Ranger Units of the American Revolution and their Contribution to the War and Future Warfighting Tactics

It has largely been common knowledge, with many revolutionary scholars agreeing, that the British forces were far superior in terms of military professionalism, technology, proficiency, and even discipline regarding conventional tactics and strategy. In fact throughout the war of American Independence, with the exception of a few unusually well disciplined regiments, there was a distinct lack of American forces who could stand up to the British army in a pitched battle in an open field. This systematic deficiency in the proper European conduct of warfare led to the almost immediate realization and subsequent implementation of elite mobile units of light infantry who specialized in the practice of irregular and guerrilla warfare tactics, offering the insurgent patriots the best chance of success as a weaker force coming into armed conflict with a more conventionally powerful enemy. Eventually, these Ranger units would come to be so valued that both sides would implement to more or less the same degree, in the long run coming to fundamentally change the outcome of the war and enact a gradual shift in war-fighting tactics, with their influence still being felt to this day.

By 1775 there was a clearly established approach towards fighting. This 18th century warfare revolved around the centrality of line infantry, eventually evolving to become what is known today as Napoleonic Warfare. This is characterized by intense drilling of the soldiers, large-scale choreographed movement, and the combined assaults between infantry, cavalry, and artillery, short-range musket fire, and bayonet charges.1 Standard formations would typically take the form of two to four ranks of foot soldiers drawn up side by side in rigid alignment, trading volleys, thereby maximizing the effect of their firepower until one side finally captured the battlefield through a bayonet charge. This style of combat left little in the way of individual bravery, but promoted the idea of group heroism, the tactical fact of life being that a regiment would be rated not by how well they could incapacitate the enemy, but rather how well they could stand up to receiving volley after volley.

These traditional methods ran in stark contrast to the tactics colonials had been forced to acquire, fighting Indian nations over the years. And, given the experience accumulated by the British in previous conflicts they had fought on the North American Continent, it was thought that there would be a general knowledge and appreciation of the colonial’s strengths and weaknesses. There was especially the lessons to be learned during the French and Indian wars, especially such examples as the defeat of Braddock near Fort Duquesne in 1756, in which around two thirds of the British forces would be lost.2 This would be an

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1 "Fighting Techniques of the Napoleonic Age 1792–1815: Equipment, Combat Skills, and Tactics" by Robert B. Bruce, Iain Dickie, Kevin Kiley, and Michael F. Pavkovic, Published by Thomas Dunne Books, 2008

education which George Washington, a survivor of that battle, would not personally forget. However, despite this opportunity for foresight, in British custom, guerrilla warfare was still largely considered an abomination not worthy of gentlemanly conduct; a recognition of its value would come only later in the war.

The uniqueness of the Revolution era Ranger units cannot be overstated, having been the first examples of their kind to implement irregular tactics since the widespread use of powder weapons and subsequent adoption of line infantry strategy. Their origination, however, begins with the advancing weapons technology, specifically the rifle. The standard military firearm of the time was the flint-lock musket. It had a maximum range of about 125 yards, and with a good marksmen shooting at a man-sized target at 100 yards, you could reasonably expect to hit it about 40% of the time. The rifle itself is different from the musket in that it was fitted with spiral grooves in the barrel, enabling the bullet to rotate in flight, giving it both extended range and accuracy. It was introduced into North America around 1700, as a result of increased immigration from Switzerland, which was the only part of the world at the time where the rifle was in use.

The Rangers themselves epitomize the opposite of stereotypical European warfare. The beginnings of these units were drawn from the many colonists who were former veterans of the French and Indian wars who had learned the hard way the withering effects of guerrilla tactics. Therefore these men were now more inclined towards bush fighting than open-field battles. These were the men that would populate the ranks of the ranger companies. Light troops acted outside the line of battle, where the smoke prevented the operator from seeing his target. Therefore they relied on surprise and quick action when striking, most often positioning themselves in woods and in rough terrain. The power of their rifles was best utilized at longer ranges, lending them immensely greater accuracy and making them ideal for ambushes and hit-and-run tactics, due to their propensity of almost always allowing themselves an avenue of retreat at all times to ensure they could avoid close quarters battle. It was through the implementation of these irregular tactics that the rangers were so adept at turning large and powerful armies into slow, reactive, and confused bodies while maintaining the advantage of surprise and deceit.

