

The Sullivan-Clinton Campaign of 1779

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The American Continental Congress authorized General George Washington to invade Native lands sharing the north-south border of their colonies. The reason for this campaign was to stop the ever-increasing raiding by the British and their Haudenosaunee allies in the latter part of the 1770s. The ever-growing war disrupted the borderlands between Haudenosaunee and Euro-American settlements. For the most part, the American colonials felt the effects of Britain's successful recruiting among Native peoples and their subsequent raids. Along the southern frontier, Cherokee war parties aided the British and attacked American settlements. In the Ohio River Valley a coalition of Native nations - including the Lenni Lenape, Shawnee, Wyandot, Wea, Odawa, Miami, and Seneca - used British supplies, at times British troops, to preserve their control of the region.

By the end of 1778, General George Washington responded to the colonial governments' appeal for assistance on the growing British-Native attacks in the west. The theater of the war between the British and the Americans shifted to the western and southern theaters, and the British encouraged their Native allies to attack American holdings in the Northwest and to cross Haudenosaunee lands to attack American colonies. General Washington and American diplomats failed to influence most of the Haudenosaunee to their cause. Only the Oneida and Tuscarora joined the American effort.

The frontier settlements of Pennsylvania and New York were needed by the American cause in three ways. First, this region provided much needed agricultural products for the American cause. The British-allied attacks destroyed settlements and active duty farmers caused agricultural productivity to plummet. Second, these areas were strategic in the separation of British coastal strength from their forts and settlements on the Great Lakes. Additionally, these American settlements served as trade centers, surveillance outposts to monitor British maneuvering on and near the Great Lakes, as well as function as potential staging areas for American counter-strikes. Third, these areas were the homelands of the Haudenosaunee, Lenni Lenape, or Shawnee, which meant these lands held great potential for future American settlement. The British and their Indigenous allies campaigns were so destructive that Washington knew that many colonists and the Continental Congress wanted to end Native violence and claim Native lands to later sell.

The American plan to invade Haudenosaunee lands idled for over a year. Washington needed to stop British attacks, demoralize their Haudenosaunee allies from further attacking American settlements - Wyoming, Cherry Valley, Oriskany - and, most importantly, divert the British forces to the Northwest. In 1779, as Washington mobilized an expedition of Iroquoia, he chose Major General John Sullivan to lead the primary leg and Brigadier General James Clinton to lead a second leg, under Sullivan's command.

Washington, Sullivan, and Clinton organized an invasion through Iroquoia to drive the British back to Fort Niagara. Washington decided on a military strategy known as “Total War” to punish the British-allied nations and force them to abandon their homelands. His methodology was simple: march west; engage the Indigenous army and any civilians; and steal and destroy housing, crops, and goods. Though, his primary object was to either destroy or displace the enemy. In his May 31, 1779, order to Sullivan, Washington writes:

“The Expedition you are appointed to command is to be directed against the hostile tribes of the Six Nations of Indians, with their associates and adherents. The immediate objects are the total destruction and devastation of their settlements, and the capture of as many prisoners of every age and sex as possible. It will be essential to ruin their crops now in the ground and prevent their planting more.

I would recommend, that some post in the center of the Indian Country, should be occupied with all expedition, with a sufficient quantity of provisions whence parties should be detached to lay waste all the settlements around, with instructions to do it in the most effectual manner, that the country may not be merely overrun, but destroyed.

But you will not by any means listen to any overture of peace before the total ruinment of their settlements is effected. Our future security will be in their inability to injure us and in the terror with which the severity of the chastisement they receive will inspire them.”

Initially, Sullivan had misgivings about engaging in Total War. First, he especially had misgivings about burning towns and crops during the summer months. Second, he doubted the value such an agenda would have on the Haudenosaunee and British. Ultimately, Washington convinced Sullivan that the expedition was a punitive one and Sullivan agreed.

Originally, the expedition involved the forces of Sullivan and Clinton working from an east to west direction. As initial arrangements were being made for the Sullivan-Clinton campaign, Fort Pitt commander Colonel Daniel Brodhead petitioned Washington to march north long the Allegheny River to destroy British-allied Munsee, Lenni Lenape, Mingo, and Seneca towns, and afterwards join the Sullivan and Clinton expeditions to drive the British from Fort Niagara.

Brodhead went on a month-long campaign north following the Allegheny River. Afterward on September 4, 1779, he wrote a report in which he reported no deaths and limited armed engagement. Colonel Daniel Brodhead’s report of his march needs to be reevaluated. A career driven officer who lobbied General Washington to be allowed to mount the expedition. Brodhead’s knowledge of the cultural geography of the upper Allegheny was limited, and yet his report did not identify any real setbacks. Brodhead wrote a slightly jumbled report in which he confused the sequences of events. Most importantly, he reported no troop losses for the entire campaign.

The Sullivan-Clinton campaign became the most important military event of 1779. Nearly one-third of the American fighting forces were dedicated to the mission. Though the campaign was organized with great difficulty. In terms of American propaganda, it was successful and executed with a small loss of American life. The chief importance was it served as the death nail for the Haudenosaunee Confederacy during the American Revolution. While the six nations of the Confederacy remained active on the frontier; the Confederacy, as a governmental organization, extinguished its fire until the Nations reconvened at Buffalo Creek.