



## Washington's General: Nathanael Greene and the Triumph of the American Revolution

*Terry Golway*

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**Washington's General: Nathanael Greene and the Triumph of the American Revolution** Terry Golway  
**The overlooked Quaker from Rhode Island who won the American Revolution's crucial southern campaign and helped to set up the final victory of American independence at Yorktown**

Nathanael Greene is a revolutionary hero who has been lost to history. Although places named in his honor dot city and country, few people know his quintessentially American story as a self-made, self-educated military genius who renounced his Quaker upbringing—horrifying his large family—to take up arms against the British. Untrained in military matters when he joined the Rhode Island militia in 1774, he quickly rose to become Washington's right-hand man and heir apparent. After many daring exploits during the war's first four years (and brilliant service as the army's quartermaster), he was chosen in 1780 by Washington to replace the routed Horatio Gates in South Carolina.

Greene's southern campaign, which combined the forces of regular troops with bands of irregulars, broke all the rules of eighteenth-century warfare and foreshadowed the guerrilla wars of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. His opponent in the south, Lord Cornwallis, wrote, "Greene is as dangerous as Washington. I never feel secure when I am encamped in his neighborhood. He is vigilant, enterprising, and full of resources." Greene's ingenious tactics sapped the British of their strength and resolve even as they "won" nearly every battle. Terry Golway argues that Greene's appointment as commander of the American Southern Army was the war's decisive moment, and this bold new book returns Greene to his proper place in the Revolutionary era's pantheon.

"Washington said if he went down in battle, Greene was his choice to succeed him. Read this book and you will understand why." -- Joseph J. Ellis, author of *His Excellency: George Washington*

## Washington's General: Nathanael Greene and the Triumph of the American Revolution Details

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## **From Reader Review Washington's General: Nathanael Greene and the Triumph of the American Revolution for online ebook**

### **Lauralie says**

Nathanael Greene was a footnote or short paragraph in a few of the books I read (John Adams and 1776) in an attempt to better understand the Revolutionary War and the men who shaped the United States. He was an ordinary man with a limp who lived in an extraordinary time. I believe that some men are great and others have greatness pushed upon them. Greene had both. He gave everything for the cause in which he believed, even paying for supplies for his men at great personal expense. He was a patriot in every sense of the word. He died before he could reach the fame of a political career, though, I am sure he would have been a part of Washington's cabinet if he had lived. He was dedicated, honorable and served with all he had, thus it is no surprise that he was one of Washington's most trusted generals. The fact that he was buried in an unmarked grave saddens me, but such was the time in which he lived, it was a harsh time and many paid the price for freedom with their lives. Greene lived to see the end of the war, but not long enough to see the people's government that would stand in its place. This book was well written, a quick read, historical and accurate. It gives a perspective of the southern campaign and the futility of a revolution. Many times I wondered, how in the world are they going to win this thing? It was a different concept of war to realize that you could win by a series of well placed retreats. Nathanael Greene whose military knowledge came from books rose to the occasion and led a cause, that seemed to be failing, to victory. I left this book thinking how unfair that he did not get his due in history, but I am glad that I came to know him. I respect him. I admire him. He was a true revolutionary.

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### **Laura says**

I love me some Nathanael Greene. There's something about him that's always drawn me to him. Born and raised a Quaker in Rhode Island, he eschewed his rigid religious upbringing to join the Rhode Island militia. Despite a limp and asthma, at the ripe old age of 33, he found himself a brigadier general in the Continental Army, going from private to general overnight. Literally. (Such was the state of the Continental Army.) Highly esteemed and trusted by General Washington, Greene was part of almost every major battle of the Revolution. He was sent south in 1780 as the third commander of the southern army after the Americans were thrashed at Camden. Though all his southern engagements were either tied or lost, he managed to beat the British back to Charleston and was at least partially responsible for Cornwallis eventually seeking refuge in the ill-fated Yorktown. Nathanael Greene and his literal ragtag army saved the south during the American Revolution and thus, the Revolution itself.

Edit: Imagine my shock when two weeks after reading the book and writing the above review, I discovered I am in fact related to Nathanael Greene. He's basically a cousin. That explains so much..

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### **Alex Bauer says**

Great info on a person I've been wanting to know more about, but the writing makes this read a sludge.

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**Brady Nelson says**

Excellent read. I personally wish it had condensed the amount of time spent talking about his time in the North, his time as quartermaster, and his personal character, and spent more time going into more detail about his Southern strategies. His Southern campaign is a small section towards the end of the book. Still very well done and I very much enjoyed it.

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**North Landesman says**

Solid book. Good read, solid use of sources. Short and easy to read.

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**Coleen says**

Well written history of the part that Nathanael Greene played in the American Revolutionary War. I was taking lots of notes for the first third of the book, which slowed me down. When I decided I already had plenty of material for our book discussion, I put the notes away and sped through the rest of the book. I admit that two-thirds of the way through, I was anxious about who was going to win the war: the British or the colonists. But I was realistic enough to know somehow 'America' won.

