The Trouble with Friends: The Franco-American Alliance at the Siege of Savannah 1779

A Monograph

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Studying failure to understand success is counterintuitive to our way of thinking, we want to emulate the victors, not understand the losing side's complexities. The Yorktown campaign of the Revolutionary War was the decisive point in the war for independence and is used as a case study in multinational operations, but the often-forgotten siege of Savannah was the father of this moment. While the siege of Savannah failed to capture the city from the British army, it provided the American and French a template of operations to adjust from. The genesis of how future operations would need to be structured and the rapport required between the American and French commanders discovered during Savannah would directly lead to the successes of Yorktown. Without the siege of Savannah there would have been no lessons learned from which to build the architecture of multinational operations that continues to be relevant to our army today. This study will show that the critical failures at Savannah were not the result of tactical decisions but of the failure of the allied command structure to develop the needed interpersonal relationships that we know today as the nature of multinational operations.

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Abstract

The Trouble with Friends: The Franco-American Alliance at the Siege of Savannah 1779 by MAJ Michael B. Hobgood, US Army, 41 pages.

Studying failure to understand success is counterintuitive to our way of thinking, we want to emulate the victors, not understand the losing side's complexities. The Yorktown campaign of the Revolutionary War was the decisive point in the war for independence and is used as a case study in multinational operations, but the often-forgotten siege of Savannah was the father of this moment. While the siege of Savannah failed to capture the city from the British army, it provided the American and French a template of operations to adjust from. The genesis of how future operations would need to be structured and the rapport required between the American and French commanders discovered during Savannah would directly lead to the successes of Yorktown. Without the siege of Savannah there would have been no lessons learned from which to build the architecture of multinational operations that continues to be relevant to our army today. This study will show that the critical failures at Savannah were not the result of tactical decisions but of the failure of the allied command structure to develop the needed interpersonal relationships that we know today as the nature of multinational operations.

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Abbreviations

FM	Field Manual
JP	Joint Publication

Introduction

> Count d'Estaing has undoubtedly the interest of America much at heart. When the Count first arrived he informed us that he would remain on shore eight days only. He had spent four times that number.
>
> —Major General Benjamin Lincoln to Congress, 22 October 1779.

The fall of Savannah to British forces in December 1778 lead to a pivotal event in the American Revolution from both a military and political standpoint. Georgia, the only colony to be re-conquered by the British, became the focal point for a joint military operation between the Americans and their new French allies. In September 1779, Admiral Charles-Hector d'Estaing anchored a fleet of 47 ships offshore carrying 5,000 French soldiers to assist the American attempt at recapturing Savannah. With American General Benjamin Lincoln, d'Estaing coordinated the first multinational operation to be executed in American history. The allies initially believed that a mere show of force would cause the British garrison to surrender, but the arrival of over 800 reinforcements caused British commander Major General Augustine Prevost to decline. This refusal led to the allied attempt at bombarding the city into submission and then into an unsuccessful frontal assault. In the end, the British held Savannah for three more years and the allied forces suffered a staggering tactical defeat resulting in over 700 casualties.

Studying failure to understand success is counterintuitive to our way of thinking, we want to emulate the victors, not understand the losing side's complexities. The victorious Yorktown campaign was the decisive point in the war for independence and thus is used as a case study in multinational operations in the United States military, but the often-forgotten siege of Savannah was the father of this moment. While the siege of Savannah failed to capture the British occupied city, it provided the American and French a template of operations. The genesis of how future operations would need to be structured and the rapport required between the American and French commanders discovered at Savannah would directly lead to the victory at Yorktown. Without the siege of Savannah there would have been no lessons learned from which to build the

architecture of multinational operations that continues to be relevant to our army today. This study will show that the critical failures at Savannah were not the result of tactical decisions but of the failure of the allied command structure to develop the needed interpersonal relationships that we know today as the nature of multinational operations.

Multinational operations have been a fixture in the American Army's history from its inception but faded until World War I and America's emergence as a global power. In such instances, the army must "closely study the political goals of each participant as a precursor to detailed planning."[1] These operations serve higher political purposes and must be planned and executed to ensure that these purposes are met.[2] The multiple and often competing national interests must be understood by the commander and staff in order to gain consensus of how and when to execute operations which complicates multinational efforts. This lack of consensus during the operations at Savannah lead directly to their failure.[3]

Given the United States global position and current focus on Large-Scale Combat Operations, commanders and staffs at all echelons will probably be required to participate in multinational operations that present complex problems and must achieve political objectives. While doctrine provides broad conceptual frameworks to use as a guide, it does not sufficiently describe how these concepts are applied. Training opportunities with multinational partners and allies are limited due to multiple considerations such as political realities, distance, and funding. Studying the Savannah campaign will provide commanders and staffs the ability to recognize and adapt to issues that cause friction in multinational formations - particularly the interpersonal relationships between people, political goals of individual nations, and the establishment of organizations for multinational formations.

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[1] US Department of the Army, Field Manual 3-16, *The Army in Multinational Operations* (Washington, DC: Government Publishing Office, 2014), vi.

[2] US Department of the Army, Field Manual 3-0, *Operations* (Washington, DC: Government Publishing Office, 2017), 1-3.

[3] US Army, FM 3-16, 1-2.

The significance of this study is to inform commanders and staffs on how to recognize and avoid pitfalls during the planning and execution of multinational operations, especially in ad hoc situations. The ad hoc Franco-American formations present at Savannah were subsequently used throughout American military history, such as the coalitions built for Operation Desert Storm and Operation Iraqi Freedom, and taught how to manage the personal dynamics and essential integration requirements. This study uses the Nature of Multinational Operations in *Joint Publication (JP) 3-16* and *Field Manual (FM) 3-16* to analyze the Siege of Savannah and provide an understanding of how to recognize proper and improper application.

This study uses the Nature of Multinational Operations theoretical tenets as a lens to analyze the Savannah campaign. It illustrates that the failed tactical actions were simply an outcome of the allied commanders' inability to apply the elements present in these doctrinal concepts. The Nature of Multinational Operations is the building of mutual confidence in order to accomplish complex operations.[4] According to JP 3-16, this consists of "respect, rapport, knowledge of partners, patience, mission focus, teambuilding, trust, and confidence."[5] These are further defined by the Department of the Army in FM 3-16 as "The intangible considerations that guide the actions of all participants, especially the senior commander."[6] At the siege of Savannah, d'Estaing was the senior and overall commander by virtue of the political nature of the alliance, but he failed to understand how to properly utilize and incorporate the American forces under his counterpart Benjamin Lincoln.

Literature Review

The American War of Independence has been extensively covered from military, political, ideological, and socio-cultural perspectives. Within these the Franco-American alliance

[4] US Department of Defense, Joint Staff, Joint Publication 3-16, *Joint Operations* (Washington, DC: Government Publishing Office, 2019), I-2.

[5] Ibid.

[6] US Army, FM 3-16, 1-2.

is widely acknowledged by historians to have played a pivotal role in the eventual success of the American Revolution. However, the Siege of Savannah is often absent, at least in great detail. Savannah becomes a footnote in most historical studies on Franco-American operations, with the bulk of the focus on the tactical level and little to no strategic or operational level analysis. However, there is common agreement by historians that the French were actively looking for opportunities to undermine British supremacy in North America and the Caribbean Sea after the disastrous results of the Seven Years' War. Where historians differ is on the catalyst for active intervention in the War of Independence. Two different approaches are used to explain the French entrance into the American Revolution.

The first approach is operationally focused authors who concentrate on campaigns and battles. Operational focused writers such as Alexander A. Lawrence, David B. Mattern, and David K. Wilson, point to the British defeat at Saratoga as the catalyst that brought direct French military support to the American cause. However, this ignores the Seven Years War's profound psychological effect on the French political and social systems which lead to an overwhelming desire to undermine the British Empire. It also discounts the diplomatic efforts of American colonists beginning in 1774 with France and the diplomatic dialogue between France and Spain that occurred after the conclusion of the Seven Years War.[7]

Meanwhile, strategically oriented authors, like Charlemagne Towers, point to documents between Louis XVI and his ministers and argue for a French desire to intervene in the Revolution regardless of American military success. Towers points to multiple communications between the French ministers Marquis d'Ossun, stationed at the Spanish court, and King Louis XVI as the

[7] Alexander A. Lawrence, *Storm over Savannah: The Story of Count d'Estaing and the Siege of the Town in 1779* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1968), 91; David B. Mattern, *Benjamin Lincoln and the American Revolution* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1995), 41-55; David K. Wilson, *The Southern Strategy: Britain's Conquest of South Carolina and Georgia, 1775-1780* (Columbia: University of South Carolina, 2005), 59-60.

genesis of this burgeoning support as early as 1775.[8] Towers also highlights a document drawn up by Comte de Vergennes that was transmitted to the Spanish court at Madrid on 31 August 1776 where the first complete intentions of the French to intervene and their reasons for doing so are explicitly stated.[9] Chief among these reasons was to provide the French with an economic market that undercut the British. These documents point to a Franco-Spanish alliance that was being crafted to provide military forces to support the American Revolution as early as 1777; unfortunately, the Fall of Long Island would dash this initial plan.

