What Effect did the Battle of Cowpens Have on the American Revolutionary War?

Word Count: 1,912
A. Plan of Investigation

On January 17, 1781, almost 2,000 American militia and regulars under the command of Colonel Daniel Morgan defeated a British force of about 1,100 under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Banastre Tarleton in an engagement known as the Battle of Cowpens. The question, though, is what effect did the Battle of Cowpens have on the American Revolutionary War? To answer this, this investigation will analyze the progress of the British Southern Campaign before the battle, Morgan’s strategy during the battle and its effect, Lord Cornwallis’ response to the battle, and the implications of those decisions made by Cornwallis. Throughout this investigation, I will analyze various sources, including secondary sources from the mid 19th Century to the present.

B. Summary of Evidence

1). The American South before the Battle:

- “With Lieutenant General Lord Charles Cornwallis as his second-in-command, Clinton sailed on December 26 with 8,500 troops toward Charleston. He landed on February 11 and commenced siege operations on March 29” (Nelson Online).
- “[Tarleton] pursued, caught, and annihilated the second of three small organized American forces remaining in South Carolina, Colonel Abraham Buford’s Virginia Continentals, at Waxhaws on May 29” (Griffith 592).
- “[Tarleton's Legion] wantonly cut down [American soldiers] who had appealed for quarter” (Griffith 592).
- “[On the British victory at Camden]…never was a victory more complete” (Cust 254).
• “Cornwallis divided his army in response to Greene's detaching of 800 men under Brigadier General Daniel Morgan to threaten the British army's left flank. Cornwallis sent Tarleton and his Legion against Morgan…” (Nelson Online).

2). The Battle of Cowpens:

• “The American commander showed no common ability and judgment in the disposition of his force” (Cust 264).

• Morgan positioned his men in accordance to Sun Tzu’s concept of “death ground” (“In difficult ground, press on; On hemmed-in ground, use subterfuge; In death ground, fight.”) (Griffith 622).

• “‘When men are forced to fight, they will sell their lives dearly…”” (Carrington 543)

• “Morgan placed more than 300…riflemen on the rising ground as skirmishers. About 150 yards behind the skirmishers, Pickens commanded a battle line of about 1,000 militiamen…on the reverse slope of a slightly higher ridge that hid many from British scouts. A third line farther down the slope was composed of…Continents” (Babits Online).

• “The militia line of the enemy were little capable of sustaining the impetuosity of such assailants, and were soon broken, routed, and scattered on every side” (Cust 264).

• “The British troops taking the whole movement as assurance of easy victory advanced rapidly, with shouts, only to find themselves confronted by the main body, which received them without flinching” (Carrington 544).

• “…a fierce Patriot bayonet charge in return broke the British charge and turned the tide of battle” (National Park Service Online).
• “Total British casualties were over 800. American losses were approximately 25 killed and 125 wounded” (Babits Online).

3). The Effects of the Battle:

• “Attempting to recapture the prisoners taken by Morgan, Cornwallis burned his wagon train and pursued Morgan and Greene across North Carolina” (Babits Online).

• “Returning to Guilford Courthouse, he [Greene] fought Cornwallis' army employing with some success, Morgan's tactics at Cowpens” (National Park Service Online).

• “…Cornwallis…decided to withdraw to Wilmington, North Carolina, to resupply his army. Later he decided to march northward into Virginia” (Nelson Online).

• “On October 18, 1781, the British army surrendered at Yorktown” (National Park Service Online).

C. Evaluation of Sources

One of the sources I examined throughout my investigation was a book entitled The War for American Independence: From 1760 to the Surrender at Yorktown in 1781 by Samuel B. Griffith II. The book was published in 2002 by the University of Illinois Press. The author, Samuel B. Griffith II., served in the U.S. Marine Corps from 1929-1956 and saw action in World War II. During his service, Griffith was awarded the Navy Cross, the Distinguished Service Cross, and the Purple Heart. In Griffith’s own words, the reason he wrote this book was “to attempt to place the American struggle for independence in the context of the period in which it took place.” The value of this book is the fact that it was written by a man with military experience. His knowledge of military strategy and tactics give a good perspective as to the impact of battles like the Battle of Cowpens. One limitation of this source is that it
was written by an American, suggesting there may be bias. He may distort the significance of some events due to his national pride.

Another source I examined was a book entitled *Annals of the Wars of the Eighteenth Century, Compiled from the Most Authentic Histories of the Period* by Sir Edward Cust, 1st Baronet. The book was published in 1858 by Mitchell’s Military Library, London. The author, Sir Edward Cust, was a former British military officer and Member of Parliament. In the words of the author, Cust wanted his book to have a “degree of usefulness in military and civil education.” As with the source above, this source is valuable in that it was written by a man with military service, meaning his perspectives on the tactics, strategies, and impacts of the Battle of Cowpens will be useful. A limitation, though, is the fact that this book was written by a British military officer in the mid-19th Century. The author shows his a bias against Britain’s enemies, including the Americans during the American Revolution. Cust often refers to them as “the enemy.”

