Lord Charles Cornwallis: From Imperial Defeat to Imperial Redemption

HST 318 “Picturing the British Empire” Final Paper

Charles Cornwallis, First Marquis of Cornwallis (1738 - 1805)

By.
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Following his ignominious defeat at the Battle of Yorktown in 1781, Lord Charles Cornwallis’ career in the British Army seemed finished. His surrender to Washington and Rochambeau effectively lost the Thirteen Colonies for the British Empire. Rather than being shunned by the British military establishment, as expected, he was successively appointed to assume command in India and Ireland. His primary task in these restive colonies was to restore imperial power. Cornwallis’ success in performing these tasks not only expanded British power, but also redeemed him personally from his surrender at Yorktown. This essay will use paintings, cartoons, and the monument to him at St. Paul’s Cathedral in London to show his portrayal in both victory and defeat, as well as his progression into the image of imperial “hero,” much like his contemporary Admiral Horatio Nelson.

Cornwallis’ service in the American Revolution started off well enough. At the beginning of 1776 he was put in command of the British forces sent by London to reinforce General Sir William Howe but, due to personal considerations, he gave up his command twice between 1776 and 1779. The death of his wife in early 1779 sees Cornwallis back in America for good. He was tasked with seizing the Southern colonies (North and South Carolina and Georgia) and during “the siege of Charleston, he actually as a volunteer formed one of the storming party.”¹ In fact, until Yorktown, Cornwallis’ campaign in the South seemed to presage an ultimate victory for Britain.²

By late 1780, Cornwallis had subdued and occupied South Carolina and Georgia. “The British secured the ports of Savannah and Charleston, destroyed the main American army at Camden, and garrisoned the South Carolina interior with supply depots...to quickly forward men

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and material to the main field army while it was on campaign.”2 At this point, I don’t believe the Americans felt they could stop Cornwallis, as “Redcoat bayonets dominated the battlefield and Britannia ruled the waves.”3 So, if Cornwallis were to be defeated, he would have to make a mistake. While he proved, time and again, that he was a brave and able battlefield commander and tactician, his Enlightenment-inspired military doctrine “led him to ignore aspects of military intelligence, logistics, and other service-support aspects of war.”4 His tactics did not take logistics or long-distance intelligence gathering efforts into account, and Cornwallis admitted that most of his information came from American civilians, whose loyalties were obviously suspect.5

Cornwallis, like most European generals during this period, focused his strategy and tactics on bringing the enemy to a decisive battle. With South Carolina pacified, Cornwallis decided to seek battle with the Americans (under Generals Nathaniel Greene and Daniel Morgan) in North Carolina. The first clash came at Cowpens on January 17, 1781 and the British force (under Colonel Banastre Tarleton) was defeated. Tarleton lost 110 men killed, 200 wounded, and 702 captured out of 1150 men and he “also lost most of his baggage and both of his artillery pieces.”6 This defeat represented a decisive turning point for both the war and Cornwallis’ fortunes. Stung by his loss of prestige, Cornwallis became set on destroying the Continental Southern Army through an all-out offensive. As such, he “demonstrated a self-destructive obsession during the ensuing campaign with offensive action and a belief in the

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5 Ibid., 135
6 Ibid., 138-139.
power of the “decisive” battle.” Cornwallis’ subsequent pursuit of Greene naturally took his forces away from their supply depots. More importantly, his pursuit played right into Greene’s hands by taking British power away from the Loyalist South. The transition to this mobile warfare was most likely predicated on emotional responses to the defeat at Cowpens but it also highlights how important offensive military action was to Cornwallis, and to the British in general. When the forces finally met at Guilford on March 15, 1781, the British carried the day, and Greene’s army was routed; its supplies seized. At this point, Sir Henry Clinton, the British Commander-in-Chief, ordered Cornwallis to advance to Virginia and fortify himself there (though he would subsequently deny this), setting up the siege at Yorktown.