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6 At the time of the rifle's introduction to America it was a short, heavy, clumsy, and not entirely accurate weapon. However, over time American gunsmiths made improvements on it to make it become the ideal marksmen’s rifle of the era.


Despite these attributes which seem objectively beneficial, Ranger units still met some heavy resistance in theory and, admittedly, some complications in practice. In practice, there were some deficits that had to be addressed and overcome. To begin with, the rifles, due to the spiraled grooves in the barrel, fouled far more quickly and were far more difficult to load. While muskets could be fired between three to five times a minute in the heat of battle (depending on the proficiency of the soldier), riflemen would be lucky to deliver two shots within that same time frame. In addition to this, rifles at that time were not equipped with bayonet attachments, thereby leaving them unable to stand against bayonet charges and cavalry. This necessitated often attaching regular troops to guerrilla units, who without their support would be unable to hold for any length of time. The inherent weaknesses of the rifle are in fact best represented by General Wayne, an ardent denouncer of the use of the rifle, in a 1778 letter to the board of war requesting to have the rifles used within his force exchanged for muskets, writing…

"I don’t like rifles — I would almost as soon face an enemy with a good musket and bayonet without ammunition — as with ammunition without a bayonet; for altho’ there are not many instances of bloody bayonets yet I am confident that one bayonet keeps off another… The enemy knowing the defenseless state of our riflemen rush on — they fly — mix with or pass thro’ the other troops and communicate fears that is ever incident to a retiring corps — this would not be the case if the riflemen had bayonets — but it would be still better if good muskets and bayonets were put into the hands of good marksmen and rifles entirely laid aside. For my own part, I never wish to see one — at least without a bayonet”

Despite the litany of grievances against the use of rifles, their shortcomings, and the ungentlemanly conduct that was perpetrated through their use, there was still no denial in the fact that they performed to their intended use remarkably well. And in the hands of such skilled men as those who made up the ranks of Ranger units, they were a downright hazard to anyone on the receiving end. As shown in the frustrations expressed by a british soldier in a letter…

"The provincials, I am clear, will never stand us in a fair line, but behind hedges, walls, or breast-works; their fire is truly formidable, and their rifles peculiarly adapted to take off the officers of a whole line as it marches to an attack.”

**British Rangers**

Considering that Britain was the predominant power in this situation, it seems fitting that their experience with irregular warfare is addressed first. Overall, the British relationship with their Ranger outfits can best be described as conflicting. Their first induction into the practice of asymmetric warfare can be traced to the French and Indian war with Robert Rogers and his Roger’s Rangers. Robert Rogers himself was a native New Hampshire man who acquired Indian bush craft in his youth, and put it to good

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use early on following an Indian Raid on his parents homestead. Following the French and Indian war, Rogers would go on to do an assortment of odd jobs before coming back during the outbreak of the American Revolution to form another Ranger company, the Queen’s Rangers.

However, it cannot be overlooked that at the beginning of the Revolution, as a result of the British disbanding their existing Ranger units, (Including Roger’s Rangers) England had no Rifleman. Because of this they called on provincial units of German *Jagers*. Despite this, the *Jager* rifles were still no match to the American rifles wielded by Colonial counterparts. They were essentially the same rifles that were brought over back in 1700, hindered by low velocity, strong recoil, limited accuracy range, slow to fire, and very heavy. So therefore when Rogers came back to again raise another unit, this time in New York, mostly drawn from Loyalists from western Connecticut, and with men from the Queen's Loyal Virginia Regiment, it served as a blessing to those in London who had forgotten what warfare was best suited to the North American continent.

The Queen’s Rangers, being the most famous of the various irregular units utilized at various times by the British, were very distinctive through not only their distinctive drab green uniforms, going against the standard practice of gaudy and flashy uniforms, were made specifically for the purpose of concealment, but for their incredible discipline expected of them to a man. They were trained relentlessly, not for parade, but for active field service. They were never to march in slow time, and were directed to fire with precision and steadiness. The unit itself went through several commanders, finally being placed under the direction of John Graves Simcoe in October of 1777, following the battle of Brandywine. It was under Simcoe’s leadership that the Queen’s would ultimately become one of the most successful British regiments in the war.

