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Module 1: Fundamentals of Strategy D14

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Session 1.1 / FA #2

Prompts

Was it possible for British joint operations in the South between 1778-1781 to win the war for Britain? Utilize concepts from Sun Tzu and Clausewitz in your answer.

- Your answer should be 350-500 words in length. Additionally, you are required to respond to at least two of the Blue Team DBF answers. These responses should be a minimum of 100 words in length and are due NLT 48 hours after the initial post due date.
- **Due:** The primary post is due on NLT Monday at 2359 and the secondary posts are due NLT Wednesday at 2359.

1. Gold Team

- Please take the “it was not possible” side of the question, arguing against the potential of success and explaining why it was not possible.***

2. Blue Team

- Please take the “It was possible” side of the question, arguing for the potential of success and explaining why it was possible.**

Gold Answer

GOLD POST:

It was not possible for British joint operations in the South between 1778 and 1781 to deliver victory in the American Revolutionary War because the campaign violated fundamental tenets of both Clausewitzian and Sun Tzu-inspired strategy. Although the British sought to regain control by exploiting perceived Loyalist strength and employing joint land-sea coordination, they misunderstood the political nature of the war, misread the terrain of conflict, and ultimately fractured the very center of gravity they aimed to control: local legitimacy.

Clausewitz notes that “war is not merely an act of policy but a true political instrument, a continuation of political intercourse carried on with other means” (Clausewitz, *On War*, 87). British operations in the Southern theater disregarded this principle by thinking that military occupation would ensure lasting political control. As Carpenter makes clear, the British commanders “failed to understand the true nature of the conflict in the South,” therefore misunderstanding the extent of Loyalist support and ultimately suffering “a profound strategic failure” despite areas of operational success (Carpenter, *British Strategic Failure*, 3). The reliance on Loyalist militia was intended for a show of domestic support, but it revealed a fundamental error of British presumptions. Professor Shaw’s lecture underscored how Loyalist militias often operated without central direction, becoming notorious for retaliatory violence that undercut British attempts to secure the region. Instead of taming the countryside, such irregular reprisals inflamed local hostility and expanded Patriot resolve, demonstrating the personal and localized intensity of the divided conflict in the South.

As Sun Tzu warned, “If you know neither the enemy nor yourself, you will succumb in every battle” (Sun Tzu, *Art of War*, 49). In battles such as Cowpens and Kings Mountain, British forces came up against militia commanders like Morgan and Sumter who exploited terrain, surprise, and mobility. These parallel the advice of Sun Tzu to focus on indirect means of winning and to make use of the enemy’s overextension (Sun Tzu, *Art of War*, 55). Professor Wilson emphasized the value of shaping the battlefield before engagement, which is a tactic the Americans used by drawing Cornwallis deeper into the Carolinas, culminating in Greene’s war of posts and the eventual overextension of British supply lines.

O’Shaughnessy shows that internal friction within British command further undermined operations. Clinton and Cornwallis barely communicated clearly in the final weeks, leading to missteps rooted in “false assumptions and misinformation” (O’Shaughnessy, *The Men Who Lost America*, 241). Clausewitz notes that “friction...makes the apparently easy so difficult” (Clausewitz, *On War*, 121). British forces became bogged down in pacification campaigns, unable to destroy Patriot forces decisively or win the population’s allegiance. Their culminating point of victory passed quietly amid partisan ambushes, scorched-earth retreats, and loyalist desertions.

In the end, no amount of joint coordination could overcome a flawed strategic vision. The Southern Campaign exemplifies a failure to understand the war’s true nature, violating the foundational teachings of both Clausewitz and Sun Tzu. Without that understanding, British victory was never truly within reach.

Blue Response #1

Emmanuel, you have built a strong argument for British potential in the South, especially in the way that you described British material advantages and Sun Tzu and Clausewitz concepts. That said, I would push back in two ways. To begin, although Clausewitz did stress the importance of unity of effort, the Southern Campaign was characterized by fragmented command relations and the absence of strategic unity, in particular between Clinton and Cornwallis. Coordination was incomplete and strategically paralyzing. Second, the expectation that the Loyalist support could be tapped effectively underestimates the way in which, personally and locally, the war was now being fought. British blunders, such as imposing neutrality oaths, drove potential allies into the arms of the enemy. Even with better training and resources, Britain was out of touch with the political nature of the war, violating that most famous Clausewitzian maxim, that war is the continuation of policy by other means. Tactical victories cannot redeem a flawed strategic premise.

Blue Response #2

Warren, your post does an excellent job unpacking the very weaknesses that undercut British hopes in the South, but that's precisely why I'd argue success was never realistically within reach. The fact that victory was contingent on correcting multiple deeply ingrained strategic failures like fractured command, flawed political assumptions, hostile terrain, and a volatile populace speaks volumes. Leaders like Cornwallis and Ferguson were vested in punitive tactics, and the idea that Britain could have just changed its strategy misses this point. Their choices weren't outliers. They were symptoms of a broader misreading of the conflict's nature. As

Clausewitz reminds us, “Everything in war is very simple, but the simplest thing is difficult” (Clausewitz, *On War*, 119). Logistics, yes, were a problem, but so too was legitimacy. No amount of supply wagons would have stopped Patriot militias from fighting for their homes against a foreign occupier. The war in the South was about hearts and minds, and the British never held either.