in the South and that galvanizing Loyalist support could provide them with men and matériel to overwhelm the southern rebels. The British Loyalist strategy and their Southern Campaign became the central focus of Britain's plan to win the war. The initial results of the British campaign in the South were spectacular. Charleston—the largest and wealthiest city in the South—fell to the British in early May 1780 after a land and sea siege, which devastated Major General Benjamin Lincoln's Continental Army and militia forces. Virtually Lincoln's entire command was trapped in the city and, in surrendering, gave up thousands of men and enormous amounts of weapons and supplies.⁷

In the clean-up efforts after that overwhelming victory, British commander General Charles Lord Cornwallis sent Tarleton to capture a small American rebel

force that had been en-route to aid Lincoln's besieged Charleston troops. Tarleton and his men caught up with Colonel Abraham Buford and his Virginia Continentals at the Waxhaws on 29 May 1780, after a furious race to cut them off from their intended retreat to North Carolina. In the pursuit, Tarleton pushed his men ferociously, covering over one hundred miles in less than fifty-five hours. During the fierce fight that followed, Tarleton's horse was shot out from under him—just as the Americans tried to surrender. Thinking that their commander had been cut down, his men went berserk and bayoneted the Continental soldiers mercilessly, despite their pleas for quarter. As a result of that battle, Tarleton became one of the most infamous and vilified British officers of the American Revolutionary War. His gruesome victory fed the rebel propaganda machine and soon propagated a new rallying cry for the rebels—"Tarleton's quarter," which came to mean no quarter for the British and Loyalist troops.⁸

The incident illustrates that while Tarleton was effective at leading men into battle, as a relatively young and inexperienced commander he sometimes lost control over his men as battle disintegrated into butchery. Tarleton's commander, Cornwallis, was cognizant of the damage caused by the behavior of Tarleton's men to Britain's ability to win the "hearts and minds" of the southern colonists and frequently cautioned Tarleton to exert greater control. Cornwallis sternly warned Tarleton, "I must recommend it to you in the strongest manner to use your utmost endeavors to prevent the troops under your command from committing irregularities."⁹ However, Cornwallis thought highly of Tarleton, describing him as "indefatigably laborious and active, cool and intrepid in action, discerns as by intuition, seizes rapidly, and improves with skill the short, but favorable and decisive moments of victory."¹⁰ Tarleton had leadership talent indeed, but his overall effectiveness was hampered by personality qualities which may or may not have been honed and brought under control through additional age and experience.

It was the newest commander of the Southern Continental Army who set the events in motion that quickly led to the Battle of Cowpens. The fourth commander of the Southern Army, Major General Nathanael Greene, assumed control of a much-reduced and demoralized army on 2 December 1780 at Charlotte, North Carolina, replacing General Horatio Gates—a commander whose folly led to the Patriot loss at the Battle of Camden on 16 August 1780. Like

Lincoln's loss at Charleston, Gates's debacle at Camden cost the rebel cause in the South dearly; it left as many as eight hundred of the Continentals and rebel militia dead and another thousand taken prisoner.¹¹

One of Greene's first decisions was a surprise move—on 16 December 1780, he split his meager force, sending Morgan out with some of the best troops in the Southern Army and ordering Morgan to “proceed to the West side of the Catawba river, where you will be joined by a body of Volunteer Militia.” Greene commanded Morgan to “employ [his force] against the enemy on the West side of the River, either offensively or defensively as your own prudence and discretion may direct, acting with caution, and avoiding surprizes [sic] by every possible precaution.” Greene stipulated that Morgan and his men were to “give protection to that part of the country and spirit up the people—to annoy the enemy in that quarter—collect the provisions and forage out of the way of the enemy.”¹² Greene's move forced Cornwallis to respond in kind; he did so by dispatching Tarleton “with his corps of cavalry and infantry, of five hundred and fifty men, the first battalion of the 71st [Highlanders] consisting of two hundred, and two three-pounders [small artillery] to counteract the designs of General Morgan, by protecting the country, and compelling him to repass [the] Broad river.” Cornwallis directed Tarleton to chase Morgan down, and finding him, to push in to “the utmost.”¹³