While authors vary in the interpretation of why the French entered the conflict on the side of America, the secondary sources have a unifying theme of largely ignoring these factors in the Savannah campaign and focusing almost exclusively on the tactical actions. Extraordinarily little analysis is done on the underlying causes of the command decisions from the political or cultural level. They even omit the effect of personal interactions of the commanders themselves. This is further hindered by the dearth of secondary material on the siege of Savannah altogether. It is often confined to a single chapter in a larger history. Only three books have been published on the campaign itself written in 1866, 1874, and 1968, respectively. These do little to address the prevailing American and French attitudes or their commitment to the alliance, thereby making connections between the strategic and tactical levels of war difficult. Tower's *The Marquis de La Fayette in the American Revolution,* offers the best attempt at this connection, but LaFayette was not involved with the actions at Savannah.

Alexander A. Lawrence's *Storm Over Savannah* published in 1968 provides a definitive tactical account of the campaign with details like no other. He even addresses some of the prevailing attitudes and provides several instances of anecdotal evidence of underlying conditions

[8] Charlemagne Towers, *The Marquis de La Fayette in the American Revolution: With Some Account of the Attitude of France Toward the War of Independence* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1901), 80.

[9] Ibid., 152.

that had effects on the tactical failure of the siege, such as American and French Soldiers not being allowed in each other's camp without passes.[10] Though this suggests a frayed relationship at the tactical and command level, it does not provide analysis on the campaign itself.

David K. Wilson's *the Southern Strategy* provides a thorough examination of the siege of Savannah within the context of the British Southern Strategy from 1777-1780. Still, his chapter on the siege of Savannah suffers from the same problem as Lawrence's work, with excellent details on the tactical level but little on the personalities and larger issues within the Allied forces. While there is some brief discussion of d'Estaing's "excessive ego" and other flaws, Wilson does not provide analysis on how this affected the campaign.[11]

Because of the gap left by so few secondary writings on the Siege of Savannah, this monograph centers on the journals of Comte d'Estaing and Benjamin Lincoln. These two journals provide insight into the previously understudied perceptions and personal opinions of the commanders involved on the planning, execution, and justifications for the tactical failure. They provide the basis for viewing the Siege of Savannah as a failure at the command level to understand the interpersonal requirements needed for successful multinational operations.

The Birth Pains of an Alliance

In a war where one side is clearly militarily superior, the weaker actor will often seek outside assistance from a nation capable of competing with the stronger party.[12] In the Revolution, the Americans were at a clear disadvantage to the British both logistically and militarily. The colonies could not produce the needed quantities of arms, gunpowder, and ammunition nor could they provide basic logistical support such as clothing and food sufficient for campaign service. Militarily, they could not contend with the Royal Navy and lacked a

[10] Lawrence, *Storm Over Savannah*, 64.

[11] Wilson, *The Southern Strategy*, 134.

[12] John J. McCuen, *The Art of Counter-Revolutionary War, the Strategy of Counter-Insurgency* (Harrisburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1966), 64.

trained, professional army.[13] American political and military leaders believed that France, having lost territory and honor in their defeat in the Seven Years War, was the best opportunity for an alliance. France was a long-time rival of the British and possessed a naval capability that was lacking in the American arsenal. Diplomatic contacts began in earnest, with American leaders believing that success in their revolution hinged on French support to the war effort.[14] They were right on all accounts.

In the French Foreign Minister, Charles Gravier comte de Vergennes, the Americans found an eager negotiating partner who had been working to influence King Louis XVI since November 1775.[15] Vergennes viewed the events unfolding in the American colonies as an opportunity for the "restoration of the Glory of France".[16] When the Americans issued their Declaration of Independence, the French were quick to act by offering assistance in the form of materials of war and financial loans.[17] Since the rebellion in the Americas put Britain in a vulnerable position, Vergennes was concerned that the British would open negotiations with the Americans. Unwillingly to commit to a war with Britain while the possibility of a settlement in America existed which would allow the British to concentrate their forces against France, Vergennes began negotiations with the Americans. On the 24 September 1776 American representative Arthur Lee agreed to Vergennes request that the Americans would inform the French before beginning any negotiations with the British. This agreement was a pivotal moment in Franco-American relations, indicating that the French had intentions of entering the war.[18]

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[13] John R. Alden, *A History of the American Revolution* (New York: Knopf, 1969), 18.

[14] James Hutson, *John Adams, and the Diplomacy of the American Revolution* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2014), 16-17.

[15] Towers, *The Marquis de La Fayette in the American Revolution,* 99.

[16] Ibid., 91.

[17] Samuel Flagg Bemis, *The Diplomacy of the American Revolution* (New York: American Historical Association, 1935), 113-116.

[18] Jonathan R. Dull, *A Diplomatic History of the American Revolution* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987), 50-57.

Still, the economically burdened French had to consider several factors before deciding on entering an international conflict less than fifteen years after Seven Year War.[19] Another overseas conflict would be costly. Then there was the problem of possibly legitimizing republicanism, a danger to a monarchial society that could encourage rebellion in their own colonies or worse.[20] Vergennes, however, convinced Louis XVI by presenting the revolution as an opportunity to diminish the power of Britain, exact revenge, increase French commerce, and recover possessions in America.[21]

For Louis XVI and Vergennes, the turning point came in December 1777 when the American diplomats in Paris reported the British surrender at the Battles of Saratoga. Conrad-Alexandre Gerard, Vergennes representative, and the American diplomats began negotiations on a treaty that would include both military and financial alliances. Before completing the alliance treaties, Benjamin Franklin took the unusual step of sending a last request for American Independence to the British parliament. When this proposal was rejected by the British, the Treaty of Alliance was signed by the French and Americans on 6 February 1778.[22] With recent military success and French support secured, the Americans now had ample reason to believe that independence was achievable.[23]

With the newly signed military treaty, the question became where and when to use a joint force. As early as July 1778, George Washington was formulating a combined venture by the French fleet, under Vice Admiral Charles-Hector d'Estaing, and American land forces to

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[19] Lawrence S. Kaplan, "The Treaties of Paris and Washington, 1778 and 1949: Reflections on Entangling Alliances," *Diplomacy and Revolution: The Franco-American Alliance of 1778*, eds. Peter J. Albert and Ronald Hoffman (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1981), 155.

[20] Towers, *The Marquis de La Fayette in the American Revolution,* 91.

[21] Ibid., 93.

[22] Dull, *A Diplomatic History of the American Revolution,* 159-161

[23] Andrew Jackson O'Shaughnessy, *The Men Who Lost America: British Leadership, the American Revolution, and the Fate of the Empire* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), 32-33, 61-62.

recapture New York. D'Estaing showed his zeal for his task when he wrote to Washington "I have the honor of imparting to Your Excelly the arrival of the King's fleet; charged by his Majesty with the glorious task of giving his allies the United States of America the most striking proofs of his affection."[24] Washington proposed that the American Army would move south crossing the Hudson River approximately 50 miles north of New York and continue onto the defenses while d'Estaing would navigate the passage between Sandy Hook and Long Island to trap the British forces and stop a provision fleet expected to arrive.[25] This plan was derailed by the shifting of the British fleet from Philadelphia to the New York harbor, the strong defenses that were present in the harbor itself, and finally by the pilots of the French naval force believing that they could not cross the bar into the Harbor.[26]

The decision was made to shift operations to the British occupied town of Newport, Rhode Island. This would be the first test of the Franco-American Alliance as a military venture and would prove to have profound effects at the tactical and strategic levels. At Newport, disagreements between General John Sullivan and d'Estaing would result in a failed attack and accusations of cowardice and negligence being leveled against each other. The two commanders were quite different on fundamental levels which led to the personal disagreements and breakdown of the operations. Sullivan was an Irish American who had been a lawyer before becoming an ardent patriot. Sullivan served in the first Continental Congress and distinguished himself by leading the right column of Washington's army at the Battle of Trenton.[27] Sullivan, due to his service in the American army, believed that he better understood the requirements of

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[24] "To George Washington from Vice Admiral d'Estaing, 8 July 1778," Founders Online National Archives, accessed November 11, 2020, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-16-02-0042.