Though an able commander, Cornwallis’ encirclement in Yorktown reduced him to lethargy. Aside from “shooting starving horses and expelling hungry slaves,” he did little of consequence as the Franco-American ring closed around him. By September 5, 1781, George Washington and the Comte de Rochambeau had closed the British in, and Cornwallis came to believe his only hope was evacuation by the Royal Navy. Unfortunately, the “Royal Navy was in no state to break the French hold on the Chesapeake Bay.”

Unable to escape, but also unable to defeat the numerically superior and ably-led Franco-American forces, Cornwallis eventually surrendered on October 19, 1781. Figure 1 depicts this surrender. Oddly, Cornwallis is depicted as offering his troops up for surrender to the French and Americans. The actual surrender was conducted by Cornwallis’ subordinate, General Charles O’ Hara, as Cornwallis claimed to be ill. I find it telling that Cornwallis is depicted in

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7 Ibid., 140.
8 Ibid., 143.
10 Brendon, *Decline and Fall of the British Empire*, 6.
11 See Appendix A.
12 Brendon, *Decline and Fall of the British Empire*, 4.
Stephenson’s engraving, as this seems to associate him personally with this imperial defeat in the minds of the British public, regardless of what Lord Shelburne and King George III would say later. It’s almost as though the British saw his person as being intertwined with this loss of imperial prestige, whether he was technically the person who offered the surrendered or not. As expected, this image represents the nadir of Cornwallis’ career. It depicts both a personal and imperial defeat as being one. It would be interesting to know how Cornwallis felt as he watched O’ Hara hand over his sword, and how he saw himself proceeding from this dual defeat.

While it may seem natural to assume that Cornwallis’ career of service to the Crown would be finished after Yorktown, this was not the case. In fact, as early as May 1782, Lord Shelburne was suggesting he “…go to India as Governor-General and Commander-in-Chief.” However, at this time, Cornwallis was still an American prisoner-of-war, and even after his release in 1783, political conflicts between Fox and Lord North on one side, and Lord Shelburne and King George III on the other, prevented him from taking office there. It took until May 1786 to get these political problems redressed, and Cornwallis finally set out from England. Since 1782, India had been “…whispering from the shadows, [but] at long last the East beckoned openly.” While civil and commercial reform would be an integral part of Cornwallis’ agenda (and his legacy) in India, it is the wars against Tipoo Sultan, ruler of Mysore, that are of concern to us here. Cornwallis had an immediate understanding of Tipoo’s ambitions due to his intelligence networks (in stark contrast to his Revolutionary War tactics), and realized the threat posed by him.

The first war against Mysore was initially led by General Medows who, like Cornwallis

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13 Seton-Karr, *Rulers of India*, 16.
15 Ibid., 18.
16 Ibid., 122-125.
during his Southern campaign in America, had an utter disregard for the gathering (and uses) of military intelligence. This led to several British disasters and, on December 6, 1789, Cornwallis announced he would lead the invasion of Mysore personally. This campaign was fouled by monsoons, and Cornwallis was forced to retreat. When news of Cornwallis’ defeat, and subsequent retreat, reached Britain there were numerous satirical cartoons released which depicted the public’s view of the defeat.\(^{17}\)

Figure 2a\(^ {18}\) shows the retreat from Tipoo’s capitol, Seringapatam, in a comical light. Cornwallis, hands in the air, is riding away on a goat (?), while Tipoo urinates on him\(^ {d}\) from behind his fortress. The point implicitly being made in this cartoon is that it was cowardice, or incompetence, rather than climatic conditions, which brought about a British defeat in this conflict. Interestingly, this defeat is presented in a much less serious tone than that of Figure 1, suggesting that it was not seen by the British as being decisive. In fact, one could say that Figure 2a is almost making light of the situation with its comical metaphor of Tipoo urinating as representing the monsoon which ultimately drove Cornwallis from Seringapatam. The humorous tone of the cartoon also seems to suggest that Cornwallis will return to exact revenge upon his foe. Also, the tone of the cartoon seems to demonstrate that, unlike the surrender at Yorktown depicted in Figure 1, the retreat from Seringapatam did not tarnish Cornwallis’ reputation.