True to form, Tarleton set off after Morgan—pushing his men swiftly toward his target. Tarleton wakened his troops in the pre-dawn hours, reportedly at 2:00 a.m. daily, and again took up the pursuit. Morgan and his men were aware of Tarleton's chase; one of Morgan's men described Tarleton's advance as an approaching thunderstorm. The speed of Tarleton's advance limited Morgan's options. He had to find a suitable place to take a stand.¹⁴

Morgan and his adversary, Tarleton, shared some of the same qualities; however, several of the characteristics that clearly set Morgan apart as a resourceful leader were not evidenced by Tarleton. Both Morgan and Tarleton knew the value of acquiring significant intelligence about his adversary; Tarleton “hourly received accounts of the increase of Morgan's corps,”¹⁵ as local militia answered Morgan's call to join his men. In his report to his superior, Greene, Morgan stated “I received regular Intelligence of the Enemy's Movements from the Time they were first in Motion.”¹⁶ Both men knew the importance of choosing the type of terrain most likely to provide tactical advantage. In Morgan's

assessment, his “situation at the Cowpens enabled me to improve any Advantages I might gain, and to provide better for my own Security, should I be unfortunate.”¹⁷ Tarleton reported that his guides were consulted about the ground Morgan had chosen and what lay to his rear and that they “described both with great perspicuity.”¹⁸ Each leader put forth significant efforts to gain the knowledge necessary to prepare for battle. A key difference between the two leaders was the way that each prepared the men that they were to lead into battle. Morgan and his infantry commander, Lieutenant Colonel John Eager Howard, one of the most acclaimed officers in the Continental Army, together with the militia officers on hand, personally rode the Cowpens field to become as familiar as possible with the terrain. Morgan then designed a battle plan that took advantage of the slight elevation changes and that set up three battle lines; the first to be made up of riflemen, a breed of men that Morgan knew well. These sharpshooters were instructed to aim for “the men with the epaulets,” as Morgan knew that bringing down his opponent’s officers would cause confusion in the ranks.²⁰

Morgan’s second battle line would be composed of militia. While Morgan understood that militiamen were frequently unreliable in battle, he also knew how to set the men up for success. Throughout the night of 16 January, militiamen responded to Morgan’s call and came into his camp. Morgan spent the night moving from campfire to campfire to welcome the militia and to tell the nervous men what he expected of them. Morgan joked and quipped with the men, calming and inspiring them. Historian John Buchanan related that Morgan even raised his shirt to show the scars he had received from his scouring at the hands of the British years before.²¹ He gave them specific instructions to get off two rounds of fire,²² then to withdraw. Morgan was well aware that Tarleton and his men would perceive the withdrawal as a sign that they had routed the militia and would charge in to destroy them, as this was Tarleton’s standard battle tactic—one from which he seldom strayed. However, rather than running down panicked militia, Morgan intended that Tarleton would race into a trap, for Morgan’s third battle line was composed of his best men—Maryland and Delaware Continentals, led by the formidable Howard. Morgan held in reserve his ultimate surprise, Continental dragoons commanded by Colonel William Washington together with mounted militiamen, who were concealed from Tarleton’s initial view by a slight dip in terrain elevation.²³

While Morgan had thought out his battle plan well, its success depended

upon the courage of his men to execute it. Morgan did his utmost to prepare his troops mentally and physically for the battle ahead. He ensured that his men were well fed and rested; he personally saw to it that every man understood the role that he was to play in the coming fight and exactly what was expected of him. Morgan reassured his militia and strengthened their resolve; he appealed to the competitive nature of his sharpshooters by calling out “Let me see . . . which are the most entitled to the credit of brave men, the boys of Carolina or those of Georgia.”²⁴ Morgan inspired trust among the men; he did not ask more of his men than he himself was willing to provide. To instill both hope and courage in his men, he spent the night before battle moving about the camp to speak with the men. For the militiamen, especially, he set forth a vision of life beyond the battle ahead, promising that

Washington’s cavalry would protect them and that if they fulfilled their task honorably, they would return to their homes and to the blessings of the old folks and the kisses of the girls “for your gallant conduct.”²⁵

Morgan’s men were as well prepared physically and psychologically as their commander could make them; only the morning would tell if it were enough to withstand Tarleton.