[25] "From George Washington to Vice Admiral d'Estaing, 14 July 1778," Founders Online National Archives, accessed November 11, 2020, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-16-02-0077.

[26] Brendan Morrissey, *Monmouth Courthouse 1778: The Last Great Battle in the North* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing Company, 2004), 77-78.

[27] Towers, *The Marquis de La Fayette in the American Revolution*, 454.

war in America.[28] D'Estaing was a member of the aristocratic class in France and was schooled alongside the Dauphin of France.[29] His association with the royal family led to fast promotions with the French army where he served in the Seven Years War earning distinction and being promoted to Field Marshall before his transfer to the Royal Navy.[30] The disparate paths to rank, coupled with social and cultural distinctions, would prove to have implications in their relationship and cause friction during and after the operations.

The initial battle plan agreed upon by the Sullivan and d'Estaing called for the French to disembark troops at Canonicut on the western side of Newport on 8 August 1778 in preparation for a simultaneous attack with the Americans from Triverton on the east side on 10 August.[31] The plan was essentially a double envelopment, which while it provided multiple problems for an enemy force, created issues over command and control for the allies.[32] Who ultimately was the overall commander was not established between Estaing and Sullivan; Estaing believed that he was by virtue of his nation's standing within the political agreements while Sullivan saw himself as an equal. Attempting to do this with a new force with little understanding of how each component operates creates opportunities for misunderstanding and a possible break in the trust and confidence of the multinational force, as was the case here.[33]

The French, following the agreed upon plan, arrived in Newport Bay and began disembarking their 4,000 troops at Canonicut. On 9 August, as d'Estaing was preparing to disembark and take command of his forces, an American aide-de-camp arrived informing the French that General Sullivan had not waited for the planned assault upon seeing British

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[28] Towers, *The Marquis de La Fayette in the American Revolution*, 454.

[29] Charles C. Jones, ed., *Siege of Savannah* (1874; reprint, New York: New York Times and Arno Press, 1968), 21.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Towers, *The Marquis de La Fayette in the American Revolution*, 456.

[32] US Department of the Army, Field Manual 3-90-1, *Offense and Defense Volume I* (Washington, DC: Government Publishing Office, 2013), 1-4.

[33] US Joint Staff, JP 3-16, I-3.

abandonment of fortifications in front of his position and had crossed over into Rhode Island.[34] Sullivan had committed a grave error in taking this action, showing a fundamental lack of knowledge of his partners and violated the trust of the French.[35] By not adhering to the agreed upon plan or reporting his proposed change to it, Sullivan had unintentionally undermined d'Estaing's authority as the senior commander. D'Estaing saw this action as a deliberate breach of their agreement and believed that this was an affront to French prestige, and his own authority, that was inexcusable.[36] This decision caused a breach of confidence on both sides as the American's believed that d'Estaing was "unreasonably offended" at a tactical decision made by the commander on the ground to gain an advantage while the French took away the belief that Sullivan was jealous of French prestige and d'Estaing's position.[37]

Suspicion on both sides was heightened and d'Estaing's next military choice came under extreme scrutiny from General Sullivan and his staff. The British, under Admiral Lord Howe, had arrived with 26 ships and d'Estaing determined that the winds favored an attack against the British fleet. On 10 August, d'Estaing embarked his troops, informed General Sullivan of his intent to return after defeating the English fleet, and set out from Newport. D'Estaing's venture ended poorly due to a storm which caused considerable damage to his fleet, including his own flagship.[38]

Sullivan's reaction to this decision, despite the fact that d'Estaing returned, as he had promised on 20 August to inform Sullivan of his predicament, was to level a public charge against d'Estaing and the French of "desertion" of an ally for leaving Newport in a report sent to

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[34] Towers, *The Marquis de La Fayette in the American Revolution,* 456.

[35] US Joint Staff, JP 3-16, I-3.

[36] Towers, *The Marquis de La Fayette in the American Revolution*, 458.

[37] Ibid., 458-459.

[38] Ibid., 461-462, 465-467.

Congress.[39] Sullivan would go even further in his accusations by writing to d'Estaing, which was subsequently read to the Continental Congress in Boston, a "protest against the measure, as derogatory to the honor of France, contrary to the intentions of His Most Christian Majesty, and the interest of his nation, and destructive in the highest degree to the welfare of the United States of America, and highly injurious to the alliance formed between the two nations."[40] With Sullivan giving written voice to his own and his staff officers feelings of abandonment, he had created a severe fissure in the trust and confidence between the French and American forces. Trust and confidence are essential for multinational operations and is a necessary component for producing unity of effort at all levels, from the commander to the rank and file.[41] Sullivan missed this point entirely and, in his frustration, lashed out without considering the possible consequences. As Alexander Hamilton, who was on Washington's staff at the time, wryly noted about Sullivan's actions "stigmatizing an ally in public orders and one with whom we mean to continue in amity was certainly a piece of absurdity without parallel."[42]

While Newport had proven a disastrous failure for the Franco-American alliance on multiple levels, it would also become a rallying point for American and French leaders to demonstrate their dedication to the alliance. Washington and Congress, realizing that the alliance was more important than any one campaign, would quickly move to reestablish the rapport between the nations. Washington used his position to "to prevent a publication of the protest upon the occasion" and to counsel Sullivan into reluctantly retracting some of his more virulent language and made the decision to not publicly release the statements.[43] Congress took action by

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[39] Towers, *The Marquis de La Fayette in the American Revolution*, 431-467.

[40] Ibid., 474-475.

[41] US Joint Staff, JP 3-16, I-5.

[42] William C. Stynchecombe, *The American Revolution and the French Alliance* (Syracuse: University Press,1969), 51.

[43] Washington, George. "From George Washington to Henry Laurens, 4–5 September 1778," Founders Online National Archives, accessed November 11, 2020, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-16-02-0549.

publishing a Resolution on 17 October proclaiming that "D'Estaing hath behaved as a brave and wise officer."[44] As an additional step John Hancock, then a Major General of the Massachusetts Militia, and the Massachusetts Legislature held a public welcoming ceremony to show solidarity with the French and treated the French officers as honored guests when they arrived in Boston.[45] So effective were these measures that when d'Estaing met the Marquis de La Fayette in Boston he declared "I offered to become a colonel of infantry, under the command of one who three years ago was a lawyer" to show his support for the American cause.[46] While this is a hyperbolic statement, it conveys a general feeling of satisfaction with the treatment of his honor and respect to his nation that Estaing was so concerned with. Further, it showed a clear understanding of the American political and strategic leaders, such as Washington, of the effects a few well-chosen words of public praise can have on a multinational partner.

The Fall of Savannah and a Caribbean Cruise

As the situation in the north ground to a stalemate and d'Estaing embarked for the Caribbean to refit his ships, the focus of the war shifted to the Southern Department of the Continental Army. The American Southern Department was commanded by Major General Robert Howe whose military actions as a theater commander had gained little success and proven to be lackluster at best. Howe's rashness and propensity to emotionally driven responses led him to feuding over who controlled strategy with the governor of Georgia, a duel with a South Carolina politician, and the loss of support from most of the department's militia. The end for the mercurial Howe came when Congressional delegates from South Carolina and Georgia demanded his removal due to a "ridiculous matter he has been concerned in S.C. – with regard to a

[44] Tower, *The Maquis de La Fayette in the American Revolution*, 494.

[45] Stynchecombe, *The American Revolution and the French Alliance*, 53, 55-57.

