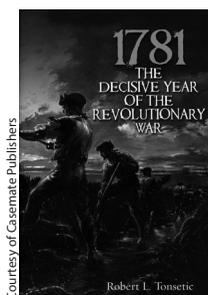


that is why they went to war. Additionally, Van Creveld is too quick to minimize the danger of a nuclear armed Iran. Despite its flaws, this book should be read by those military professionals and historians who are interested in airpower and its future.



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1781: The Decisive Year of the Revolutionary War

by Robert L. Tonsetic

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Robert Tonsetic offers an examination of the year 1781, which he calls the decisive year of the Revolutionary War. While one might debate whether that was the decisive year—as opposed to say 1776 that saw both the political transformation of the war and the all-important survival of Washington’s army—1781 was indisputably one of the most significant years of the war. Tonsetic covers both northern and southern theaters and examines strategic, operational, and tactical level events.

The year opened with a rebellion in the Pennsylvania line that might have been fatal to the cause of independence, however, it ended with the British defeated in all but the formal sense of a treaty. The strategic seat of the war moved from New York, New Jersey, and Philadelphia to Virginia, the Carolinas, and Georgia. The year 1781 opened with battles in the Carolina backcountry at Cowpens (17 January) and Guilford Courthouse (March 15). Although each side won a battle, the British winning the big one, the combination proved disastrous for the Crown. Cornwallis headed for the safety of the coast and ended up at Yorktown waiting for the Royal Navy. In an act of joint and combined cooperation, the Americans’ new ally France provided both an army and a navy to help isolate and besiege Yorktown. Meanwhile, the Americans managed to lose the battles but still recover control of the Carolinas and Georgia. The year ended with Cornwallis’ surrender and the Americans in control of their country, with the exceptions of New York City, Charleston, Savannah, and outposts on Lake Champlain and the Great Lakes. The political debate in London to end the war lasted into 1782, and the Treaty of Paris was not signed until 3 September 1783, but the war was over in all but the most formal sense by the end of 1781. That is a good story, and Tonsetic tells it well.

There is always tension in a survey like this about the ratio between generalities and details. Similarly, in a book about one year of a long war, there is also tension between providing or assuming background knowledge about the historical and strategic setting. Authors grapple with what needs explanation and what the audience should already know. Tonsetic handles these tensions ably. He moves the reader nimbly from broad brush to detailed descriptions,

and a person likely to read this book will probably have the background knowledge the author assumes about armies and politics during the Revolution. The book is interesting and readable; however, a few points deserve mention.

One such point is the Battle of the Capes (5 September 1781). That naval engagement between the British and French fleets off the Chesapeake Bay was critical to the eventual success at Yorktown and tremendously more important to the war than Hobkirk Hill or Eutaw Springs. Although Tonsetic discusses the battle and acknowledges its significance in about a page of text, it comes off as a sideshow. In fact, the Wikipedia entry on the battle is longer, more detailed, and better documented.

Tonsetic provides the reader seven maps—three at the operational level (eastern coast, northern theater, and southern theater) and four tactical (Cowpens, Guilford Courthouse, Eutaw Springs, and Yorktown). While the seven are well chosen, and the publisher rather than the author probably established the limit, four or five more would have been helpful. Maps contribute a great deal more to a book's success than any collection of pictures.

From an academic perspective, the book is light on endnotes, and does not cite or acknowledge some obvious and important sources. For example, the Rhode Island Historical Society for several years (ending in 2005) collected and edited thirteen volumes of *The Papers of General Nathaniel Greene*. While these are priced beyond the grasp of the individual, good academic libraries have them. Since Greene was one of the main characters in the story of 1781, one expects to find material from this excellent collection. More generally, Tonsetic uses some primary sources, but most of the bibliography is secondary material. Since the audience seems to be the general public, this is not as egregious as it would be in a primarily academic work.

Overall, the book is worth reading. Its strength is its breadth—it covers matters that full histories of the war ignore or mention only in passing. That breadth, however, is limited to military events, so those with interests in political, economic, diplomatic, and the social aspects of the year will find scant satisfaction. That should not be a surprise. The book is about the decisive year of the Revolutionary War, not the decisive year of the Revolution. That distinction also clarifies the issue of decisiveness that opened this review. From a military perspective, 1781 was *the* decisive year of the Revolutionary War.