It is worth noting that while the Queen’s fell under the classification of a guerrilla unit, there were some differences to be noticed between them and our conception of what guerrilla warfare should be. For instance, while they were consistently instructed in the practice of accurate firing, they payed attention to, above all else, the use of bayonet to a point of total reliance on that weapon. This shows the stark contrast between the British and American Ranger units and how the British still showed a heavy reliance, and preference, for the use of the bayonet. Also bringing to point that the Queen’s (with the exception of a few marksmen) did not make use of the long rifles which gave other units such as the Colonial’s Morgan’s riflemen the distinct advantage in range and accuracy which was so often necessary in the American landscape.

Notwithstanding the complication of methods, the Queen’s Rangers still showed considerable reliability in their actions, forming a reputation of remarkable trade skills in innovative tactics. So much so that, according to Simcoe’s journal, while in the process of storming a rebel encampment, “the whole

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17 Robert Rogers was ultimately forced out of command of the Queen’s Rangers due to a perceived ineffectiveness likely brought about through years of hard drinking and gambling following the French and Indian War.

corps followed with so much silence, that the enemy's sentinels were passed without alarm, and this
division gained the heights in the rear, and could see the whole chain of sentinels walking below them."

Or during a separate incident where it’s claimed that, “At New-Bridge Serjeant M’Laughlin, with six of
the Rangers in advance, fell in with and either killed or took the whole of a small rebel out-post.” The
reputation of the Queen’s, and especially of Simcoe, became extensive enough to warrant discussion
among British elites concerning their activities. In a letter between General Clinton and Lord Germaine
(May, 1780), General Clinton espouses upon the courage of Simcoe and the success he has led the
Queen’s Rangers towards achieving…

"Lieut. Col. Simcoe has been at the head of a battalion since October, 1777; and since that time has been the
perpetual advance of the army. The history of the corps under his command is a series of gallant, skilful, and
successful enterprises against the enemy, without a single reverse. The Queen’s Rangers have killed or taken
twice their own numbers. Col. Simcoe himself has been thrice wounded; and I do not scruple to assert, that his
successes have been no less the fruit of the the most extensive extent of his knowledge of his profession which
study and the experience of within his reach could give him, than of the most watchful and shining courage." 

The Queen’s Rangers would also see extensive action during the Philadelphia campaign, including the highly successful, and highly controversial surprise attack (planned and executed by Simcoe) at the Battle of Crooked Billet. 

While technically not fitting the criteria of an actual battle, the engagement which took place at Crooked Billet, named after the Crooked Billet Tavern nearby in what in now present-day Hatboro, Pennsylvania, serves as an ideal example not only for showing the combat skills exercised by the Queen’s Rangers, but as a nearly perfectly executed surprise assault on an unsuspecting force. Fought on May 1, 1778, this was a planned surprise attack in the early hours of the morning against Brigadier General John Lacey and three regiments of Pennsylvania militia, who were literally caught sleeping. Simcoe devised it as a "pincer"-style attack, with his troops attacking from the north and east, leaving the enemy only narrow avenues of escape. During the brief fighting which ensued, it became so savage, that almost immediately following the battle, reports surfaced that the British and Loyalist troops had committed numerous atrocities, including the murder of prisoners-of-war and setting fire to the wounded American soldiers. The majority of Lacey’s soldiers who witnessed these alleged events maintained their accusations for the remainder of their lives. As it is however, there remains only one viable account of the engagement from that morning, coming from the Pennsylvania Gazette:

"Lacey, at first, made some appearance of opposition, but, in a few seconds, was thrown into confusion, obliged
to retreat with precipitation, and were pursued about 4 miles. They left between 80-100 dead on the field; and on
Friday, between 50-60 prisoners, besides waggoners, with 10 of their waggons loaded with baggage, flour, salt,
whiskey, &c. were brought in by the troops on their return: What number of rebels were wounded, we have not
been able to learn. Besides the above waggons, 3 were burnt after taking out the horses; also all the huts and

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Press, 1844. Original, 1787. Pg 87

Press, 1844. Original, 1787. Pg 140

Press, 1844. Original, 1787. Pg ix-x

22 Boatner, Mark M. "Crooked Billet, Pennsylvania" in Encyclopedia of the American Revolution. New YorK: D.
what baggage could not be brought off. The royal party did not lose a single man on this occasion, and have only 7 men wounded, and 2 horses killed.”