[46] Paul F. Dearden, *The Rhode Island Campaign of 1778* (Providence: Rhode Island Bicentennial Federation, 1980), 134.

female."[47] Howe's main vice, his tendency toward "womanizing", forced Congress' hand and in September 1778 they voted to replace Howe with a steadier patriot whose temperament and personality were more agreeable, the Saratoga veteran Major General Benjamin Lincoln.[48]

Before Lincoln, who was recovering from a leg wound suffered at Saratoga, could arrive the Southern Department's defenses would be tested by a shift in British strategy. With a stalemate in the north, the British shifted their focus to the Southern Department hoping to split the American colonies and raise Tory militia support from an assumed population of loyalists based on faulty intelligence. This presented Howe, waiting for Lincoln's arrival in Charlestown, with two threats. First were the forces under British General Augustine Prevost in Florida and second were intelligence reports of a British expedition from New York centered on Georgia.[49] Howe first turned his attention south to deal with an advance force from St. Augustine under Lieutenant Colonel Lewis Fuser. While the bulk of British forces in Florida would not advance for another month, Fuser believed he could compel the surrender of Fort Morris, located 20 miles south of Savannah, by a show of force. Fort Morris was the only American force that could delay the British advance from Florida and its fall would provide a clear path to Savannah. Upon Fuser delivering his ultimatum, the American commander Colonel John McIntosh replied brazenly "We, sir, are fighting the battles of America…As to surrendering the fort, receive this laconic reply 'Come and take it!'[50] Recognizing that his attempt had failed and receiving reports of Howe's approach with 200 reinforcements for Fort Morris, Fuser withdrew removing one of the obstacles for the defense of Georgia.[51]

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[47] E. Stanly Godbold Jr. and Robert H. Woody, *Christopher Gadsden and the American Revolution* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1982), 179.

[48] Wilson, *The Southern Strategy*, 69.

[49] Ibid., 71.

[50] Mark M. Boatner, *Encyclopedia of the American Revolution, 3rd ed.* (Mechanicsburg: Stackpole Books, 1996), 397-398.

[51] Wilson, *The Southern Strategy*, 71-72.

With the threat to the south removed for the moment, Howe turned north to establish defensive positions in the Georgian capital of Savannah. Savannah was surrounded by a series of twenty-year-old fortifications, built during the Seven Years' War to deter the Spanish, that had fallen into a dilapidated state. Howe assessed that the walls would render a defense in the town useless and only serve to trap American forces upon the arrival of the British.[52] The Americans assumed that they would be outnumbered heavily by the British regulars and Howe even considered withdrawing what few troops he had and giving up Savannah without a fight. His officers, a majority of whom lived in and around Savannah, argued against this strategy in a council of war. They believed that if the capitol fell the British would claim the entirety of Georgia and that if they could defend Savannah for a few days, General Lincoln would arrive in time to relieve them with the army he was assembling in Charlestown. Persuaded by this argument, Howe decided that a defense of Savannah should be attempted.[53]

The British, under Lieutenant Colonel Campbell, began landing their forces on 29 December at Girardeau's plantation a few miles southwest of Savannah with no opposition. Howe, believing these landings to be a feint, deployed his army a half mile southwest of Savannah in an open field bordered by woods and swamps on both flanks. This deployment of the Americans in a V shape with the open end facing the British lines allowed the Americans to take advantage of the ground and maximize the limited numbers of soldiers available. With the addition of a small trench dug in front of the American position and four artillery pieces to provide support, a British frontal assault would be met with unsupportable casualties.[54] Unfortunately for the Americans, the British found a cooperative slave on a plantation as the

[52] Wilson, *The Southern Strategy,* 72.

[53] Ibid.

[54] Archibald Campbell, *Journal of Lieut. Colonel Archibald Campbell*, ed. Colin Campbell (Darien: Ashantilly Press, 1981), 26.

moved up from the landing points who told them "he could lead the Troops without Artillery through the Swamp upon the Enemy's Right."[55]

Campbell built a force of 588 men as a flanking column to be led through the swamps to envelope the Americans from the rear. Campbell then placed a staff officer in a tree from which he could observe the progress of the flanking column and launch the frontal assault of nearly one thousand men to fix the American position. Convinced that the swamps and tree lines on their right flank were impenetrable, the Americans did not post forces there and soon found themselves under attack from these positions. Howe, realizing he was about to be enveloped, ordered a general retreat that soon devolved into a rout as American soldiers sought to outrun the British.[56] Howe had lost the Georgian capital in a matter of minutes. The British victory severely hampered an already hobbled Southern Department by capturing 23 mortars and howitzers, 48 cannons, and large amounts of personal equipment and food needed by the Americans. Colonel Henry "Light Horse Harry" Lee, famous for his cavalry tactics in the Continental Army, commented that "Never was a victory of such magnitude so completely gained with so little loss."[57]

After the debacle of operations at Newport, d'Estaing had shifted his operations from the American theater to the Caribbean in compliance with his orders from France. Though d'Estaing had been sent to assist the Americans, he also had a competing, and more lucrative for the French crown, demand of seizing valuable British sugar islands. This created the impression among Americans that the French were not fully committed to the American cause and that their designs on territorial gain in the West Indies had resulted in the "abandonment" in the Newport

[55] Campbell, *Journal of Lieut. Colonel Archibald Campbell*, 26.

[56] Ibid., 29.

[57] Henry Lee and Robert E. Lee, *Memoirs of the War in the Southern Department of the United States* (New York: New York Times, 1969), 120.

campaign.[58] Shortly after the British captured Savannah, an American delegation, through the French consulate, sent letters to d'Estaing requesting his assistance in retaking the Georgian capital. The delegation consisting of General Lincoln, Governor Rutledge of South Carolina, and several French officials determined that American forces were incapable, due to a lack of cannons and mortars needed for siege craft and numerical inferiority, of retaking Georgia without French assistance.[59] They appealed to d'Estaing with the argument that Savannah was lightly defended and that his fleet coupled with a small landing force in conjunction with the American forces present it would lead to a brief, successful campaign.

For d'Estaing, this appeal for support could not have come at a better time. During the winter 1778 and early 1779, the French had sent two naval squadrons to reinforce him along with several regular army detachments for operations in America and the Caribbean. He also had access to the colonial possessions in Martinique and St. Domingue where he liberally recruited free black and white volunteers to bolster his forces.[60] D'Estaing had spent his time wisely in the Caribbean refitting his ships and on 2 July 1779, he capped his tour off with the capture of the British island of Grenada. These successes secured his political position and fame in France allowing D'Estaing the opportunity to order his force of thirty-five ships and over 5,000 soldiers to set sail for Georgia in August keen to add to his own reputation and his nation's honor with a quick victory over the British in America.[61]

Best Laid Plans: Personalities, Planning, and the Seeds of Failure

[58] "To George Washington from Lieutenant Colonel John Laurens, 23 August 1778," Founders Online National Archives, accessed November 11, 2020, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-16-02-0394.

[59] Lawrence, *Storm Over Savannah,* 116.

[60] Kennedy, *Muskets, Cannon Balls, & Bombs*, xi-xii.

[61] Wilson, *The Southern Strategy,* 135.

For multinational operations to succeed, commanders must endeavor to build rapport with their counterparts, show respect by including them in the planning process, and ensure they have a knowledge of their partners capabilities.[62] In the planning for the siege of Savannah, d'Estaing and General Lincoln took very divergent paths. The lack of respect from d'Estaing to his American counterpart based on his place in society before the war, coupled with his experience in Newport, would become evident through the actions and assessments made by d'Estaing. Rapport and knowledge of the American's capabilities would also suffer from fundamental differences in the commanders and in the development of a plan that was loosely understood by both sides.

Lincoln and the American army were viewed with open contempt by the French commanders. The French openly called American forces the "insurgents" indicating that they had no confidence in their fighting capability. French officers were less than enthusiastic about General Lincoln. D'Estaing's liaison to the Americans in Charleston, Colonel de Bretigny, assessed Lincoln as "an honest man, easily impressionable, prickly, who has few ideas of his own, but who is ready to adopt those of anyone he comes across; while valuing what is good he does not have the strength to accomplish it…so far as military affairs are concerned, the General is another man entirely."[63] Bretigny was making a distinction between Lincoln's capacity for making decisions and his ability to fight. Both Bretigny and D'Estaing shared in this frustration of Lincoln having "no opinions of his own" based on Lincoln's habit of councils of war, but they did concede that Lincoln was "not afraid of cannon fire."[64] Essentially, they believed that Lincoln was incapable of making decisions on his own because he sought consensus amongst his subordinate commanders which was not a French concern.

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[62] US Joint Staff, JP 3-16, I-3-I-4.

