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Dave R. Palmer, *George Washington's Military Genius*. Washington: Regnery, 2012. Pp. xvi, 254. ISBN 978-1-59698-791-3.

Review by Tal Tovy, Bar-Ilan University (tovytal@bezeqint.net).

The military history of the American Revolution can be divided roughly, both chronologically and regionally, into two main stages. The first extended from the aborted American attack on British strongholds in Canada at the end of 1775 to the surrender of the British general John Burgoyne at Saratoga in October 1777. The war then shifted to the southern colonies until the capitulation of the British forces at Yorktown four years later.

From the military point of view, a number of historical issues continue to be discussed and debated. There is, for example, a lack of consensus about the contribution of the militia and irregular warfare generally to achieving decisive victory against the regular British army. Some scholars claim such warfare was critical to American success in the southern theater and therefore in the entire war; others disagree. Regarding George Washington's generalship, many studies portray him as adopting a defensive, or "Fabian," strategy, because, for a good part of the war, he believed his regular forces could not win pitched battles against the British army. In *George Washington's Military Genius*,<sup>1</sup> Lt. Gen. (ret.) Dave Palmer, a former superintendent of the US Military Academy, questions this piece of conventional wisdom.

Part I, "Strategy Described" (chapters 1-6), provides a complete overview of the war plans that Washington implemented during the Revolutionary War. Palmer here carefully describes the concept of strategy as it was understood in the eighteenth century. He also assesses the influence of Frederick the Great's military thinking on the conduct of the war, highlights the unique importance of geography in its various arenas, and outlines the British perception of the war. Two of the book's most important chapters (5 and 6) treat American war aims and relations between Washington and the Continental Congress.

Part II, "Strategy Executed" (chapters 7-10), analyzes Washington's actions during the war as evidence of his strategic thinking. Palmer so sharply distinguishes four stages of the conflict that, as he intends, the American general seems to have conducted four discrete wars. This division furthers his argument that Washington did not espouse a purely defensive strategy throughout.

The British regarded the American Revolution in the wider context of their eighteenth-century colonial wars, construing the political and military confrontation as the revolt of British citizens against the Empire. Moreover, Britain saw the Revolution as endangering its standing as a superpower, especially in its relations with France, Holland, and Spain. In practical terms, the British planned to seize control of the Hudson River and cordon off the New England colonies, and only then to move south and, with the help of settlers loyal to the Crown (the "Loyalists"), conquer the southern colonies. But the defeat at Saratoga and the entry of France into the war early in 1778 led to a changed strategy of increasing reliance on Crown supporters in the colonies.

Washington understood, especially after the fall of New York in August 1776, that, even though his small army could not defend all the cities in America, its very existence ensured that the revolution would continue. Lacking a true regular army, he avoided any decisive clash with the professional British forces in favor of a strategy of attrition, risking battle only when the odds were clearly in his favor. Recognizing that the British needed their navy to supply and transport their army, he tried to lure them to battlefields far

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1. The book appeared originally as *The Way of the Fox: American Strategy in the War for America, 1775-1783* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1975). It retains the structure of the earlier edition, with an updated bibliography. "The diversity of opinion among well-regarded historians inspired me to write this book nearly forty years ago. The continued lack of consensus is the motivation for this new edition" (xv).

inland. His Fabian strategy bought him time to enlarge, equip, and, most importantly, train his forces as well as to secure the involvement of European powers on the side of the colonies.

After the British defeat at Saratoga, the Minister of the Colonies, Lord (George) Germain, advocated a move to the south, hoping to “Americanize” the war by pitting loyalist settlers (and a downsized British army) against the patriots. After restoring control in the south, the army could then resume military operations in the northern colonies. This adjustment in strategy was also dictated by the participation of France, Holland, and Spain in the war, which posed a more serious and immediate threat to the British Empire.

At the end of 1778, the British brought Georgia back under their control. American-French attempts to regain it ended in painful defeat. The British then went on to conquer South Carolina with the general aim of gradually advancing northwards, establishing an operational base in the mouth of Chesapeake Bay, and reconquering the northern colonies. In May 1780, they took Charleston, South Carolina, and Washington tried to move his army from New York southwards in order to strengthen the militia forces. But after Lord (Charles) Cornwallis defeated Gen. Horatio Gates at the battle of Camden, South Carolina, in August 1780, there was no organized American army in the south; even the militias ceased to function effectively. British control over the settled areas of the colonies denied freedom of movement and support to whatever guerrilla forces were still active. However, poor control of the border areas of the southern colonies allowed guerrilla groups to reorganize and recommence operations.

In the autumn of 1780, Washington received another blow—the defection of Maj. Gen. Benedict Arnold, one of the most gifted generals of the revolution and commander of the fortifications at West Point. It was feared that this would lead to the loss of the Hudson River to the British. Washington’s letters in the period after Arnold’s desertion show his anxiety over the problem of defending West Point; he sent large parts of his army to that garrison at the expense of their other defensive responsibilities. Although the British did not in fact seize control of the Hudson River, the very presence of their large, well-trained army supported by the navy in New York helps explain Washington’s fears and the measures he took to allay them.

In October 1780, Gen. Nathanael Greene took command of the American forces in the south, where his first task was to overhaul the regular army, the militias, and the guerrilla groups. Even before he arrived, patriotic militias had already attacked a loyalist British force at the battle of Kings Mountain on 7 October 1780 in South Carolina. This battle marked the turning point of the struggle in the south: it forced the British to delay their advance northwards and focus on the patriot guerrillas.