Golway is a good writer and did his research well enough to provide a lot of documentation for his book material. It was a very different approach for me in viewing our country's early (although not the very earliest) history. And it was surprising how little some of our politicians and leaders have changed over the years; i.e. Congress.

Definitely, I would read other historical books by Golway.

I needed to put the book on Hold to secure a copy, and I am immediately returning it so that another reader will have the opportunity to do so.

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**Renn Daniels says**

Washington's best general and closet confidant. A master of men and the battlefield, what Knox did with artillery, Greene championed with men and strategy.

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**Chris says**

I've been fascinated with Nathanael Greene since I was very young. He was an interesting person in himself, but what interests me even more is that he never got credit for the influence he had, not just on the outcome of the Revolution, but on military strategy and doctrine.

Greene grew up in a Quaker family in Rhode Island. His father didn't believe in anything like a liberal education, so anything Greene learned that wasn't written in the bible, he taught himself. He was particularly interested in military history and strategy, and in 1774, he joined the New Hampshire militia. It says something about mobilization for that war, and something about Greene, that within two years year he went from being a private in a state militia to a major general in the Continental Army. But he got Washington's attention and became one of his favorites.

Greene had some moderate success as a strategist during the early years of the war, but really won Washington's favor by keeping the army clothed and fed as its quartermaster through Valley Forge and some incredibly lean years. What he really wanted though, was a field command, and he continually reminded Washington of this. But Washington needed an opportunity to give him one.

By the summer of 1780, the Continental Army in the South was under the command of Horatio Gates, an ambitious general who disliked George Washington and thought he wasn't suited to be the commander in chief. Gates thought he himself should have the job. It didn't help Gates' case when he led the army into a disastrous battle at Camden, South Carolina, in which they were nearly annihilated. Gates was relieved of his command, and Washington sent Greene to lead what remained of the southern army.

The idea was to somehow wrest control of Georgia and the Carolinas away from the British. But there was no way Greene would be able to accomplish this in open battle, when they were outnumbered nearly 7 to 1, had little artillery and not enough horses and were in relatively hostile territory, since the South was known for having a higher ratio of loyalists. So Greene maneuvered, constantly on the move, crisscrossing through the South, getting the British to chase him, occasionally turning to fight them, but then quickly abandoning the field once he had harangued the British enough.

Greene came to the realization that the war didn't have to be about taking and controlling territory. He instead chose to make sure that every time his army made a stand and the British chased them off, it was at a huge cost to the British. They could have the land. Greene's campaign included three major battles, at Cowpens, Guilford Courthouse and Eutaw Springs, and technically, Greene lost every one of them. But in the end, the British expended so much energy chasing him and his tiny army, that they had effectively given up control of the South simply because they weren't there. And they were so exhausted and depleted from the chase, and from the cost of driving Greene off those battlefields, that they chose to hole up far away in Virginia, at Yorktown. There, they were surrounded by Washington's army from the north, hemmed in by the French fleet off the coast, and the entire British Southern army surrendered. It effectively ended the war.

In reality, what Greene conducted was an insurgency, and the British never figured out how to deal with it. It didn't come down to territory or positioning, it came down to the fact that Greene dictated the terms of engagement, and the British let him. The British were willing to give up a thousand soldiers in order to gain the field at Guilford Courthouse. Greene was willing to give up the field at Guilford Courthouse at the cost of a thousand British soldiers. The British general, Cornwallis, who was considered their best strategist, played right into his hands. He maneuvered Cornwallis all over the south, led him away from the territory he was there to secure and into the territory from which he never escaped. It was incredibly dramatic, and it was truly brilliant.

And yet, very few people in the United States know who Nathanael Greene was. Part of that is a general lack of knowledge of our own history, and part of it is the fact that Greene never got his due. He wasn't a politician, he died young and wasn't really a part of the administration of the United States after the war. He went pretty quietly. But his contribution was one of a few fundamental elements that affected the way that war went, at a time it could have gone either way. I would love to see more research and more writing done

on who he was and what he did.

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### **Sarah says**

A succinct, well-written biography; one that is a bit on the short side, but better than one of excess chaff.

The author takes a balanced look at Nathanael Greene, presenting his flaws alongside his skills and triumphs. He manages to present necessary information about the various battles and skirmishes of the Revolutionary War without going on too long, and provides the necessary background and context without getting sidetracked.

My biggest critique would be that the ending of the book is rather abrupt; I realize Greene's death was itself rather abrupt, but it would have been nice to get a bit more of an epilogue wrapping everything up.

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### **Andrew says**

Most people do not know who Nathanael Greene was or the amount that he contributed to America's independence from Great Britain. He was one of Washington's generals, but was overshadowed by Horatio Gates and Henry Knox. Golway makes Greene very relatable to the reader as somebody who was truly human. He walked with a limp, but through hard work, rose through the ranks to become one of Washington's most trusted generals.

