

# MARINE CORPS HISTORY

VOLUME 11, NUMBER 2

WINTER 2025/26



# BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

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*A Revolutionary Army and Its Officers: Washington's Revolutionary War Generals.* By Stephen R. Taaffe. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2019. Pp. 360. \$39.95, cloth; \$32.95, e-book.)

*The Road to Yorktown: The French Campaigns in the American Revolution, 1780–1783.* By Louis-François-Bertrand du Pont d'Aubevoye, comte de Lauberdère, edited and annotated by Norman Desmarais. (El Dorado Hills, CA: Savas Beatie, 2021. Pp. 312. \$11.99, cloth; \$12.99, e-book.)

*No Turning Point: The Saratoga Campaign in Perspective.* By Theodore Corbett. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2012. Pp. 438. \$24.95, paperback; \$21.95, e-book.)

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Even the greatest generals need good lieutenants. In *Washington's Revolutionary War Generals*, Professor Stephen R. Taaffe investigates the biographies and actions of the senior officers who helped make George Washington's Revolutionary War Continental Army what it was.

One reason that the American War of Independence is an anomaly in U.S. military history was the selection of the Continental generals by the Congress, rather than by the Congress-appointed commander. During that war, Congress, which also served in the role of government, appointed 73 major and brigadier generals to serve in its various departments and field armies. The author's disappointed conclusion is that their performance was, for the most part, mediocre. The main reason for this mediocrity was the British military's avoidance of assigning colonists to high-level commands, preventing colonists from gaining command-level experience. Second, and perhaps more important, the colonists regarded a permanent army as a threat to civilian rule and liberty.

Consequently, prior to 1775, the different American colonies were content to depend on their local militias for defence. As another consequence, when

war broke out, Congress looked to the colonial upper class for its Continental Army generals rather than militia leaders. But as observed by John Adams: "A colonel is killed in New Hampshire. The next colonel in the American army to replace to him is in Georgia. Must we send the colonel from Georgia to command the regiment in New Hampshire?" (p. 45). Seniority, Adams concluded, had its place, but was hardly foolproof.

Another pool of officers consisted of the Europeans who crossed the Atlantic to offer their services. Many of them were adventurers, of whose quality and reliability most of Congress had little or no inkling.

So who, ultimately, were Washington's best generals? The author mentions the aggressive Benedict Arnold, long before his act of betrayal; John Glover, whose boatmen saved the Continental Army from destruction at Long Island and conveyed it across the Delaware River to victory at Trenton; the western-Virginia rifleman Daniel Morgan; John Stark, Vermont-born victor at Bennington; Anthony Wayne, who backed his "mad" attacks with careful planning beforehand; Nathanael Greene, loser of battles and winner of campaigns; French volunteer Gilbert de Motier, marquis de Lafayette; talented artilleryist Henry Knox; and master instructor Friedrich Wilhelm Freiherr von Steuben. One common factor among these individuals was that they were all relatively young and prepared to think outside of the box.

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Thomas Zakharis was born in Thessaloniki, Greece, and is an enthusiast of history, particularly of the Napoleonic era. He is the author of many book reviews on this and other subjects in several journals. For his writings about the Napoleonic era, he was decorated by the president of the International Napoleonic Society.

*Washington's Revolutionary War Generals* takes an approach that is likely to satisfy scholars of the period.

In recent years, historians have been turning their attention to the diaries of soldiers and officers as valuable research resources, including Professor Norman Desmarais. In *The Road to Yorktown*, he turns to the translated diary of Louis-François-Bertrand du Pont d'Aubevoye, comte de Lauberdière, aide-de-camp to and nephew of Lieutenant General Jean-Baptiste Donatien de Vimeur, comte de Rochambeau.

It is ironic that by 1780, the royalist and aristocratic French were helping the American Patriots, many of whom had fought against them during the previous war in North America. In any case, it is now generally agreed that without the help of their army and fleet, the American cause would eventually have been lost, notwithstanding the command capabilities of General Washington.

The young comte watched the Americans from the eye of a French aristocrat and wrote down many intriguing personal observations. However, in his capacity as aide-de-camp, the comte de Lauberdière recorded more pertinent details, including of the Anglo-French campaigns, such as the exact places where the French expeditionary force landed in America. In both technical and human respects, this book should add an invaluable firsthand account to any student of the American Revolutionary War.

In *No Turning Point: The Saratoga Campaign in Perspective*, historian Theodore Corbett contradicts one of the established notions regarding the American Revolutionary War. To cite just one example, Sir Edward S. Creasy's monumental book *The Fifteen Decisive Battles of the World from Marathon to Waterloo* rated the Saratoga Campaign of 1777 as 13th. Corbett sets out to prove that conventional wisdom wrong.

First, the author sets that stage with the region's development as a colony. After the Seven Years' War, waves of European immigrants (from Germany, England, Scotland, and Ireland), plus colonists from New Hampshire and Massachusetts, began to settle in the

sparsely populated Hudson Valley and in the territory around Albany, New York. Those settlers from different countries and different religious doctrines usually became farmers, eventually adding lumber mills and sawmills that were usually operated by Black slaves. While the local fur trade remained in the hands of old Anglo-Dutch families, the new colonists added a fresh process of capitalist development. When the German mercenary soldiers of Lieutenant General John Burgoyne's army marched into the territory, they were impressed with the prosperous appearance of the farms and the houses they saw, inducing many to desert or, after being taken prisoner, choosing to settle in the area themselves.

According to Corbett, Burgoyne's greatest failure came when he organized the Loyalists into corps for military action. Another mistake was the use of Native Americans, such as the Mohawk, whose often indiscriminate raiding terrified both Loyalist and Patriot alike.

Although he does not regard the Battle of Saratoga as a pivotal American victory, the author does regard General Sir Guy Carleton's naval victory on Lake Champlain in October 1776 as the most strategic victory of the Revolutionary War, since it gave the British control of the invasion route from Canada to Saratoga, for the rest of the conflict. From 1778 to 1782, the British would launch continual forays into New York and Vermont.

Going beyond his appraisal of the Saratoga campaign, Corbett also describes a virtual civil war going on within the American struggle for independence from Britain. For example, he notes the Vermont assembly, which succeeded in gaining a separate free trade agreement with Canada from the British Government in May 1790, while ignoring the other states. Scholars interested in examining a different perspective on the birth pangs of the modern American nation and the difficult process by which its states became united will find *No Turning Point* intriguing food for thought.