Tarleton’s advance followed his familiar pattern and he approached Morgan’s

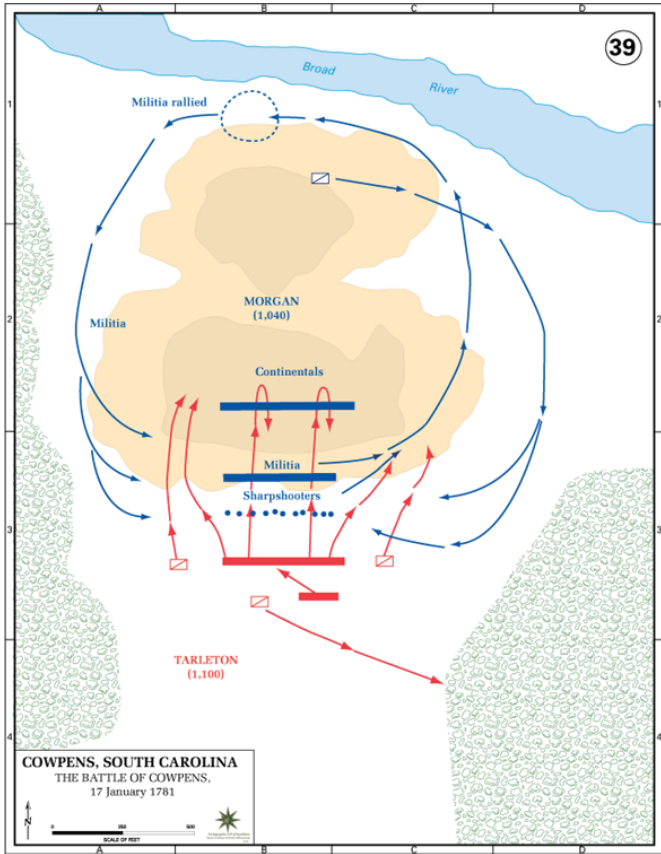


Figure 3 Battle of Cowpens US Military Academy West Point

camp in his typical style—pushing his men hard. Once again they roused at 2:00 a.m. and made a tiresome four hour march before arriving at Cowpens. Neither well-fed nor rested, Tarleton’s troops faced Morgan and his well-prepared men. Morgan’s measures had stripped Tarleton and his men of a key advantage: the element of surprise. In previous engagements, the furious pace that Tarleton set for he and his men often caught their prey off-guard; this was not the case at Cowpens.²⁶ Yet Tarleton had the advantage of well-seasoned troops under his command. Tarleton’s lack of leadership finesse showed in his reliance on “one maneuver, the head-on, slam-bang assault.”²⁷ Thrown off balance by Morgan’s preparations, Tarleton did not adjust. He threw his men into battle before they were organized and prepared. As his plans disintegrated around him, Tarleton called on his reserve—his own Legion dragoons, men he had personally led into numerous battles. Tarleton’s own men “forsook their leader, and left the field of battle.”²⁸

Morgan’s personal leadership, his planning and preparation sealed the victory. He was able to lead a combined group of Continentals and militia together successfully, in a manner that recognized both the strengths and weaknesses of the militia and set them up for success. Tarleton, though he had the better tactical weapon at his command in the person of the British regulars, failed to adjust to the circumstances on the battlefield and could not meet the challenges he faced from Morgan’s tactical genius. The leadership exercised by Daniel Morgan makes the Battle of Cowpens memorable and leads to its use even today by the United States Army as a case study for concepts of leadership on the battlefield.²⁹

Notes

1. “The Battle of Cowpens,” Cowpens National Battlefield, National Park Service, accessed February 15, 2015, <http://www.nps.gov/cowp/historyculture/the-battle-of-cowpens.htm>.

2. Stanley D. M. Carpenter, “British Strategic Failure in the Southern Campaign, 1778-1781.” Naval War College Paper, 2008, 6.

3. Don Higginbotham, *Daniel Morgan: Revolutionary Rifleman* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1961), 4-5.

4. John Ferling, *Almost a Miracle: The American Victory in the War of Independence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 37-43; Higginbotham, *Daniel Morgan*, 22-23.

