Cornwallis: Soldier and Statesman in a Revolutionary World

(Richard Middleton)

September 22, 2025

To the extent most people ever think about Charles, Earl Cornwallis, they think of him as portrayed in Mel Gibson's film *The Patriot*. There he is an aged, somewhat hapless, conflicted military officer, ultimately defeated at Yorktown, whereupon he sails back to England in disgrace. Little of this is true, and his life after the War of Independence was full of distinguished service to England, which pushed his service in the colonies to the background. And as this excellent biography shows, Cornwallis was an exemplar of the type of competent, selfless aristocrat who made the now-dead British Empire the greatest empire the world has ever known. We do well to recover the knowledge of his life, and apply lessons learned from it to our own lives.

The Cornwallis family was (the main line is extinct) traceable to the fourteenth century, but they only received noble status in 1661, for support of the Crown during the Wars of the Three Kingdoms, the English civil wars. They held lands in Suffolk, northeast of London. Through smart and lucky choices of whom to support in those years of ferment, the family increased their wealth, power, and titles, with Cornwallis's father being elevated by the King from a baronetcy to an earldom in 1753. Cornwallis himself was born in 1738, and after stints at Eton and Cambridge, in 1756 he joined the Grenadier Guards as a junior officer, a prestigious regiment appropriate for his station. The Seven Years War (what we Americans call the French and Indian War) had just begun, and Cornwallis fought in several engagements in Germany, receiving quick promotion, to lieutenant colonel. His father died in 1762, and in that same year the war ended and Cornwallis returned to England, only twenty-five, to assume his father's title and role as head of the family.

Cornwallis was not rich. While he owned a modest set of lands, the earldom had not come with new lands or other income sources. His manor house was run down, and he had expenses necessary to maintain a house in London, because he sat in the House of Lords. A man of his position was also required to entertain and employ quite a few servants, which stretched Cornwallis's budget. He managed to supplement his

income through appointment to a variety of middling government sinecures, such as constable of the Tower of London. Such sinecures, however, were contingent on remaining in good favor with the government in power, not easy given that he had to vote in Parliament. He thus necessarily had both allies and opponents, and the latter might be in power at any given time, cutting his income. His primary employment, however, was as the colonel, that is, the chief officer, of the 33rd Foot Regiment. Yet he married for love, in 1768, to the daughter of a lieutenant-colonel in a Foot Guards regiment, and for the next several years was occupied primarily with regimental duties.

The war in America brought him back to active fighting (along with his younger brother, captain of a British warship). As did most of the British ruling class, he viewed the war as brought on by a handful of troublemakers, the disposal of whom was the main aim of fighting the war. He arrived in 1776, and fought in the early part of the war against George Washington's army around Manhattan. It appeared the war would soon be over, and so Cornwallis made plans to return to his family (he now had a son and a daughter). But Washington's crossing of the Delaware and the Battle of Trenton put the British on the back foot, and Cornwallis, sent to hunt Washington down, was out-maneuvered. The war ground on; Cornwallis remained in America and fought in and around Philadelphia, and was sent home for a rest, and with messages for the King from his superiors, at the beginning of 1778.

Most importantly, his beloved wife Jemima was sick, with a liver ailment. He resigned his commission, reluctantly agreed to by the King, to attend to his wife. But she died in February of 1779, and, greatly bereaved, he sought to return to active service. With his reputation as a solid military commander (although he had more than one dispute with other officers, mostly the result of personality conflicts attributable to the others), this was eagerly granted, and by July he was back in New York. Soon, though, he was sent to the Carolinas, where, among other efforts, he drummed up support among Loyalists, as well as among the Creeks and Cherokees, even if neither group proved very reliable. Here he came into contact with, as the superior officer of, Banastre Tarleton, a highly competent and ruthless commander (and the main villain of Gibson's movie). He wasn't, and the British weren't, nearly as ruthless as portrayed there, however. For example, Cornwallis did not hesitate

to execute two British soldiers who raped a local girl. Nonetheless, the southern war was fairly brutal, both because it was a type of civil war and because the Scots-Irish presence there, along with the irregular nature of much of the fighting, conduced to less gentlemanly forms of conflict.

Cornwallis ably implemented his orders, and proved an excellent administrator, solving many problems resulting from laxity and corruption, but the British strategy was confused and often counterproductive. Conflict among the British commanders therefore increased. For example, Tarleton tried, unsuccessfully, to tarnish Cornwallis with responsibility for various British failures, especially at the Battle of Cowpens, in 1781 in South Carolina, where Tarleton was badly defeated by the Americans. Ordered to Yorktown, Cornwallis was cut off from resupply by the French navy, defeated by Washington on land, and surrendered in October of 1781, ending the major fighting of the War of Independence.