At the end of the day, the British inflicted significant damage on Lacey and his forces, who were forced to retreat into the neighboring Bucks County. All told American forces lost around 20 percent of his militia killed, wounded, or captured, in addition to ten wagon-fulls of supplies. Whereas the Queen’s and additional British forces walked away with a reported seven men wounded.

**American Rangers**

Throughout the course of the Revolution, there were an innumerable amount of militias, minutemen, and scouts on the patriot side of the conflict. This however is unsurprising, given that the beginnings of any true insurgency begin with some level of asymmetric combat, the primary aim of which is to constrain the ability of the powerful nation to intervene rapidly and at relatively low cost. Despite, however, the proliferation of these irregular colonial units, there is truly only one which truly fits the bill of being a true Ranger unit, having perfected the use of guerrilla tactics, that one example being Daniel Morgan and his force of Morgan’s riflemen.

It was only throughout the ardent support of both Adams and Hancock that one of the first acts of the Continental Congress was the approval vote to raise a detachment of ten companies of “expert riflemen”. In this they unanimously elected Daniel Morgan to captain the unit. Morgan himself was an incredibly tough frontiersman who had already gained an esteemed reputation from surviving Braddock’s expedition, and then subsequently surviving a typically fatal punishment of 499 lashes for punching a superior officer, staying conscious and keeping count with the drummer the entire time. He then later served as a rifleman in the provincial forces assigned to protect the western settlements from Indian incursions. Morgan used his pre-Revolutionary reputation to good effect, bringing together the best he could. He decided to scrounge from the colony’s frontier counties where men were known for “amazing hardihood” gained through life-long frontier living. These hunters and veteran Indian fighters were able to travel long distances without provisions, and display remarkable proficiency with the rifle. Out of all the possible men, Morgan only accepted the most accurate marksmen, some sources writing that the best American rifleman could, in a good light and with no wind, hit a man’s head at 200 yards and his body at 300, an unprecedented feat for the time. In some people’s opinion, such as governor Patrick Henry, that perhaps Morgan was too selective, as an explanation for their deficit in numbers.

Morgan’s Rangers were trained rigorously to be fiercely independent, to the point where merely their existence was seen to be a direct contradiction to the lifestyle of the average soldier. For instance,

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23 Royal Pennsylvania Gazette (Philadelphia), May 5, 1778.


they addressed their officers by their given names and refused to abide by any military protocols, and when the Army was called to attention, the Rangers simply lined up, standing at ease. This sense of leniency however served a higher purpose of instilling in the rifleman the mindset that they were there for the one purpose of fighting, with anything else being purely superfluous. This allowed them to be incredibly efficient soldiers individually, emphasizing thin skirmish lines, individual marksmanship, and encouraging sharpshooters to pick off enemy officers. This would come into play during one of their first combat experiences at Boston Neck, where Morgan’s riflemen were tasked with harassing Colonel William Howe as he retreated through New Jersey. Morgan did so by having his 500 riflemen target and terrorize the enemy troops as they moved, using their long range capabilities to do so from safety, an unusual and controversial tactic for that day. Nonetheless, these tactics were enormously effective for the purpose of accomplishing larger strategic goals. Because of this, the rifle corps were valued very highly, to the point where at one point Washington sent Lieutenant Colonel Alexander Hamilton to secure Morgan’s riflemen from Gates’ command.29

The first large scale battle that Morgan’s riflemen were involved in was the failed attack on Quebec with Benedict Arnold, who Morgan was close friends with. While this entire endeavor was a failure from the beginning of the march in which Arnold’s effective force was cut down to 600 from the original 1,100 effective fighting men,30 all the way to the end of the fighting where Morgan and many of the men with him were captured. Morgan still gained widespread recognition for gallantry and fighting in the front alongside his men the entire time, where in one of the accounts, it describes when Morgan and his riflemen ended up in the vanguard of the force. Morgan, “came face to face with a British squad. When the lieutenant in command called for him to surrender, Morgan shot him through the head. The redcoats fled for the barricade, pursued by the riflemen.”31

Once Morgan again regained his freedom, he came back to find that the rifle corps, as well as a promotion, was still waiting for him, all on the command of General Washington.