D. Analysis

In an attempt to break the stalemate that was the American Revolution in 1780, the British began an invasion of the Southern American colonies with the capture of Charleston, South Carolina by Sir Henry Clinton (Nelson Online). With this move, not only was Clinton able to damage severely the organized American military force in the South, but he also captured the largest port in the South. In an attempt finish off American resistance in the Charleston area, Clinton let loose Lieutenant Colonel Banastre Tarleton, who on May 29, engaged American forces in the Battle of Waxhaws. After the battle, according to many reports, “[Tarleton’s Legion] wantonly cut down [American soldiers] who had appealed for quarter” (Griffith 592). Tarleton’s massacre of surrendering troops, which would later be
called “Tarleton’s Quarter,” would become a rallying cry for American forces later in the war.

Things went from bad to worse for the Americans in the South. Shortly after his victory at Charleston, Clinton gave command of operations over to his second in command, Lord Charles Cornwallis. With his new command, Cornwallis continued to push deeper into South Carolina. In an attempt to stop him, General Horatio Gates, the Hero of Saratoga, was sent to do the job. On August 16, 1780, Cornwallis’s army soundly defeated Gates’s at the town of Camden; as described by British military historian Sir Edward Cust, “...never was a victory more complete” (254). The reason why the Battle of Camden was one of the worst defeats in American military history was the fact that Gates tried to engage Cornwallis in the typical 18th Century style of warfare in which one side faces the other in an open field in a tight formation and fires volley after volley of musket fire into the opposition. With his inferior militia force that would often run away after only receiving a few volleys, Gates was doomed from the start. With no opposition, Cornwallis began his invasion of North Carolina.

After Camden, Gates was replaced by General Nathanael Greene. Greene, realizing that he could not win in a pitch battle as Gates had attempted to do, began a war of attrition against the British. Rather than engage Cornwallis outright, Greene would use guerrilla-style hit-and-run tactics to bleed the British out. As part of this strategy, Greene gave a detachment of about 800 men to “Brigadier General Daniel Morgan to threaten the British army's left flank. Cornwallis sent Tarleton and his Legion against Morgan” to eliminate the threat (Nelson Online).
With Tarleton in hot pursuit, Morgan decided to make a stand at an area known as the Cowpens, just south of the North Carolina/South Carolina Border. The ground had two hills, one behind the other and wooded areas on the flanks. With the Broad River behind the second hill, there was no way for his army to escape; the ground can be likened to Sun Tzu’s concept of “death ground” (“In difficult ground, press on; On hemmed-in ground, use subterfuge; In death ground, fight.”) (Griffith 622). In Morgan’s own words, “‘when men are forced to fight, they will sell their lives dearly…”” (Carrington 543).

Morgan then proceeded to place his forces “[showing] no common ability and judgment” (Cust 264). “Morgan placed more than 300…riflemen on the rising ground as skirmishers. About 150 yards behind the skirmishers, Pickens commanded a battle line of about 1,000 militiamen… [hidden] from British scouts. A third line…was composed of…Continents” (Babits Online). The idea behind this formation played off lessons learned from the Battle of Camden. With militia out front, when the British attacked, they would retreat almost immediately. With this, the British would advance, thinking they’ve won the day, and then the main American force of regular troops would attack the British, catching them by surprise. The battle went exactly according to plan.

When the British attacked, “the militia line of the enemy [Americans] were little capable of sustaining the impetuosity of such assailants, and were soon broken, routed, and scattered on every side” (Cust 264). With this, “the British troops taking the whole movement as assurance of easy victory advanced rapidly, with shouts, only to find themselves confronted by the main body, which received them without flinching” (Carrington 544). After fierce combat, the British retreated. Many Americans gave British soldiers Tarleton’s Quarter.
“Total British casualties were over 800. American losses were approximately 25 killed and 125 wounded” (Babits Online).

The Battle of Cowpens virtually turned the tide of the war in the south in favor for the Americans. Deep in enemy territory with little supplies as a result of an ill-fated pursuit by Cornwallis of “Morgan and Greene across North Carolina,” the British began to move to the coast to resupply (Babits Online). Along the way, Greene’s forces would engage Cornwallis in a strategy of, in his own words, “…fight, get beaten, rise, and fight again.” In many battles, like the pyrrhic British victory at Guilford Courthouse, Greene “[employed], with some success, Morgan's tactics [from] Cowpens” (National Park Service Online).

“Cornwallis…decided to withdraw to Wilmington, North Carolina, to resupply his army. Later he decided to march northward into Virginia” (Nelson Online). Cornwallis eventually found himself at Yorktown, where he was later defeated by a Franco-American force under the command of George Washington (National Park Service Online).

E. Conclusion

As a direct result of the American victory at Cowpens, the British were forced to move towards the Atlantic Coast to resupply in order to continue their campaign. It was when the British army was waiting for supplies at the small Virginia port of Yorktown that Washington and his forces were able to trap Cornwallis. After a nearly month long siege, Cornwallis was forced to surrender. It was with this surrender that effectively ended the Revolutionary War. Had the Americans under Daniel Morgan not been able to achieve victory on that January morning in 1781, it is safe to say that the American War for Independence would have been prolonged or even lost.
Works Cited