[63] Marquis de Bretigny to Le Comte d'Estaing in Alexander Lawrence, *Storm Over Savannah* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1968), 58.

[64] Le Comte d'Estaing in Alexander Lawrence, *Storm Over Savannah* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1968), 71.

D'Estaing and his French counterparts also found the American's deficient in decision making ability and force management. Lincoln's system of council of war, where he sought to make decisions by consensus, was confusing at best to the French; D'Estaing believed that this was an extension of Lincoln's inability to make decisions of his own. Bretigny's assessment of the problems within the Southern Department as "never has this country been in greater need of help. It is necessary to defend it against itself and against the enemy. All here is in frightful confusion; very few regular troops, no help from the north, a feeble and badly disciplined militia and the greatest friction among the leaders" did little to move d'Estaing beyond his assessment of the Americans as little more than ragged men led by a farmer with a limp.[65]

D'Estaing was a French aristocrat who, though known for his intelligence and bravery, was seen by his fellow officers as dictatorial and possessing an excessive ego, very much a man of his station. His impulsive nature and ambition were points of contention amongst his subordinates and led one officer to comment "the ambition of Count d'Estaing is easily excited filled with the sole idea of success, he is inclined to undertake any expedition, however dangerous it may be."[66] While his ego may have driven his decisions, few doubted his physical abilities or ability to make decisions. Though d'Estaing had turned fifty, he was known to have the "enthusiasm and fire of a man twenty years of age" and able to physically endure situations that "not a man in the fleet" could believe for a man his age.[67] Lincoln, in his attempt to build rapport with the French, assigned Major Thomas Pinckney as a liaison due to his ability to speak French, Lincoln's familiarity with him from Saratoga, and his background. Thomas was the son of a colonial chief justice in South Carolina who spent most of his early years in Europe and attended the royal military academy at Caen, France. This background provided Pinckney insight that

[65] Marquis de Bretigny to Le Comte d'Estaing in Alexander Lawrence, *Storm Over Savannah* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1968), 58.

[66] Jones, ed., *Siege of Savannah*, 58.

[67] Ibid., 70.

Lincoln did not possess on how d'Estaing would perceive actions and expectations of conduct.[68] This showed Lincoln's understanding of d'Estaing's background and his commitment to building trust and confidence with him.

Functioning as a special Aide-de-camp to d'Estaing, Pinckney would witness an event that showed the underlying tensions in the French army. On 9 September 1779, Pinckney participated in the landings on Tybee Island with d'Estaing. For this operation, hundreds of French soldiers were loaded into longboats, but once on land d'Estaing "marched near half mile in the direction of the fort, when d'Estaing, looking back and seeing only his slender escort, asked the Adjutant General, where were the troops to reduce the British post? M.de Fontanges answered that he had received no directions to order any troops for the occasion."[69] This exchange illustrated a lack of Unity of Command within the French forces and a possible inability by d'Estaing to describe and direct his vision of operations to his subordinate commanders and staff. By contrast, Lincoln's perceived weakness of gaining consensus in his councils of war ensured that all his subordinate commanders understood the mission and intent. Pinkney goes on to further elaborate on this situation writing "the General appeared much irritated, replying that he had informed him of the object he had in view, and that it was his duty to have brought with him the number of troops necessary for the occasion."[70] This incident showed a lack of coordination within the French forces and would have effects on allied abilities to coordinate actions in the coming siege.

This confusion among the officer corps of the French force would have effects on the lower ranks. This inaction by d'Estaing and Fontanges caused a rumor among the 700 French soldiers left in the longboats that d'Estaing had forgotten them. D'Estaing's perceived reputation

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[68] Franklin B. Hough, ed., *Siege of Savannah* (1866; reprint, Spartanburg, SC: The Reprint Co., 1975), 159-160.

[69] Thomas Pinckney in Franklin B. Hough, ed., *Siege of Savannah,* 159-160.

[70] Ibid.

of being concerned with his own ego and ambitions led his soldiers to readily believe the rumor. Despite this report and the opinions known to Lincoln from John Laurens who had served at Newport, how he viewed d'Estaing or his French allies was not found in his private or public letters. Lincoln was the very model of a respectful ally, one who could express himself and American interests without being combative in nature to his French allies at Savannah.[71]

Count d'Estaing, having been assured by Governor Rutledge, the French consulate in Charleston, and General Lincoln that only a short campaign would be needed to capture Savannah due to the small British force and the dilapidated state of the defensive works, made the decision to help the Americans. D'Estaing sent General Francois, Vicomte de Fontagnes, to Charleston to discuss a plan of operations for retaking the Georgian capital. Due to concerns for his fleets vulnerability to the autumn storms in the region, d'Estaing gave de Fontagnes clear instructions that "nothing would be neglected in case of an attack upon Georgia, but established a prior condition that I would devote only one week to it."[72] The time restriction was a result of the hurricane season in the region coinciding with the proposed time of attack. This did not trouble Lincoln, as he believed that the small garrison the British possessed and the "insufficiency of its works" would take little time to defeat.[73]

The agreed upon plan between Lincoln and d'Estaing's representative Fontagnes at Charleston was simple, but the lack of details would cause confusion in execution at the command level. Lincoln recorded that the "plan of cooperation was settled between the confidential officer (the Viscount de Fontagnes) the Governor, to whom the Count had wrote, and myself. We engaged (barring accidents) that one thousand men should be thrown into Georgia on

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[71] Wilson, *The Southern Strategy,* 133.

[72] D'Estaing, Jean-Baptist Charles Henri Hector Theodat, "Journal of the Siege of Savannah with Some Observations by M. Le Comte D'Estaing," In *Muskets, Cannon Balls & Bombs: Nine Narratives of the Siege of Savannah in 1779*, edited and translated by Benjamin Kennedy, 42-75 (Savannah: Beehive Press, 1979), 43, hereafter referred to as D'Estaing, "Journal of Savannah".

[73] Mattern, *Benjamin Lincoln*, Page 80.

the 11th, that the Count was to land 3000 men at Beaulieu, block up the enemy in Port Royal and Savannah, and send vessels into the southern inlets to prevent them from escaping, should they attempt it, to Augustine."[74] D'Estaing's note to Governor Rutledge had outlined his willingness to engage in a campaign but stressed the timeline restriction to avoid the seasonal storms off the coast of Georgia. This allowed for agreements to be made with little input from d'Estaing and created a problem of ambiguity present within it and its inability to address reinforcement from other possible garrisons which could lead to the failure of the operations.

When Fontagnes returned to d'Estaing with the plan, d'Estaing was shocked to learn that the Americans only had one thousand regular soldiers and little to no artillery for the proposed siege. With d'Estaing's lack of planning guidance outside of the time frame, Fontagnes felt he was bound to plan based on d'Estaing's guidance of "nothing would be neglected". This ambiguous guidance led Fontagnes and the Americans to assume that d'Estaing would provide for shortfalls in equipment and manpower to support the agreed upon plan. D'Estaing remarked that "it is the nature of Americans to promise much and deliver little, this nation always counts on acquiring whatever it lacks."[75] With this understanding of the American situation, d'Estaing was sorely tempted to leave without attempting the operation as it was currently conceived because of the possibility of failure. He kept this reservation in his journal, fearing that this would be seen as cowardice and not prudent military thought.[76] Several factors would stay d'Estaing's hand, chief among them that several ships had been damaged in a severe gale on 2 September. This forced the French fleet to have to commit repairs that would take up to a month to complete.[77]

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[74] Benjamin Lincoln, "Journal of Major General Lincoln From September 3 to October 19, 1779." in *Muskets, Cannon Balls & Bombs: Nine Narratives of the Siege of Savannah in 1779*, edited and translated by Benjamin Kennedy (Savannah: Beehive Press, 1979), 121. Hereafter referred to as Lincoln, "Journal of Benjamin Lincoln".

[75] D'Estaing, "Journal of Savannah", 55.

[76] Ibid., 44-45.

[77] Wilson, *The Southern* Strategy, 136-137.