“As Col: Hugh Stephenson of the Rifle Regiment ordered lately to be raised, is dead, according to the information I have received, I would beg leave to recommend to the particular notice of Congress, Captain Daniel Morgan, just returned among the prisoners from Canada, as a fit and proper person to succeed to the vacancy occasioned by his death… His [Morgan’s] Conduct as an officer on the expedition with General Arnold last fall, his intrepid behavior in the Assault on Quebec when the brave Montgomery fell; —the inflexible attachment he professed to our Cause during his imprisonment and which he perseveres in; added to these his residence in the place Col: Stephenson came from and his Interest and influence in the same circle and with such men as are to compose such a Regiment; all in my Opinion entitle him to the favor of Congress, and lead me to believe, that in his promotion, the States will gain a good and valuable Officer for the sort of Troops he is particularly recommended to command.”32

Despite the wealth of experience gained throughout the war up to this point, it was the Saratoga Campaign in which Morgan’s riflemen would truly prove their worth on the battlefield.


30 Smith (1907), Volume 1, p. 152
31 Journal of Stocking, in Roberts, March to Quebec, 565.
32 Washington to Hancock, Sept. 28, 1776, Fitzpatrick, ed., Writings of Washington, VI, 128.
The Saratoga Campaign marks one of the most influential moments in the war, with Morgan’s riflemen being at the center of it. Saratoga itself is commonly broken up into two separate engagements, those being the battle of Freeman’s Farm, and the battle of Bemis Heights. These two encounters would ultimately come to change the entire course of the war, bringing a sense of legitimacy to the Patriot forces which would not be ignored going forward.

The first battle of Saratoga began the morning of September 19, when sentries reported that Burgoyne was advancing in three columns on the American positions near Bemis heights. Due to skirmishes in previous days, Morgan’s men had driven all British scouts back within their own lines, leaving Burgoyne with only vague information on the American positions. All the same, he was still determined to to bring on an engagement. During the course of the engagement Morgan’s riflemen were at all times stationed in some of the most intense portions of the battle, beginning by accidentally running their advance force head on into the British main force. This accident was nearly disastrous for the corps, but Morgan, recognizing the error in time, was able to call back his men to regroup and reoccupy a favorable position. From there they were able to sustain effective enough fire to force a temporary withdrawal. Quickly reforming however, Burgoyne moved up artillery for the purpose of blasting the riflemen out of their positions and out of the trees they had climbed. While a good tactic in theory, by the time the redcoat artillerymen trained their cannons into the woods, Morgan’s sharpshooters had trained their weapons, and went to work. By late afternoon, nearly all the gunners were dead or wounded, silencing the heavy guns. From that point onwards, the entire battle was a series of rolling the enemy back, only to give way again in the face of counter-attacks. This allowed the Patriot regulars at certain points to even capture the artillery previously freed of its operators. Morgan’s riflemen were almost certainly the most successful unit that day. The riflemen alone were primarily responsible for the reduction of the British 62nd regiment to fewer than sixty effective fighting men, as well as annihilating nearly every officer from many of the other companies. However, it would also be false to claim that they were able to manage these feats by themselves. These riflemen would’ve been far less effective, and especially vulnerable without the support of Dearborn’s regulars, whose bayoneted muskets prevented the enemy from being able to charge their positions.

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34 Despite technically capturing the artillery, they were rendered unusable due to the remaining artilleryman disabling the pieces in anticipation of capture.

By the end of the day, the total casualties inflicted at Freeman’s Farm equaled to Gates’ 320 men killed, wounded, and missing, to Burgoyne’s nearly 600. Within the riflemen’s ranks, despite being the longest engaged unit that day, were merely 4 killed, 8 wounded, and 3 missing. Very soon after the battle of Freeman’s Farm, a request from Washington was sent asking for the return of Morgan’s riflemen, which Gates staunchly resisted in a letter saying, “In this situation, your Excellency would not wish me to part with the corps the army of General Burgoyne are most afraid of.”