Cornwallis’ beaten and starved army reached Bangalore, their closest base, on July 11, 1790.\(^ {19}\) The city quickly became the headquarters for a renewed offensive against Tipoo Sultan, and Cornwallis spent several months preparing for it. He conducted surveys of the routes to Seringapatam,\(^ {e}\) and tried to solicit more support from his Indian allies. He also worked rigorously to secure enough supplies for the second invasion of Mysore. Through Herculean

\(^{17}\) Ibid., 150.  
\(^{18}\) See Appendix A.  
\(^{19}\) Wickwire and Wickwire, The Imperial Years, 153.
efforts, he managed to procure “carriages, bullocks, rice, gunny sacks, gunny, arrack, camp equipment, money, guns, and clothing” from Madras. The need to make certain that his supply lines remained unmolested as he marched on Seringapatam forced Cornwallis to seize the series of forts Tipoo had set up on the route to the city. In July 1791, Cornwallis began a systematic attack on the forts seizing some through force, and others through bribery. During December 1791 and January 1792, Cornwallis conducted one final intelligence gathering effort before advancing on Seringapatam. On January 25, 1792, Cornwallis and General Robert Abercrombie (who had also been at Yorktown) along with their Indian allies marched on Tipoo Sultan’s capitol city. By February 11, 1792, Cornwallis and Abercrombie had forced Tipoo and his remaining supporters into Seringapatam and had put the city under siege. How ironic that the besieged at Yorktown now became the besieger at Seringapatam? This time, however, the victory was his and Tipoo Sultan surrendered to Cornwallis on February 24, 1792. One of the terms of surrender was that Tipoo surrender two of his sons (Abdul Kalick and Mooza-ud-Deen) to Cornwallis to ensure his compliance with the peace terms.

Figure 2b describes the taking of Tipoo’s sons by Cornwallis. As expected, Cornwallis is the central figure. He’s portrayed not just as a victorious general, but also as a caring parent taking back charge over his children. There is also a genuine sense of caring for Tipoo’s sons emanating from Cornwallis’ as he takes the hand of one of Tipoo’s sons. Unlike Figures 1 and 2a, Cornwallis is clearly portrayed in this painting as a victor of Empire. There is no hint of comedy in this serious rendering and, much like Figure 1 does with the surrender at Yorktown, I believe this was the piece of art meant to officially depict Cornwallis’ campaign against Tipoo.

20 Ibid., 154-155.
21 Ibid., 156-169.
22 Ibid., 170.
23 See Appendix A.
The obvious divergence between Figure 1 and Figure 2b are the differences in how Cornwallis is portrayed. It appears that Cornwallis had finally redeemed both himself and the British Empire through the victory over Mysore and the reassertion of British power on the Indian subcontinent. The fact that Cornwallis was able to defeat Tipoo through siege tactics, by which he was himself defeated, also provides a personal vindication for Cornwallis, in my opinion. The handing over of Tipoo Sultan’s sons appears to serve as an allegory for a fundamental handing over of power. By offering his sons to Cornwallis, Tipoo was effectively leaving Mysore without rulers to succeed him. Only the British could fill the power vacuum that would develop. Cornwallis left India shortly after his victory at Seringapatam, but no one can deny that British imperial power was more firmly entrenched in India after his departure than before his arrival. This fact is highlighted by Figure 2b, but it also represents both an imperial, and personal, redemption.