When looking at somebody like Nathanael Greene, it is important to discuss, much like JQA, where he came from and why his role was significant. In this book, Golway showed me that it is not only important to do those two things, but find common ground between your subject and your reader. If this gap is not bridged, it is difficult to connect with a text. I felt like I was able to connect with Nathanael Greene more than any of the other Revolutionaries I have read about.

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### **Christian says**

There's always a concern when a history or biography comes off as more 'popular' than academic, especially when the relative obscurity of the subject is such that there is no real demand for a popular history.

The issue here, though, is that its the relative obscurity of the subject matter, General Nathanael Greene, is itself a failing of the popular telling of the American Revolution. This in turn is due to the focus on the war in the North, with the typical focus on the South being exclusively Yorktown. Thus the Southern theater of Greene's glory is a footnote to the story of Independence, although recent abominations, er, movies such as The Patriot have started bringing more focus on this forgotten theater of war.

Greene also didn't help his case by dying before the Constitution was adopted; whereas figures such as Alexander Hamilton and Henry Knox who were in Washington's cabinet get their proper measure of respect for both their military and political careers, Greene only possesses the former.

So a popular history of Greene is necessary as a way to bring a pivotal figure to the forefront. Golway does

an admirable job in making the case for Greene's role in the war's success (both in the North and the South), although he struggles a little bit when Greene is quartermaster general, as both the subject and its author are highly repetitive during this interval. I was also surprised with how much detail was given to the oft-overlooked Battle of Springfield ... until I noticed the author lives in Maplewood which is two towns over from Springfield and borders Union (my hometown, at the time called Connecticut Farms) which hosted a major part of conflict.

Greene himself deserves a modern historical biography of the size typically authored by Brands or Chernow (i.e. twice the size), but Golway does a great job in laying the groundwork and re-introducing to Americans a figure who should not be ignored. All fans of the American Revolution owe it to themselves to read this biography.

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### **Mike Hankins says**

Solid work on Greene, his background, and the southern campaigns. This is more of a "popular" work, and thus there's not really a central thesis or argument, but what emerges is a picture of Greene as a unlikely contributor to the war (given his quaker background).

Golway does a good job of showing how Greene's past (arguments and rejection of his religious and cultural heritage) informed his approach to generalship. Golway also avoids blatant hagiography common to books like this, so that is a welcome change.

Golway also gives a decent picture of how the character of the southern campaigns were different from what many of us think of as the Revolution -- its much more of a brutal insurgency, there's a lot more infighting among Americans, much more civilian involvement, and overall a harsher experience where the lines are more blurry than in the more "traditional" campaigns that we often study. I might have liked more on those aspects, but this isn't a study of the campaigns overall, but rather a study of Greene's life, so it's appropriate that Golway doesn't spend his entire time on the nature of the war in the south -- for more on that, readers can always look to Nash, Countryman, or Hoeder (or TH Breen, Ray Raphael, or Woody Holton).

Overall a good read that complements the literature fairly well. This book will have much more mileage for the non-scholarly reader (and serves as a good introduction for new students of the topic), but grad students might want to just skim this.

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### **Cheryl A says**

This is the best book written thus far on General Greene. Accurate information has been a long time coming on the General. His historical papers were not compiled and released until 1976. I've been searching for factual information on Nathanael Greene since the 1950's because I was told as a child that our Greene family was related to him. Now I know his story, his influence, his devotion to an independent America and the sacrifices he and his family made during the Revolutionary War.

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## **Steven Peterson says**

Nathanael Greene was one of George Washington's most trusted subordinates. This book does a signal job in describing why this was the case and why Greene deserved this trust.

Greene was a most unlikely military leader. He was a complete amateur, coming into the military with very little martial background. He had a physical disability.

Early on, he made a major error in the New York campaign, leading to the loss of troops who could not be spared, when the fort that he had urged be defended fell--with no strategic gain in the process. Another leader might have cashiered Greene, but Washington maintained his faith in the junior officer.

Greene played an important role in the desperate attack on Trenton. When General Gates suffered a disastrous defeat in the south, Greene was dispatched to somehow try to retrieve the situation.

Greene did well. The irony of his life is that--after having provided yeoman service to the new republic--he did not long survive the victory to enjoy the fruits of success. This is a solid biography of an underappreciated Revolutionary War leader; it is well worth reading.

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## **Laura says**

Overall, it was okay. I wanted to learn more about Greene and the Revolutionary War fought in the South, and I did. But the book left me a bit disappointed. It started out fine, but when I got to 1780 when Greene took over command of the army in the South, the writing style got very short and it read almost like a travelogue. (Greene went here and fought the British and retreated, Greene went there and fought the British and retreated, then the war ended and he died.) It made me wonder if a different person wrote the end of the book, or if the author just got bored of writing and tried to finish it up as quickly as he could.

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