A BRIEF COMPARISION OF THE LEADERSHIP STYLES OF NATHANIEL GREENE AND WILLIAM HOWE

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When considering leadership strategies of those participating within a conflict, the background, and personal experiences of the leader under focus have often been noted to influence their development. The analysis provided in this research paper intends to give a brief overview of both these items regarding American Major General Nathanial Greene and British Commander-in-Chief William Howe. Its intent is to better glimpse the underlying approaches and foundations of the strategies employed by both individuals within the context of their participation in the American Revolution.

Nathaniel Greene was an American Major General who served under General George Washington. Born in Rhode Island, Greene grew up curious and took to reading to expand his abilities and knowledge, eventually amassing 250+ volumes within his private library.[1] This collection introduced Greene to numerous topics, including classical literature, law, math, and, most importantly – military history. This last genre would give him insight into many different types of military strategy employed in many different battle scenarios throughout the global historical record.

With the breakout of hostilities at the American Revolution's opening, Greene quickly found himself advancing through the new locally organized militia and subsequent Continental Army established by Congress utilizing the knowledge and organizational skills he had gained through his years of study. Eventually becoming second-in-command of the American forces under General George Washington, Greene was noted to be a competent and organized leader who could be counted upon. Occasionally unsuccessful in his strategic decisions he nevertheless wholeheartedly developed and evolved these strategies to support both his military superior and

[1] Gerald Carbone. *Nathanial Greene – A Biography of the American Revolution* (New York: Palgrave Macmillian, 24 June 2008), 6.

the overall American military war agenda.[2] However, it was during his tenure as Commander of the Southern Department of the Continental Army where he would also illustrate his penchant to take risks or fight utilizing unconventional tactics when he deemed them worthwhile. Perhaps the most well-known example of this behavior occurred with Greene's division of forces while engaging Cornwallis' troops which resulted with a major American victory at the Battle of Cowpens in 1781.[3] He would continue to use this strategy throughout his future confrontations with Cornwallis eventually gaining the respect of his adversary.

On the British side of things, William Howe was a British Army officer who eventually rose to the rank of Commander-in-Chief overseeing the English land forces in North America. Born to an elite family with extensive connections, Howe was raised in an affluent environment and entered military service at a young age like much of his family had before. Over the course of his career, Howe fought bravely and steadily rose through the ranks because of his actions, particularly during his first assignment to North American during the Seven Years War. This was followed by additional examples of honorable behavior and leadership off the coast of France and in Havana until his achievements resulted in his eventual promotion and reassignment to North America. Many within and without the British military considered Howe to be one of the best officers the British Army had ever produced.

At first glance, Howe would seem to be a perfect candidate to command troops against the inexperienced and untrained colonists. However, unlike the American General Nathaniel Greene, Howe had not undertaken the study of military strategy and had gained promotion mostly through his acts of valor. Furthermore, evidence suggests that he did not consider the

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[2] Ibid, 78.

[3] Ibid, 163-167.

militias of the colonists to represent a real threat or believe that American military leadership should be considered legitimate. This can be inferred with his letter to George Washington upon his arrival in New York addressed as if written to a private gentleman rather than a leader of military forces.[4] When this lack of knowledge combined with his inability to adapt to the ever-changing conditions of war and his inability to "think outside the box", it resulted in British losses, which in turn led to a loss of confidence in his ability to command. In addition, these losses bolstered French opinion on the chances of American success in their bid for independence and they responded by aligning with the colonists. This chain of events led to Howe's eventual replacement due to his failure to move beyond the thinking of a tactical soldier to those of a strategic planner.[5]

As evidenced by the brief overview presented above, both Nathaniel Greene and William Howe were complicated and intelligent individuals influenced by their experiences, educations, and the attitudes of the time in which they lived. Although both had their fair share of failures and successes; their code of ethics and morality, fueled by the attitudes and ideologies of their vastly different home environments, helped develop each general's individual leadership style (or lack thereof).

Greene was able to apply the lessons he had learned through his experiences and studies to current military environments and situations. He was able to grasp an understanding of the effect on morale and efficiency that continued harassment via unconventional tactics could have

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[4] Library of Congress. *The American Revolution*. (George Washington's Papers Collection, Accessed 18 October 2020), https://www.loc.gov/collections/george-washington-papers/articles-and-essays/timeline/the-american-revolution/

[5] Brian McHugh. *Sir William Howe: A Study in Failed Strategic Leadership* (Master's Thesis, Defense Technical Information Center, March 2013), 10.

upon the enemy's forces. He would continue to learn and study from military engagements occurring in real-time.

Despite Howe's immense bravery on the battlefield, he had not been exposed to similar information on military strategy in his youth nor during his military career. His experience concerning military strategy had only occurred during battle engagements occurring within his time in service. This resulted in his not being able to successfully navigate the transition in thinking from that of a tactical soldier operating in a limited environment into that of a strategic planner necessary to oversee an entire frontline offensive. Although competent in field operations, he was simply trapped in a mindset brought about by the very connections, privilege, and traditions he had been raised and served by. In essence, he had been locked into a "tunnel-vision" of sorts by his own military limited experiences.

When comparing these individuals against one another, it becomes evident that both were exceptional military leaders. But observations can be made regarding both the adherence to traditional ideologies, experiences, and routines, as well as the impact of environment upon a person and his way of leading.

Bibliography

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