Cornwallis’ last service to the British Empire would come in Ireland. Early in 1798, reports reached London “of dangerous unrest in Ireland,” possibly with French political and military aid. 24 The French Revolution had given rise to political unrest all over continental Europe, which also reached Ireland to further stoke the flames of dissent. The refusal of the British to allow Irish Catholics to serve in Parliament, to settle land disputes between Catholics and Protestants, and the failure to relax the penal code made Ireland a very restive colony. 25 On June 10, 1798, King George III personally asked Cornwallis, as he had in the case of India, to assume imperial command. With Ireland in full rebellion, Cornwallis was ordered to perform two tasks: defeat the rebellion and restore British authority, and secure Ireland’s assent to the

25 Ibid., 25.
Union Jack.\textsuperscript{26} He would succeed in one and fail in another, all the while wishing “he was back in Bengal.”\textsuperscript{27} Despite a landing in Ireland by the French under Humbert, Cornwallis was able to press his attack and the French surrendered on September 8, 1798. On October 2, 1798, the bells of St. Paul’s in London sounded victory, as the rebellion had finally been quashed. Cornwallis now set about performing his next task: bringing Ireland into the United Kingdom.\textsuperscript{28} His efforts would fail, however, due to a number of reasons. The Irish Parliament would not sanction union with Britain, nor would the British Parliament allow Catholics into the government. Also, there was bad blood on both sides, with neither willing to compromise. By mid-November 1798, Cornwallis realized he had failed. He soldiered on in Ireland, despite misgivings, finally resigning in May 1801 after William Pitt the Younger was ousted as Prime Minister.\textsuperscript{29}

The man who went to Ireland in July 1798 was full of confidence, energy, and enthusiasm for his new task, as depicted in a portrait painting by John Copley. Figure 3a\textsuperscript{30} shows Cornwallis after his Indian triumph looking both dignified and serene. (This is a far cry from the cowardly man running from “the elements” depicted in Figure 2a.) His attire seems to be a cross between that of a statesman and general, perhaps reflecting a dual perception of him held by the artist, the public, and the Crown around the time the painting was produced (1795). His gaze is reminiscent of that of many other statesmen in that he appears to be gazing into the future or, rather, looking out for it. He’s depicted as a diplomatic hero, it would seem, much like Admiral Horatio Nelson in one of his portraits. Figure 3b\textsuperscript{31} shows Nelson in what also seems to be a cross between civilian and military dress, and both he and Cornwallis proudly sport the Star

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 233, 242. 
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 240 (picture page).
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 326-336.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 340-354.
\textsuperscript{30} See Appendix A.
\textsuperscript{31} See Appendix A.
and Ribbon of the Bath in their respective portraits. Nelson’s gaze is as forward-looking as that of Cornwallis, and one can see obvious parallels in the way each man is depicted. Both have relaxed, almost regal, dispositions and appear to be portrayed as heroes to be emulated. Cornwallis’ service in India and Ireland, where he redeemed both himself and the British Empire, allow for him to be depicted in the same manner as the victor of the Battle of Trafalgar, equating him with Nelson. Figures 3a and 3b both represent imperial heroes at the height of their respective powers and prestige.

Finally, I would like to look at one last monument to Cornwallis and draw conclusions from it. Figure 4 is a statue of Cornwallis at St. Paul’s Cathedral in London. The statue shows Cornwallis, dressed as a Roman general, standing on a column above three other figures (that sitting on the lower-right obviously Indian or Oriental). It’s obvious from the image that Cornwallis is being depicted as a British “Julius Caesar” who conquered or pacified the “barbarians” standing or sitting below him. Completed after his death, this monument represents the way in which Cornwallis had been judged in posterity by the British. It’s obvious that he was seen as a conquering hero after his death. Despite defeat at Yorktown, Cornwallis bounced back and reasserted imperial authority over two of Britain’s most important, and restive, colonies. Figure 4 embodies his personal transition from defeat to ‘hero’ status and also represented an imperial statement. That the man who lost an entire world for the British Empire could come back and redeem himself (and the Empire) made him worthy of such recognition. It may also have reinforced the notion of British exceptionality when they looked at this hero and his talents. In any case, Figure 4 is Cornwallis’ epitaph, and it shows him as the conquering imperial hero that I have argued him to have been.