Guerrilla warfare in the south, begun at the very start of the revolution, reached its peak after the fall of Charleston. Patriotic units retreated to the marshes and hills in the heart of the colonies and staged raids against British forces and loyalist units. Notable guerrilla commanders included Francis Marion, the “fox of the marshes,” Andrew Pickens, and Thomas Sumter. The difficult terrain meant the British could deploy only small cavalry companies against the irregular enemy units: mountains, forests, marshes, and the absence of roads or navigable rivers prevented the use of large infantry units or artillery.

Nearly all the American commanders, as veterans of the French and Indian War (1754–63) or the expedition against the Cherokee tribe (1761), knew the value of using available cover, moving stealthily, and firing precisely—in short, the essential methods of guerrilla warfare. The preferred tactic was to strike a selected enemy unit, rapidly withdraw, redeploy to ambush any pursuers, and then disperse. Within days or even hours, the fighters would reassemble to prepare another raid.

Greene complained to Washington about the sorry condition of the regular army and shifted his efforts to irregular warfare. That Washington did not oppose the change is a testament to his strategic grasp of military realities in the south. Indeed, the two men represent two complementary strategies for conducting the war. Greene’s operations furthered Washington’s strategy of attrition, as his irregulars wore down the British and bought time for the regular army, bolstered by the French, to organize for a decisive showdown, in the event, at Yorktown.

Palmer’s analysis throughout the second part of his book stresses the subtlety and flexibility of Washington’s strategic thinking. Though he always aspired to build a proper, well-disciplined army that could

defeat the British regular army, when circumstances required, he shrewdly alternated or blended defensive and offensive approaches at both the strategic and the tactical levels. For example, after Gates's defeat at Camden, he combined a defensive strategy with a type of tactical offensive by guerrillas.

Palmer rightly observes that neither Washington nor any other eighteenth-century general actually used the term "strategy," which received its classic definition only after the Napoleonic wars in the work of Carl von Clausewitz. Nonetheless—and this is one of the book's main points—strategic thinking was in fact already being done, just as naval strategy predated the writings of A.T. Mahan (1). Washington should not, Palmer argues, be seen simply as a latter-day Q. Fabius Maximus, attempting to delay and waiting on events and luck until the British realized they could not win. He stresses that the American commander waged aggressive war in 1775–76 and in 1777–78, with a climax in 1781. He maintains, too, that Washington had formulated a true grand strategy in looking "beyond the war to the subsequent peace" (83). He prosecuted a strategy designed to accomplish the goals set for him by Congress: independence and territorial expansion. To those ends, he established an army, trained and equipped it, and led it into battle to guarantee the ideals of the declaration of independence. Though he may not have used the word itself, Washington grasped the meaning of strategy far better than did the British generals who fought against him.

Another special value of the book lies in its discussion of Washington's defensive strategy during the war. In particular, Palmer contends that many historians, having forgotten that a purely defensive approach could not bring a decisive victory, have failed to appreciate the wisdom of Washington's military actions. Scores of his letters firmly assert that a (by European standards) regular army was required to confront British forces in the colonies; but when he felt such a force was lacking, he embraced a defensive strategy until he felt confident enough in his army to go on the offensive.

Palmer discusses in detail as well the influence of European military theory on warfare in North America and particularly the effect of Frederick the Great's writing<sup>2</sup> on Washington. Although Frederick understood the value of maneuvers against the enemy's line of supply, he stressed that a general who wished to gain a decisive victory must conduct offensive battles: the enemy's army itself, not his supply lines or logistic storerooms, must always be the primary objective. Washington wanted a national army that could execute Frederick's principles of warfare. He expected colonial governors to recruit soldiers for the Continental Army under his direct command. As the Revolution progressed, especially in the southern colonies, he actively sought the definitive battle that would end the war once and for all. For example, in his order for the day on 5 September 1777, he wrote that: "One Bold Stroke will free the land from rapine, devastations and burning."<sup>3</sup> For Washington, as for Frederick the Great, the most important principle of war was the massing or concentration of forces. The Prussian king believed that "There is an ancient rule of war that cannot be repeated often enough: hold your forces together, make no detachment, and when you want to fight the enemy, reassemble all your forces and seize every advantage to make sure of your success."<sup>4</sup> So long—but only so long—as the Continental Army could not "seize every advantage," Washington refrained from conventional pitched battles with the British army.

As Palmer's research shows, the many letters that Washington sent to generals under his command and to members of the Continental Congress amply demonstrate that, even granting the contributions of the militias, he regarded a regular army as the key to victory.<sup>5</sup> This fact is the guiding principle in Palmer's assessment of the strategic genius of George Washington during the Revolution.

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2. His *Principes Généraux de la Guerre* (1747) appeared as a draft document before the end of the War of the Austrian Succession (1740–48) in the period of calm before the Seven Years' War (1756–63). The German version, *Die General Principia vom Kriege*, appeared in 1753.

3. General Orders (5 September 1777), in John C. Fitzpatrick, ed., *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources, 1745–1799*, vol. 9 (Washington: Gov't. Printing Office, 1937) 181.

4. "The Instruction of Frederick the Great for His Generals (1747)," in Thomas R. Phillips, ed., *Roots of Strategy*, vol. 1 (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole, 1985) 343–44.

5. See also Tal Tovy, "Militia or Regular Army? The Debate on the Character of the American Army during the Revolution," *European Journal of American Studies* 1 (2010) – <http://ejas.revues.org/7814>.

Even some forty years after its first appearance, *George Washington's Military Genius* remains a seminal work on its subject.<sup>6</sup> Written with great clarity and drawing expertly on primary sources, it clarifies the predicaments and dilemmas that Washington faced in waging the war for independence. It should be required reading for those in search of a fundamental military history of the American Revolution.

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6. That said, Palmer's updated bibliography does not sufficiently reflect the recent more comprehensive historiographical discussion of Washington's strategy vis-à-vis that of various British generals.