Middleton does not spare Cornwallis from some criticism for his conduct in the war. Certainly, however, others bore more of the blame for losing the war, notably Henry Clinton, his immediate superior. Middleton's opinion is that the British simply did not understand "the ideological underpinning of the Revolution," leading to the false assumption that defeating a small number of troublemakers would win the war. In his nature, Cornwallis only strove to do his duty for King and country, and despite errors, did the best he could with the limited resources he was given.

He returned to England, where he was, to his relief, given a cordial reception by the King and praised by all, or nearly all, high and low. (Technically, in that more ceremonial age, he was a prisoner of war on parole, until the final settlement of the war, and thus could not publicly appear at court.) He had to endure public inquiries in Parliament, but emerged unscathed. He occupied himself with various political tasks and his sinecures, though he had trouble with his children. His daughter, at age sixteen, eloped with an Irish ensign of the Foot Guards. This was not a suitable match, and the groom had no chance of earning an income that would keep Cornwallis's daughter in an appropriate social position. Thus, he was forced to supplement their income. Meanwhile, his son was frequently ill, and showing signs of profligacy, which grew worse as he grew older.

Cornwallis needed something to do with his life, and he was still eager to serve. There was no call for more soldiering at the time, but in 1786 he was appointed as both governor-general and commander-in-chief of India—that is, simultaneously the top civilian and military leader, in a complicated place that desperately needed a highly capable chief in both areas. The East India Company was struggling both to turn a profit and to deal with several military conflicts, and Cornwallis had proved himself both an able administrator and an excellent military commander. Moreover, unlike most of the men serving in India, he had a well-deserved reputation for being incorruptible. And he would receive an annual salary in the range of, in today's money, two to three million pounds, solving his money problems (as well as being made a knight of the Garter, increasing his social prestige).

Cornwallis stayed in India for six years, dealing with a very complex situation on many levels. India was governed by a patchwork of principalities, some of whom were independent and some subordinate to the Company. Taxation and the law codes were a mess, and Cornwallis expertly reformed both, taking an appropriately paternalistic attitude to the backwards Indians, with the prime goal of bringing consistency and reducing arbitrariness (as in the Muslim rule that killing someone in a way that did not shed blood was not a capital crime). However, his aim was not to replace local law; the English always governed with a light and enlightened touch. Rather, he aimed to raise the Indians out of their degradation by giving them the tools to do the task mostly themselves. Thus, he put a stop to child slavery, widespread in India, but he could do little about slavery more generally, since it "was sanctioned by both Hindu and Islamic law." The final result of his efforts was the Cornwallis Code, portions of which survived into the twentieth century, and which made huge advances in bringing proper administration to India.

Much of his time was spent dealing with internal Company matters. He reformed the debt of the Company, reducing interest payments to a more acceptable level. He also had to deal with endless requests for preference and patronage from the powerful in England, from the Prince of Wales (later George IV and notoriously undisciplined and dissolute) on down, all of which he refused, furthering his reputation for incorruptibility. He remained unmarried, and moreover, he did not take a

mistress, while he reacted with rage to rumors spread about that he intended to marry the sixteen-year-old daughter of a Company official.

Other difficulties loomed with military affairs. The Company maintained regiments with a rank-and-file of British men and others with a rank-and-file of high-caste Hindus, sepoys. These latter men were skilled and loyal, but they were the exception among the mass of Indians, then as now, and coordinating the two was difficult. Cornwallis needed the military in shape; the Sultan of Mysore, Tipu Sultan, was causing trouble. Mysore was an independent principality and Tipu wanted to expand at the expense of his neighbors. (Middleton notes that today Indians try to point to Tipu as an "Indian nationalist who challenged the imperialist order," but that he was in fact just a "feudal warlord.") Tipu had modernized his army with French help, although the French declined to help him fight his enemies, but it was not enough to defeat the combined forces of the British and their Indian allies. Tipu was defeated in 1792 and forced to give up half his lands (measured by revenue, not geographic expanse).