32 See Appendix A.
Appendix A

Figure 1 - The British Surrendering their Arms to Gen. Washington, 1781
By: James Stephenson after J. F. Renault, ca. 1860
Retrieved from:
Figure 2a - 'The coming-on of the monsoons; - or - the retreat from Seringapatam'
By: James Gillray, December 6, 1791
Retrieved from:

Figure 2b - Lord Cornwallis Receiving Tipu Sahib’s Sons as Hostages at Seringapatam
By: Robert Home, ca. 1793
Retrieved from:
<http://footguards00.tripod.com/09GALLERY/Art/09_cornw-tipu.htm> on April 30, 2011.
Figure 3a - Charles Cornwallis, First Marquis of Cornwallis (1738 - 1805)
By: John Singleton Copley, ca. 1795

Figure 3b - Horatio Nelson, Viscount Nelson
By: Lemuel Francis Abbott, ca. 1797
Figure 4 - Monument to Marquis Cornwallis, South Transept of St. Paul’s Cathedral in London, England
By: John Charles Felix Rossi, ca. 1811.
Charles Heaton asserts, and I agree, that until Yorktown Cornwallis had not made a tactical blunder as defined by the Prussian Carl von Clausewitz. Nor did he fail at “grand tactics,” or the manner in which he configured his army to bring about battle. His failure, it seems, lay in the arena of strategy. See Heaton, *The Failure of Enlightenment Military Doctrine*, p. 125-126.

In February of 1783, the British granted the Americans equal rights with regards to trade with the Empire. However, this concession by Shelburne caused him to be ousted from government, as Charles Fox and Lord North combined to bring him down. The two men then forced themselves into office, much to George III’s chagrin, and this left Cornwallis’ appointment in question. See Wickwire and Wickwire, *The Imperial Years*, p. 8-9.

Cornwallis quickly applied himself to the war, telling Medows how he should have conducted the campaign. “I have…after long & very mature reflections on the safest & most practicable means of invading the Mysore dominions finally resolved to do it by the passes which lead into that country from the center of the Carnatic.” See Wickwire and Wickwire, *The Imperial Years*, p. 137.

Cornwallis did not see this slanderous cartoon when it was published. See Wickwire and Wickwire, *The Imperial Years*, p. 150.

The efforts in intelligence gathering paid off, “for he actually learned in detail Tipoo’s movements and the size and strength of his army, information invaluable to him when he actually moved south for the attack.” See Wickwire and Wickwire, *The Imperial Years*, p. 154.

In July Cornwallis bribed one fort to surrender to him, and by October 18, 1791 he had seized the extremely strong fort of Nundydroog. Next, he moved on to Sevendroog, which seemed unassailable as it sat on a large mountain rock. Cornwallis regardless ordered his engineers to analyze the fort and determine where the best place to mount an attack would be. They reported that the north face was the best option, and the British attacked accordingly. Cornwallis took Sevendroog by late December 1791, and he took the last major fort in his way (Outradroog) by January 1792. See Wickwire and Wickwire, *The Imperial Years*, p. 159-161.

The Mahrattas were non-committal, and their leaders (Hurry Punt and Persem Bhow) blackmailed Cornwallis for their cavalry support. In the end, they gave supplies and conducted raids to draw off some of Tipoo’s forces. The nizam’s cavalry also withheld support, remaining at Bangalore even after Cornwallis seized Sevendroog. When an army from the nizam did arrive, the British were not impressed, describing them as a “disorderly rabble.” It seemed for the best that these dubious allies lagged behind Cornwallis and his approach on Seringapatam. See Wickwire and Wickwire, *The Imperial Years*, p. 162-163.

The first thing the British government did was remove the current viceroy and Commander-in-Chief, John Camden. William Pitt the Younger mentioned Cornwallis to the Cabinet and George III wrote to Windsor himself agitating for Cornwallis to assume command the same day. See Pakenham, *Year of Liberty*, p. 232-233.