D'Estaing assessed that he could not simple sit idly by while these repairs were being carried out due to the Americans providing the needed material and would develop three key reasons for French involvement in the campaign. First, the Count still believed the assessment of his allies and fellow "knowledgeable Frenchmen" that a demand for surrender would cause Savannah to comply. Second, the British garrison was too widely dispersed to stop Savannah from being taken, particularly since this was addressed in the agreed to plan of cooperation. This belief allowed for the assumption of 1,300 men for the British and 6,000 men for the allies which was "almost exactly correct according to regulations" for a siege ration. While he stated that this was his overriding reason for attempting the siege, his last reason was probably what tipped the balance. D'Estaing's third reason was he believed that "if I had not attacked Savannah, I would have been considered a coward." This fear went hand in hand with experience at Newport and reinforced his belief that "London, America, and even Paris would have done more than dishonor me. They would have supposed that I had secret orders not to assist the Americans", which would affect not only his but France's honor. This concern for his reputation and the possible "rupture of relations" were in line with the concerns of aristocratic expectations of the time to not be weak or the source of national shame.[78]

As d'Estaing came to his decision, Lincoln prepared his army for the movement to Savannah. On 9 September, the same day as d'Estaing's arrival on Tybee Island, Lincoln began movement from Sheldon, South Carolina with his thousand-man army of Continentals and militia. Stopping only to repair bridges needed for crossing the multiple rivers in their path, the small contingent reached the northern bank of the Savannah River by the agreed date of 11 September. Unfortunately, they found no boats in the area capable of crossing the river and were forced to lose time in constructing rafts causing a delay as the American forces were shuttled

[78] D'Estaing, "Journal of Savannah", 44-45.

across the river from 12-14 September.[79] Lincoln, concerned that he had not heard from d'Estaing since departing Charleston and recognizing he was behind schedule, sent messengers to locate the French Army. Lincoln realized his force was too small to engage the British alone and needed to combine forces with the French as soon as possible.[80] D'Estaing, meanwhile had landed unopposed at Beaulieu as planned and was quickly closing the thirteen-mile distance to Savannah, and another critical failure in the campaign.

The Four Horsemen of Failure

As the Americans continued their sluggish journey to Savannah, the first of four key decisions at the command level that would lead to tactical failure was being taken by their French allies. D'Estaing's army of twenty-four hundred men, later to swell to four thousand, arrived one mile outside of Savannah on 16 September. As d'Estaing observed the defensive positions of Savannah, he was met by an American contingent under Colonel McIntosh, making this the first time the forces had met in the campaign. McIntosh, having seen the dilapidated state of the British defenses, was eager for d'Estaing to assault the position immediately and secure a quick victory. D'Estaing demurred from an assault believing that the small contingent of Americans and his French forces would suffer undue casualties, but he was not against attempting to bluff the garrison into surrender.[81]

D'Estaing sent a message to the British Commander Prevost stating that "Count d'Estaing summons his excellency, General Prevost, to surrender to the arms of his majesty the King of France."[82] He further warned Prevost that if the town were taken by assault, all actions

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[79] Mattern, *Benjamin Lincoln*, 81.

[80] Lincoln, "Journal of Benjamin Lincoln", 123.

[81] Mattern, *Benjamin Lincoln*, 72,76.

[82] Ronald G. Killion and Charles T. Waller, *Georgia and the Revolution* (Atlanta: Cherokee Publishing Company, 1975), 194.

taken within the town, such as pillaging, would be the British commander's fault for failing to surrender. D'Estaing had made a critical mistake that held in it the potential to tear the alliance apart before any actions were taken against the British garrison. This declaration was a breach of protocol from the American perspective, particularly due to the operation being a joint venture with the French on American soil. No mention of the Continental Congress was made in the surrender demand, his insistence that the garrison was to surrender to "the King of France" was a political misstep.[83] This demand seemed to confirm previous suspicions that the French were not committed to the success of the Americans, but only in gaining a measure of revenge for their loss in the Seven Years War.

Upon his arrival, General Lincoln was informed of the declaration that d'Estaing had presented to the British through a reply by Prevost to the demands. This was distressing to Lincoln who was surprised to find that "just before my arrival he had sent a summons to General Prevost requiring his surrender to the arms of France. This I did not know until I saw Prevost's answer."[84] The problem for Lincoln was not that d'Estaing had called for the surrender of Savannah, but that the surrender had been demanded to the "arms of France only, when the Americans were acting in conjunction with him."[85] D'Estaing further misread Lincoln's protests as being a trivial matter of Lincoln being "displeased that I demanded the surrender of the town without waiting for him" which would lead to the Americans not receiving the spoils from the town, what d'Estaing called "arguing over the bear's pelt before you have brought him down."[86] This was a misinterpretation by d'Estaing of Lincoln's concerns. Lincoln's concerns were over the political interpretations that could ensue from this demand, not over which part of "the bear's pelt" he would receive. This surrender demand presented possible political problems for Lincoln

[83] Mattern, *Benjamin Lincoln*, 81-82.

[84] Lincoln, "Journal of Benjamin Lincoln", 123.

[85] Ibid., 123-124.

[86] D'Estaing, "Journal of Savannah", 51.

and fledgling American nation. If the surrender had occurred under these terms, the French could make a claim on the city and the British could leverage this turn of events to undermine the alliance between the French and Americans.

D'Estaing failed to understand the position of Lincoln in the matter. Lincoln's nation was attempting to be a free and independent country that was recognized as such by other nations, that their own allies would undermine them in a joint operation was a political disaster for the Americans. While D'Estaing agreed that all negotiations in the future would be "agreed to on our part with the commanding officer of the French forces and the Commanding officer of force of the United States".[87], but damage had already been done to the rapport and trust of the allies. Lincoln went out of his way to show no unhappiness with the French and to present a united front to the allied troops. Colonel John Laurens, a former aide-de-camp of General Sullivan's, believed that d'Estaing's actions showed the disregard their French allies held for the Americans. A crack in the alliance was formed and found the allies arguing over political realities and protocols before firing their first shot in anger at the British.

General Prevost, making interpretations from his correspondence with d'Estaing, sought to expand the emerging separation and to take advantage of the allies' fractured situation as he perceived it. He recognized that his garrison was too weak to withstand a determined assault, that he needed time to strengthen his defenses, and to bring Lieutenant Colonel James Maitland's eight hundred soldiers from the town of Beaufort on Port Royal Island. Prevost tried several gambits to buy time, first he demanded to know the terms the French would offer him to surrender and then when this failed to buy enough time, he asked for a twenty-four-hour truce to consult with the civilian leaders.[88] Shockingly, d'Estaing granted the truce without consulting Lincoln that evening saying that "it did not seem to me to be worth disturbing you about after the

[87] Lincoln, "Journal of Benjamin Lincoln", 124.

[88] Mattern, *Benjamin Lincoln*, 82.

fatigue of a long march."[89] Lincoln's recognition of the need for good relations with the French in securing his country's future independence, and that the Americans were junior partners in the alliance, prevented him from reacting to the French count's decision.[90] The frustrations of his subordinate commanders, however, were expressed by Lieutenant-Colonel Francis Marion when he exclaimed "My God! Who ever heard of anything like this before? First allow an enemy to entrench and then fight him!"[91]

D'Estaing's unilateral decision would have far-reaching consequences for the allied effort at Savannah and would prove to be the second fatal decision that ensured British success. While d'Estaing considered this meaningless decision, it bought the British time. Prevost frantically began working on his defenses, improving the entrenchments, and adding more cannons to repulse any possible assault; d'Estaing considered these efforts to be "of very little importance to me."[92] These defenses were seen by d'Estaing as still vulnerable to assault due to the small size of the garrison. However, the truce allowed for the arrival of Maitland's garrison and nearly doubled the force of available to General Prevost. Lincoln and d'Estaing went to Brewton Hill overlooking Savannah to observe the position and, as d'Estaing wrote, "saw still crossing the river a string of small boats loaded with troops, a sight so vexatious that I began to bemoan bitterly the impossibility of stopping a reinforcement that was going to give the expedition extreme difficulty."[93]

The reinforcement of the British garrison would be a bone of contention between the allies and developed because of the vague initial plan agreed to before the allied forces began their march to Savannah. While d'Estaing was correct in his assessment after the siege that

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[89] D'Estaing, "Journal of Savannah", 50.

[90] Mattern, *Benjamin Lincoln*, 82; Lincoln, "Journal of Benjamin Lincoln", 124.

[91] Jones, ed., *Siege of Savannah*, 120.

[92] D'Estaing, "Journal of Savannah", 50.

[93] Ibid., 51.