5. John Buchanan, *The Road to Guilford Courthouse: The American Revolution in the Carolinas* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1997), 276-288; Thomas Fleming, “The Battle of the Cowpens,” *Military History, supplement America’s Great Battles, 1775-2002* (2002): 19, accessed August 27, 2012, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/212663878?accountid=8289>.

6. Buchanan, *Road to Guilford Courthouse*, 60-61.
7. John S. Pancake, *This Destructive War: The British Campaign in the Carolinas, 1780-1782* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1985), 32-35, 63-66.
8. *Ibid.*, 70-71.
9. John Ferling, *Almost a Miracle: The American Victory in the War of Independence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), p 437; Buchanan, *Road to Guilford Courthouse*, 63, 68.
10. Anthony J. Scotti, *Brutal Virtue: The Myth and Reality of Banastre Tarleton* (Bowie, Maryland: Heritage Books, Inc., 2002), 19-20.
11. Pancake, *This Destructive War*, 103-107.
12. Nathanael Greene to Daniel Morgan quoted in Theodorus Bailey Myers, ed., *Cowpens Papers: Being Correspondents of General Morgan and the Prominent Actors* (Charleston: The News and Courier, 1881), 9-10.
13. Banastre Tarleton, *A History of the Campaigns of 1780 and 1781 in the Southern Provinces of North America* (London: Printed for T. Cadell, 1787), 212, accessed February 14, 2015, <http://archive.org/details/historyofcampaig00tarl>.
14. Ferling, *Almost a Miracle*, 481.
15. Tarleton, *A History of the Campaigns*.
16. Daniel Morgan, "Letter to Nathanael Greene, January 19, 1781, Battle of Cowpens," *TeachingAmericanHistory.org*, Ashbrook Center at Ashland University, accessed August 28, 2012, <http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/index.asp?document=886>.
17. Morgan, "Letter to Nathanael Greene."
18. Tarleton, *A History of the Campaigns*, 215.
19. W. J. Wood, *Battles of the Revolutionary War: 1775-1781* (Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 1990) 217-218.
20. *Ibid.*, 217.
21. Buchanan, *The Road to Guilford Courthouse*, 317.
22. Historians differ on the number of shots that Morgan directed the militia to fire before pulling back from Tarleton. In brief research, the author noted a number stating "two" while several others said "three." While not an exhaustive list, those stating "two shots" were John S. Pancake, *This Destructive War: The British Campaign in the Carolinas, 1780-1782* (1985; repr., Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1992), 135; John Buchanan, *The Road to Guilford Courthouse: The American Revolution in the Carolinas* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1997), 317; W. J. Wood, *Battles of the Revolutionary War: 1775-1781* (Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 1990), 217; Christopher Ward, *The War of the Revolution* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1952), 757; Robert Middlekauff, *The Glorious Cause: The American Revolution, 1763-1789* Rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 479; Don Higginbotham, *The War of American Independence: Military Attitudes, Policies, and Practice, 1763-1789* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1971), 366; while those that stated three were John Ferling, *Almost a Miracle: The American Victory in the*

War of Independence (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 481; Lawrence E. Babits, *A Devil of a Whipping: The Battle of Cowpens* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 55; Thomas Fleming "The battle of Cowpens" *Military History, suppl. America's Great Battles, 1775-2002* (2002), 20; Lt. Colonel John Moncure "The Cowpens Staff Ride and Battlefield Tour," *Combat Studies Institute* (January 1996), 38,158; and Benson Bobrick, *Angel in the Whirlwind: The Triumph of the American Revolution* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 429. Given that the time to re-load was not insignificant—the differences noted are surprising.

23. Wood, *Battles of the Revolutionary War*, 217-218.

24. Buchanan, *Road to Guilford Courthouse*, 320.

25. Wood, *Battles of the Revolutionary War*, 219.

26. *Ibid.*, 219-220.

27. Pancake, *This Destructive War*, 133.

28. Wood, *Battles of the Revolutionary War*, 221, 225.

29. Lieutenant Colonel John Moncure, *The Cowpens Staff Ride and Battlefield Tour*, Combat Studies Institute, U. S. Army Command and General Staff College, January 1996.

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