For the remainder of the time between the battles of Freeman’s Farm and Bemis Heights, Morgan’s riflemen would stay occupied causing considerable headaches for the British in their frequent raids on the pickets and sniping men from treetop positions.

The second battle for Saratoga would wait until the 7th of October. During this time Burgoyne was desperately hoping that Clinton would show to reinforce his depleted forces. When it became clear this would not happen, Burgoyne resolved himself to throw everything he had into the fight in a last ditch attempt to break through and continue on to Albany. He began by extending over 1,500 men across a wheat field, ultimately giving them no clear line of sight to the American positions as they were firmly entrenched within the woods surrounding the field.

It was ultimately Morgan who came up with double envelopment tactic, where his men would crawl close to and attack the British right flank while a simultaneous attack took place on the British left flank. The British left fell remarkably quickly when a poorly timed charge disintegrated under a volley, forcing the British grenadiers to fall back again to the main body. Meanwhile, Morgan’s riflemen worked spectacularly on the British right, in conjunction with Dearborn’s regulars. Where the riflemen would target officers and thin the ranks, sowing confusion, while the regulars would get within range, deliver a volley, and then drive the enemy back with bayoneted charges.

Following soon thereafter, Morgan moved towards the left of Burgoyne’s center.

It was around this point that Morgan spotted British General Fraser commanding the British light infantry and 24th regiment, who were putting up stiff resistance. Believing Fraser’s efforts at rallying his men were prolonging the fight, he ordered one of his best marksmen, Timothy Murphy to kill him. Murphy ultimately brought down Fraser within three shots, quickly followed by a forth which brought

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38 Graham, Morgan, 161-62; Nickerson, Turning Point of the Revolution, 360.
down General Burgoyne’s aide, carrying a message. Realizing it was over Burgoyne attempted a
retreat northward along the Hudson, but General Gates, to his credit, foresaw this, and dispatched units to
surround the remainder of his force. With the possibility of escape eliminated, Burgoyne officially
surrendered on October 17, near the village of Saratoga.

It is the opinion of more than one authority that by all accounts the defeat at Saratoga should
have ended the war. This itself is not as far fetched an idea as it may seem, and lends credence to the
belief that this is one of the most influential engagements of the war. With the American victory at
Saratoga, the entire case for the Continental Army was legitimized, from their cause to their ability to
hold ground with the preeminent power in the world, as seen in the comments of Lafayette to Washington
in which he proclaimed that the riflemen were, “above even theyr reputation.” It was this
legitimization which brought into the conflict the support of the French and eventually, the Spanish. At
this point it is the belief that the practical move would’ve been to make peace with the colonies on
whatever terms, essentially cutting their losses, and then to turn their attention (and resources) to
protecting the rest of their interests around the globe.

The guerrilla tactics seen on both sides of the conflict contributed greatly towards the progression
of the war towards the ultimate outcome. There are some who believe that these tactics played more of an
annoyance role in the larger picture, only really becoming influential in the sense that that they forced the
allocation of a trivial amount of resources towards addressing the issue. It is my argument however, that
the influence of irregular tactics, and asymmetric warfare in general, played a far greater role in allowing
for the Americans to achieve the victory and independence they fought for.

In order to survive the early stages of the insurgency, the Americans’ success came largely as a
result of guerrilla style fighting, further aided along by fighting amongst a predominantly sympathetic
population. With the use of these tactics starting to take off in 1776, the rapid increase of guerrilla raids
and assassinations of messengers escalated to the point where the British were forced to post guards of
upwards of fifty men to be sent along to protect any given messenger. And while this information alone
supports the hypothesis of guerrilla warfare taking an annoyance role in the big picture, it is only a
portion of the overall impact. What this approach towards warfare really allowed for was in a sense a
means to an end. A grand strategy of shifting from guerrilla to conventional warfare at the right phase of
the insurgency was intended to work to the advantage of the disadvantaged Colonials. In the long run this
allowed the Army to perform the necessary decisive stroke with conventional armies and provide the