General Prevost's request for a truce was "was nothing but a trick" and that he was "seeking the time they gained by the truce to insure the safe entry of the entire Beaufort garrison"[94], it encouraged the French and Americans to descend into a morass of accusations and recriminations. The truth was that the Americans and French believed that there were only two ways to get a large force from Port Royal Island to Savannah, overland or open sea lanes, but a third existed and was used brilliantly by the determined Lieutenant Colonel Maitland. The American militia had blocked the overland route and French warships controlled the sea lanes as agreed, but Maitland used the intercoastal waterways that linked the island to the Georgian capital which were unguarded.[95]

Unaware of this fact, the finger pointing and blame placing began in earnest. The Americans argued that Viscount de Fontanges, d'Estaing's representative at the planning meeting in Charleston, had agreed that the French were to guard Port Royal Island; Fontanges would deny this claim and argue that the Americans had this responsibility. A suggestion that Fontanges may not have told d'Estaing "what had been decided at the Council held in Charleston" or misconstrued his instructions caused significant confrontations between the French and American leadership. D'Estaing records that Lincoln "claimed that it had been ordered and acknowledged that it was the French responsibility to prevent the evacuation of Beaufort by anchoring vessels up the river. This complaint, contrived after the fact, seemed to me another of our allies' unjust recriminations."[96] D'Estaing found it "impossible to assume that an officer of advanced rank, experienced, well informed and intelligent" as Fontanges could have forgotten such information.[97] D'Estaing would claim that a letter from the French consul in Charleston removed all doubts that the Americans and not the French were to blame. In this communication the consul

[94] Ibid., 50.

[95] Wilson, *The Southern Strategy*, 144.

[96] D'Estaing, "Journal of Savannah", 61-62.

[97] Ibid.

"declares that General Lincoln was personally ordered…to stop with his troops the evacuation of the Beaufort garrison and the reinforcing of Savannah."[98] This blame placing shows that the neither the French nor the Americans knew who was responsible for ensuring that the British could not be reinforced by the Beaufort garrison due to the ambiguous plan agreed to and that d'Estaing was attempting to deflect any blame that could be laid on him for this failure.

This quarrel over who had allowed the British to reinforce the garrison in Savannah would lead to the complete separation of the American and French camps. So strained were the relations between the French and American soldiers that fights broke out between the camps. Lincoln was forced to order the French camp off-limits to American soldiers to prevent the men from fighting, which would be one of the underlying causes that lead to another fatal decision in the campaign.[99] Lincoln remained conciliatory and understood the position that his country would find itself in without French support, even while junior officers such as Colonel John Laurens rankled at the French incriminations, and sought to restore good relations with the French. With the desire for a successful completion of operations at the forefront of his mind, Lincoln invited d'Estaing to a personal meeting at his headquarters and sought to convince d'Estaing that a major victory was still possible despite the situation at hand. D'Estaing reported that he was convinced to stay and attempt the siege by Lincoln's constant "begging, even demanding, our perseverance."[100] Coupled with the possible shame and damage to his political position in France he would be subjected to for backing out of another allied operation, d'Estaing agreed to the attempt despite his doubts for success.[101]

After the reinforcement of Savannah by the British and a desire to end operations as quickly as possible, the French and Americans made a third decision that ensured the failure of

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[98] Ibid.

[99] Mattern, *Benjamin Lincoln*, 83.

[100] D'Estaing, "Journal of Savannah", 61-62.

[101] Mattern, *Benjamin Lincoln*, 83.

operations. Instead of following the well-developed siege techniques of the day, the allies opted to bombard the city and hope that the effects of this would force the British to capitulate. During a normal siege, a besieging army would construct a series of trenches that ran parallel to the enemy lines and design these in a zig-zagging pattern toward the city under siege. The zigzag pattern was designed to keep the attackers from receiving direct fire into the trenches which allowed them to maneuver to a point of advantage slowly and safely. This technique had been perfected by a French marshal and engineer named Sebastien de Vauban and was well known to d'Estaing, but it required large amounts of resources and time that were not available to the allies.[102]

D'Estaing wryly stated that "in the Americans' opinion the mortars were the alliance's ark of the covenant. They would make the walls of Jericho fall. I hoped so; but I was skeptical."[103] D'Estaing's skepticism was never voiced to his allies to avoid damage to his honor or being labeled a coward and the bombardment began with 300 firebombs which "we chose to begin firing…at night in order to make them more terrifying." For five days continuous firing would put more than a thousand shells into the city of Savannah. As deserters came in from the town they reported that the bombardment "caused distress; however, the ground was all sand in the city and the streets were not paved"[104] with the result being that the British suffered one soldier killed and about forty civilians died in the bombardment.[105] A French officer summed up the results aptly when he stated that "we begin to lose confidence upon discovering that all this heavy firing will not render the assault less difficult. We regret we did not attack on the very first day."[106] Lincoln's assessment was just as morose when he observed that the bombardment did

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[102] Wilson, *The Southern Strategy*, 144.

[103] D'Estaing, "Journal of Savannah", 59.

[104] Ibid., 61.

[105] Mattern, *Benjamin Lincoln*, 84-85.

[106] French naval officer in Jones, *Siege of Savannah*, 26; Wilson, *The Southern Strategy*, 156.

not achieve "the desired purpose, that of compelling a surrender."[107] With the failure of the bombardment came the undesirable decision of having to either lift the siege or assault the works; the allies chose to attempt an assault.[108]

The decision to assault Savannah, though not under ideal circumstance, was not the final fatal choice in the campaign, but it would facilitate it. The fatal decision came when d'Estaing decided to reorganize his army only hours before the planned assault which led to a delay in not only the time for the assault, but in the loss of coordination with the American feints planned to support it. Rendezvous with the Americans was already difficult due to the separation of camps, which was done to avoid confrontations between the allied soldiers, was now further delayed by several hours. D'Estaing's decision to restructure his army into a series of grenadier, light, and line battalions cause significant issues with the French soldiers now falling under organizations they were not familiar with and had not trained with.[109]

This resulted in the French army taking three hours to muster putting them an hour behind schedule and leaving the American soldiers to believe that their feint attacks were not to be executed as scheduled. The French army did not arrive at the American camp until four o'clock in the morning, the same time the initial assault was supposed to be launched.[110] Count d'Estaing would try to shift the blame to Lincoln by claiming "The attack started too late. I should have even made allowances for General Lincoln's absence, since I had to send someone to find him. I should have arrived at Colonel Lauren's camp much earlier."[111] Further, d'Estaing would damn the Americans privately in his journal by saying that "the feint attack from the siegeworks was not executed as the order specified and attracted very little attention from the

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[107] Lincoln, "Journal of Benjamin Lincoln", 127.

[108] Lincoln, "Journal of Benjamin Lincoln", 127; D'Estaing, "Journal of Savannah", 64.

[109] Wilson, *The Southern Strategy*, 160.

[110] Ibid., 160-161.

[111] D'Estaing, "Journal of Savannah", 69-71.

enemy because he was informed of the real point he had to defend. The worthlessness of the diversion of the Americans who wandered back to their camp, and the failure of the one from the river which did not take place" were the true reasons for his failed assault according to d'Estaing.[112] While d'Estaing sought to deflect blame to the Americans, the true failure of the campaign lay with his inability to foster a relationship based on trust and confidence with his ally.

Conclusion: Lessons for Yesterday and Today

From the failed campaign at Savannah several lessons were learned by the French and Americans at the time and can be inferred for our benefit now. At the time, D'Estaing would declaim that the British "had everything we lacked, which is saying quite a lot: they had galleys, shallow-draft boats which carried heavy artillery. More importantly they had experienced pilots."[113] He would also lay the blame for failure at Savannah on the arrival of reinforcements under Colonel Maitland which was, in his view, entirely General Lincoln's fault. This view could have soured D'Estaing's support of the American Revolution, but he seems to have confined his opinion to his official journal for French consumption.[114] This confining of his opinion to his journal was also a way for d'Estaing to deflect blame and explain away the failure of the Savannah campaign as an American mistake rather than take direct responsibility for it.

Even though he recognized the failure that the campaign was, and with his campaigning days behind him, he still rendered incalculable assistance to the American cause. Working in conjunction with the returning Marquis de Lafayette, who had served in General Washington's army, D'Estaing lobbied for greater military assistance to the American cause and secured "from

[112] D'Estaing, "Journal of Savannah", 69-71.

[113] Ibid., 48.