The Indians, like all peoples with a justified inferiority complex, are very touchy about having their inadequacies pointed out. For example, a few weeks ago on X I pointed out, to refute the constant mendacious claim we need to import Indians to America for "talent," that India has never had any accomplishments, scientific or otherwise, of the first order, despite having a massive population, and showed that Grok agreed with me. Thousands of Indians were tremendously offended, and tried desperately to disprove my very obvious and totally inarguable point by all offering up an identical pathetic short list of extremely modest accomplishments, leading with their ace-in-the-hole, India landing an unmanned probe on the south pole of the Moon a few years ago (for some reason it is important to them it was the south pole). When I pointed out that Americans had put an actual man on the moon sixty years ago, their response was—that was fake, India is Number One! There is no reasoning with such people. Thus, I have great sympathy for Cornwallis, who had to deal with them every day for years. I also suspect that Americans would do well to try to pay attention to the Indian caste system, and to assume that it reflects realities among Indians. It is entirely clear that there are huge differences among Indians, both genetically and culturally, reflected among other places in the caste system, and

if we are to have dealings with Indians, we should be dealing with the quality Indians, of which there are certainly some, while ignoring and totally excluding the dregs.

Such Indian fabulism is on full display in a topic tangentially related to Cornwallis, so-called Mysorean rockets, used by the natives in India. Rockets had been known for hundreds of years in Europe, and longer in China. The Chinese, contrary to myth, did not only use gunpowder, which they invented, for fireworks. But their weapons were very crude and were not improved for a millennium, whereas when the Europeans got their hands on gunpowder, within a few decades they were forging twenty-foot cannon to hurl giant balls which smashed fortifications. As always, it is the Europeans who advanced technology, even in those rare instances they did not invent it.

So it was in India. The British noted the occasional use by Tipu of rockets (though Middleton does not mention them), and if you look on the internet, such as on Wikipedia, there are numerous breathless references to Tipu's mighty advances and sophisticated use of rockets, which they claim William Congreve stole for his famous military rockets. Most of the references in Wikipedia are to "citation needed," but there are some trackable references, mostly to Indian sources, some of which in turn point to actual reference works, such as Werner von Braun's and Frederick Ordway's *History of Rocketry and Space Travel*, published in 1966. I bought all those reference works to check the facts. And, as I expected, it is true that Tipu used rockets (because he could not make cannon, and probably at the instigation of the French), but they were extremely crude and of little effect (although he may have been the first to use iron-cased rockets), and almost everything you can read about them on the internet is either a gross exaggeration or a fiction. Congreve, and Congreve alone, turned them into effective weapons of war. Yet legions of Indians behind their keyboards, when not producing slop to earn money for clicks, spend their time corrupting the internet with their limitless ethnic chauvinism, on this and doubtless thousands of other topics. This is why, of course, trusting the internet, or "AI," which mostly just summarizes errors it finds on the internet, is a mistake, and you should only rely on books, preferably those published before 1960, when ideology started to badly infect the history profession in the West.

In any case, in 1794 Cornwallis returned to England, worn down but still eager to serve. He left the Company on a vastly sounder footing, on every level, than he had found it. Europe, however, was now much changed—the French Revolution had upended the entire European system, and the scent of war was everywhere. After a short period with his family, he was asked to oversee a combination of diplomatic and military work with the Austrians, which he found to be a waste of time. He then became Master of the Ordnance, the administrator of England's military infrastructure, and a role very much in keeping with his talents. In 1798 he was made Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, with the mandate to quell the rebellious Irish, not in the Cromwellian way but with his proven ability to combine military and administrative competence. In 1801 he returned and, with Napoleon Bonaparte now ruling France and threatening England, in 1802 negotiated the short-lived Peace of Amiens.

And, finally, in 1805, unable to retire or sit still, he was again appointed governor-general of India, in part because his successors had proved less able than him. Cornwallis could never relax; he claimed to want to retire to his estate, but when given the chance, hated it. Most likely this inability was a combination of his personality and that when left alone, he brooded on his long-dead wife. Thus, he sought this appointment. But he died only a few months after arriving, aged sixty-six, and is buried in Ghazipur, overlooking the Ganges.

He has had a long afterlife; for a very long time, Cornwallis was a hero in England, while an object of unjustified derision in America, as the focus of British defeat in the War of Independence. In England, he is naturally no longer a hero. Today, when dusky invaders from the Third World rule over Britain, he is treated with contempt, because he is associated with "colonialism" and "imperialism," falsely claimed to be bad things—although Middleton notes that his reputation is "brightest in India," where "his administrative reforms continue to be acknowledged," which speaks well of the Indians. But mostly his memory has just been erased, like so many men who built Britain, brick by brick, over centuries—the vast majority of them, certainly of their leaders, men of the ancient British aristocracy.