39 “Timothy Murphy: Frontier Rifleman”. New York State Military Museum and Veterans Research Center.
40 Higginbotham, Don. Daniel Morgan: Revolutionary Rifleman. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina
Press, 1961. Pg. 73-74
41 Louis Gottschalk, ed., The Letters of Lafayette to Washington, 1777-1779 (New York, 1941), 7; Gottschalk, Lafayette Joins
the American Army (Chicago, 1937), 82.
Complex Opponents from the Ancient World to the Present, ed. Williamson Murray and Peter R. Mansoor, 72–103
43 Alexander, Jason S. “The American Experience in Irregular War: From Practice To Policy, and Back Again.” The
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Complex Opponents from the Ancient World to the Present, ed. Williamson Murray and Peter R. Mansoor, 72–103
Americans with international legitimacy following victory. Under this argument, the application of asymmetric warfare was the preeminent factor contributing to the American victory.

Admittedly, given time, it is entirely likely the British would’ve broken and destroyed the various guerrilla bands harassing them. Nevertheless, it is because of the support of the the regular army, through the transition of irregular to conventional, even though they were weaker than the British, forced them [British] to hold most of their army together in larger units to confront the Colonial regulars, thereby not allowing the dispersement necessary to beat the guerrillas. This created a situation in which the British could only force expensive tactical victories at strategically unsustainable costs.

More than just influencing the course of the Revolution, the irregular and guerrilla tactics employed by the Ranger units on either side also had lasting impacts on the way warfare would be conducted in the future, with some traits still in effect to this day. In the specific case of Morgan’s Riflemen, it has been famously quoted by Revolutionary scholar Gordon Wood, who stated, “Morgan’s success will be more important in its distant consequences than it was on the day of victory.” This statement while directed at the lasting legacy of Daniel Morgan, also applies more broadly to others who participated in such activities during the Revolutionary years.

As a prime example, Robert Rogers, the man who formed the British Queen’s Rangers is interestingly enough still lionized to this day as the father of the contemporary US Army Rangers, all of whom are required to know by heart the twenty-eight rules of his “plan of discipline.” This adulation, while applicable to his wider career, is often narrowed down to one specific event in his earlier years.

He was the first person to ever recognize the offensive capabilities of ranger units, and put his theory to the test in a retaliatory raid against a Native American Abenaki village. In the course of this raid, him and his men trekked, unnoticed through over 100 miles of wilderness, attacked the village with complete surprise, and then proceeded to exfiltrate back the way they came, staying just barely ahead of a revenge party of natives the entire way. This particular action alone highlights two of the most important aspects of irregular warfare today. The “long range penetration” and the ability to “observe, orient, decide, and act” more quickly than one’s foes. It’s now known contemporarily as the OODA loop, and is recognized as a key element in small unit military effectiveness.

The study of these units, and their consistent ability to use their strengths to effectively square off with stronger powers has since inspired countless other resistance movements across the globe, including our modern-day enemies. As seen today with our Coalition forces in Iraq, we have become, in a sense,  

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colonial era Britain. We were more than sufficiently equipped to decisively defeat a decrepit, dysfunctional and poorly motivated army but have since been inadequate to contend with the guerrilla forces seen in the wake of conventional victory.51

Overall, the use of irregular warfare tactics allows the best chance of success when a weaker foe comes into armed conflict with a more conventionally powerful adversary. This realization comes from the recognition that they do not need to meet in traditional “force on force” battle conducted according to historical conventions and the dictates of the stronger enemy. We as Americans were eventually able to defeat the British on conventional terms and with conventional armies. Yet, to survive the early stages of the insurgency, the Colonial’s success came largely as a result of a strategy of shifting from a guerrilla style fighting amongst a sympathetic population to more conventional terms. As for our then-enemy, it wasn’t until too late that most British officials recognized that the American continent was ill-suited for the conventional warfare of the Old World. We as a fledgling country were able to comprehend this fact, and over the years have built upon the intrinsic value in asymmetric warfare as seen in not only our own current irregular capabilities, but of those of other actors around the world.

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