[114] Ibid., 53.

Both Ministers of the War and of foreign Affairs…the Most positive Assurance"[115] of support. The combined lobbying of D'Estaing with his ties to King Louis XVI and Lafayette through private correspondence with Vergennes, brought about the second expedition to America led by the militarily competent Count de Rochambeau.[116]

Further demonstrating D'Estaing's shaping of future events, the Savannah siege seems to have provided a template for future cooperation between the French and Americans. Most allied operations were modified sieges along the lines of what was attempted at Savannah. Yorktown would follow the attempted plan of Savannah by having American and French soldiers lay siege to a coastal town while a French fleet would deter British attempts to reinforce by sea lanes. What had been d'Estaing's misfortune of being unable to anchor off American coast lines indefinitely would be overcome at Yorktown through a deeply coordinated plan that accounted for the weather problems endemic to the Atlantic seaboard. The critical requirements of coordination of land attacks and sea defense were finally achieved with astounding results at Yorktown in 1781.[117] This was of little surprise as D'Estaing assisted, at the request of the French government, in planning the venture.[118] D'Estaing's familiarity with American capabilities and the requirements of land and sea integration helped provide context for the development of the initial plan. Though no written record was left behind, from Lincoln's participation at Yorktown and Washington's use of councils of war, we can infer that the lessons learned from the Savannah campaign were heeded by Washington. This influence can be seen in Washington's use of an integrated staff, particularly using Lafayette in his role of American General and accredited representative of the French government, provided the required integration for successful

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[115] Marie Joseph Paul Yves Roch Gilbert du Motier, marquis de Lafayette, "To Benjamin Franklin from Lafayette, 29 February 1780," Founders Online National Archives, accessed November 11, 2020, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-31-02-0410.

[116] Wilson, *The Southern Strategy*, 173-174.

[117] Kennedy, *Muskets, Cannon Balls, & Bombs*, xii-xiii.

[118] Tower, *The Marquis de La Fayette in the American Revolution, vol 2,* 94.

operations.[119]

The most important result of the Savannah campaign for the Americans was not the tactical failure, but the strategic impact of its attempt. This campaign gave the fledgling American nation proof that the French were committed to the American cause.[120] This interpretation was crafted by the Americans, in particular General Lincoln, after the campaign through select messaging. General Lincoln, to help craft the narrative, expressed his satisfaction and belief that the attempt showed that "Count d'Estaing has undoubtedly the interest of America much at heart. When the Count first arrived he informed us that he would remain on shore eight days only. He had spent four times that number; his departure, therefore, became indispensable."[121] Even Colonel John Laurens, who had been critical of d'Estaing in the Newport campaign, stated that "Count d'Estaing, to whom we are as much indebted as if his efforts had been attended with the most complete success, is obliged by the most cogent reasons to leave us. His presence has procured a momentary suppression of those calamities with which we were threatened previous to his arrival."[122] Laurens' change of heart occurred because of the suffering of the French soldiers and sailors in their attempt to seize Savannah; shared sacrifice solidified the French and American relationship. At Newport d'Estaing had not engaged in the campaign but at Savannah Laurens witnessed d'Estaing's commitment; d'Estaing would suffer two bullet wounds in the assault.

With mission focus being the only unifying tenet for Lincoln and d'Estaing, their attempts to see the mission completed despite "capability shortfalls that would limit their ability to accomplish tasks"[123], the study of the Savannah campaign provides a cautionary tale of hubris for the American military professional. American officers must be cognizant of the perception

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[119] Ibid., 95.

[120] Kennedy, *Muskets, Cannon Balls, & Bombs,* Ibid., V.

[121] Benjamin Lincoln to Congress, 22 October 1779, in Hough, *Siege of Savannah*, 154-155.

[122] John Laurens to Henry Laurens October 23, 1779, in Kennedy, *Muskets, Cannon Balls, & Bombs*, 132.

[123] US Joint Staff, JP 3-16, I-4.

they create surrounding themselves and the perception they create for their subordinates when interacting with multinational partners. They should seek to cultivate interpersonal relationships that bolster their allies, or they will easily find themselves making the same mistakes that d'Estaing made and experience similar failures. Understanding the impact of failing to develop the Tenets of Multinational Operations, particularly trust and confidence, as detailed in JP 3-16 is key to understanding the failures at Savannah. Tactical concerns had a hand in the failure, but the command interactions between d'Estaing and Lincoln were the true genesis of the underwhelming result.

D'Estaing had little interest in showing respect by "understanding, discussing, and considering partner ideas"[124] to build an effective relationship with General Lincoln which led to misunderstanding and suspicions on both sides. D'Estaing's concerns were his personal ambitions for glory and for French national honor, this resulted in the Americans not being treated as complete partners in the endeavor and being viewed as rank amateurs who were in the way of French ambitions. American officers of today must be cognizant of how they deal with foreign partners and allies. The American military professional will often find himself in the same position similar to d'Estaing's: that of a seasoned professional expected to provide guidance and leadership in a multinational force. Key to this is respecting a partner nation for their willingness to sacrifice alongside of and in the interests of America. This requires an open dialogue and integration of ideas from partner nations. Showing respect deepens ties between the effected partners and creates an atmosphere of shared responsibility for mission success.

D'Estaing also failed to develop rapport with his American partners which then led to a lack of "teamwork among their staffs and subordinate commanders and overall unity of effort"[125] necessary for successful campaign planning and execution. This was in stark contrast to

[124] US Joint Staff, JP 3-16, I-3.

[125] Ibid., I-4.

Lincoln's efforts to develop rapport by utilizing liaisons, such as Pinckney, to help facilitate information flow and decision making between the allies. Liaisons may seem to be counterintuitive to developing rapport, but the commander on the modern distributed battlefield cannot be everywhere. A commander's selection of his liaisons shows his understanding, or lack thereof, his partner nations and their specific concerns, particularly to "facilitate a shared understanding and purpose among organizations."[126] In the case of Savannah, Lincoln showed an understanding of his fellow commander in selecting Pinckney as his representative. Pinckney's upbringing in aristocratic European society provided him insight into how d'Estaing worked and what his values, beliefs, and concerns were. This allowed for Pinckney to easily integrate with d'Estaing's staff and provide input to and from Lincoln in language both sides could accept.

When we examine d'Estaing's conduct, there is also a shocking lack of patience and knowledge of partners. As JP 3-16 states "Without patience and continued dialogue, established partnerships can rapidly degrade"[127] which was seen in the initial failure to include the Americans in the surrender demands to the British forces, and continued when d'Estaing decided that he did not need to consult with Lincoln before approving a truce with the British. This could have led to a collapse of allied operations if not for Lincoln's application of patience and "cultural awareness"[128] of his French counterpart. For the current military officer, patience and knowledge of partners is critical, particularly in ad hoc coalition operations. Concepts that seem simple to American leaders can be completely foreign to their partner nation representatives, exercising patience in developing systems to work through these problems is crucial. Knowledge of partners requires an open dialogue and outside research into the partner nations cultural practices; pure military capability information does not equate to understanding your partner. To truly gain

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[126] US Department of the Army, Field Manual 6-0, *Commander and Staff Organization and Operations* (Washington, DC: Government Publishing Office, 2014), 13-1.

[127] US Joint Staff, JP 3-16, I-4.

[128] Ibid.

knowledge of a partner, the military professional must learn to develop a base of "regional knowledge, local customs, values, and cultural awareness"[129] of where he is operating and who he is working with.

All these cumulative failures by d'Estaing at the command level led to an erosion of trust and confidence in lower-level leadership and distrust between the French and American soldiers. The already existing tension from the aborted Rhode Island campaign of the previous year was not mollified by d'Estaing's opening actions and decisions of the Savannah campaign. However, Lincoln showed in his actions that he desired to "build personal relationships and develop trust and confidence"[130] through his liaison selections and his attempts at personal interactions with d'Estaing such as his private dinner at Savannah. For the current professional, d'Estaing's conduct shows a decided approach of ignoring this relationship creating an image of ignorance of "the ability to inspire trust and confidence across national lines."[131] As JP 3-16 states "there can be no unity of effort in the final analysis without mutual trust and confidence"[132] which is clearly seen in the Savannah campaign and should be a warning from the past for the current military professional.

[129] Ibid.

[130] US Joint Staff, JP 3-16, I-4.

[131] Ibid., I-5.

[132] Ibid.

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