In America, aristocracy is both suspect and alien to us. We have little history, at least since the Civil War, of hereditary aristocracy, of

the great house, of men raised into a family and born into an inexorable acceptance of the duties that flow from that position. The American approach, relative to the British, is not necessarily better or worse, merely different. Americans always had more admiration for the self-made man than did the English, and the possibility of rapid social change this allows in turn permits great accomplishment, if the ruling class embodies adequate virtue. The British, however, now have the worst of all worlds, because in their lust to reach the left-wing paradise, Year Zero, for a hundred years those who control Britain have worked to destroy the aristocracy that raised Britain to first place on the entire globe. That aristocracy, tens of thousands of mostly nameless men who selflessly dedicated themselves to Albion, has therefore simply either disappeared or become irrelevant, in the same way as Great Britain itself.

The malignant in England, including many traitors within the ruling class (something that seems to be a recurrent theme in the history of the modern West, an oddity which certainly bears more focus than it usually gets), primarily used radical changes in the legal system to accomplish their ends. Immediately after World War II, confiscatory inheritance taxes were imposed, with the aim of reducing the great to the status of the low, intending to destroy the class which made Britain great, and thereby demolish the generational transmission of traditions and duties. Other age-old legal rules, such as primogeniture and entail (forbidding the alienation, by sale or otherwise, of family property), were voided to the same end. This, combined with the imposed Zeitgeist of what is today called gay race communism, destroyed the aristocracy, while allowing a few to live as museum pieces, as long as they never contradicted the new rules, though even those few are fading now, after multiple generations of punitive inheritance tax and forced kowtowing to the new morality.

No better example of this fall into irrelevance and degradation exists than the monarchy. The putrid Charles III daily worships the invaders of England and endlessly praises Islam, while never, not once, defending or praising Christianity, the ancient rights of Englishmen, or Englishmen themselves. Charles's milquetoast eldest son crows that he has no interest in ever being Defender of the Faith and also never says a word about the destruction of his nation, while his other "son," the fruit of the whorish Diana cuckolding Charles with her riding instructor, married

a run-through American climber who emasculated him so rapidly and thoroughly her accomplishment should be in the Guinness Book of World Records. Henry II, or Richard I, or for that matter any other English monarch of the past thousand years, man or woman, would have all these cretins whipped and thrown into the Tower, never to emerge. Yet this descent was inevitable; these Last Men are just the inescapable result of the destruction of the British aristocracy, because the monarchy and the aristocracy are indissolubly linked.

All this is sad, but as always, there is no return, no way back. The future for England will be either, and most likely, sinking beneath the waves of history, becoming a cesspool no different than an Indian slum or a Somali shantytown, or the harsh rule of a strongman who will restore the nation with fire and sword. Perhaps, in that latter case, a new virtuous ruling class will emerge over time. It will bear no relation and have no connection to dukes, earls, and baronets in the mold of Cornwallis. Maybe new traditions will form, and they will be good and valuable traditions, forming a strong society. But it will not be England, because England is over.

And what of us? America did not destroy its aristocracy; as I say, it never really had any very significant multigenerational aristocracy, and thus destroying it was not a priority for the gay race communists. After all, where are the great Dutch families of New Amsterdam, or the Astors, or the Vanderbilts, or even the Rockefellers? They disappeared on their own. America births the great, certainly, but they do not form a lasting class; thus the proverb, shirtsleeves to shirtsleeves in three generations. Certainly, it would be theoretically desirable to create great houses in America; the Substack writer Paulos has even offered detailed proposals for how such might be created by the wealthy, using patronage as a vehicle of long-lasting influence, and other writers have amplified the same theme. The problem with such proposals, however, is that in the conditions of liquid modernity, and subject to direct and indirect attack, such could not last more than a generation or two, without massive changes in both the legal system and social expectations. No-fault divorce would have to be forbidden, and a spouse who married into a great family disallowed from receiving any portion of the house's assets if divorce occurred for any reason. The eldest son would have to inherit the vast majority of the assets, whatever the wishes of the patriarch (or

the son). Society would have to demand that son, and all the children, carry on the family's legacy, regardless of their personal desires. All of this (except for ending no-fault divorce) is completely antithetical to the American way of thinking.

And perhaps that is the way it should be. We should remember that the American way of formation of the ruling classes, of ferment, of striving, created what was once the greatest and most successful nation ever to grace the globe. It would be foolishness to try to impose on America what made Britain great. An American aristocracy on the British model would be an artificial creation; we should view men like Cornwallis from afar, exemplars of behavior we should emulate in our own circumstances, rather than men whom we should slavishly copy. Virtue is always worth emulating, if applied to our own time with discretion.