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Virginia Battles Lord Dunmore

Virginia had only a few thousand Tories at most, but they were concentrated in a few strategic areas. Aided by Lord Dunmore, the highly energetic royal governor, they gave the American rebels a good deal of trouble. Apart from the Tory predominance on the Eastern Shore, the Loyalists were concentrated among the Scottish merchants in Virginia's commercial city of Norfolk and on the extreme northwestern frontier around Pittsburgh. After the rejection by the Virginia Assembly of Lord North's conciliation scheme in June 1775, Dunmore fled with over a hundred British regulars to a British ship in the harbor of congenial Norfolk.

Toryism was strong though not predominant on the American frontiers, undoubtedly in part because of a suspicion that the American governments might not be able or eager to supply armed forces to push back the Indians. Toryism on the Virginia frontier was concentrated around Pittsburgh (now in Pennsylvania), near where Fort Pitt had been dismantled three years before. Under Dunmore, Virginia, during 1773 and 1774, had aggressively expanded its territory. Dunmore had seized control of the Pittsburgh region, arresting and expelling Pennsylvania officials and creating a new West Augusta County there for Virginia. Furthermore, in "Dunmore's War," the governor had defied the Proclamation Line of 1763 and had driven the Shawnee Indians out of Kentucky.

When the Revolutionary War began, John Connolly, a physician, Tory militia official, and faithful ally of Dunmore and Britain, conceived an audacious plan. Visiting Dunmore on his ship during August 1775, Connolly brought with him a pledge of loyalty to Dunmore and the crown

from several hundred inhabitants of West Augusta County, including the Indian traders Alexander McKee and Simon Girty. More important, Dunmore and Connolly agreed to the latter's scheme (the "Connolly Plot"), in which Dunmore would raise a troop of Tories in the east, while Connolly, made a lieutenant colonel, would winter at the British fort of Detroit. There Connolly would form a regiment of British regulars and Tory militia into the Royal Foresters, after which he and McKee, with a troop of Indians, would march up the Ohio and seize Pittsburgh. Dunmore would march west, and Connolly east, perhaps enlisting oppressed indentured servants as he went, to meet at Alexandria in northern Virginia, cutting the American colonies in two. In early October a peace conference at Pittsburgh between Indians and representatives of Virginia and Pennsylvania had resulted in an agreement that provided for Indian neutrality in exchange for an American pledge to maintain the Proclamation Line of 1763 as the limit of western settlement. This agreement defied the fact that the line had already been rendered *de facto* obsolete by the white victory of Dunmore's War over the Shawnees and by the subsequent beginning of the settlement of Kentucky. McKee and Connolly were agreeable to this arrangement as a short-term tactic until their proposed campaign could begin.

It was an ambitious and undeniably unworkable scheme; but at any rate, it never had a chance, as Connolly and two aides were arrested shortly afterward by alert militia at Frederick, Maryland. Connolly was brought before the Continental Congress for trial and promptly imprisoned. As for McKee, he was soon confined to Pittsburgh by the local Committee of Correspondence, headed by George Croghan, for corresponding with an official of the British army.

The collapse of the Connolly Plot left Lord Dunmore with his forces based upon the sea. For the first time in the war, the British now found themselves a small armed force facing a large, unorganized, hostile population. Except for the initial shock at Concord, the British forces had encountered regular American armies (as at Boston) or fought in friendly or neutral territory (in Canada), but now Lord Dunmore was facing the essence of counter-revolutionary warfare. Since it is waged by relatively small though heavily armed forces of the government or its supporters against the mass of the civilian population, counter-revolutionary warfare must needs be mobile, swift, and devoted to hit-and-run raiding. Even so, it is a grave mistake, made by many analysts and historians, to confuse this kind of raiding with true guerrilla warfare.

Guerrilla warfare must rest on the active support of the bulk of the populace; the guerrilla troop is the armed spearhead of the revolutionary masses. Its fire is directed in pinpoint fashion against government troops and installations, and sometimes against their relatively few allies and

sympathizers. Its aim is to dislodge the rulers from the backs of the people. Its long-run chances of victory are excellent. But counter-revolutionary raiding is necessarily conducted in wild and haphazard fashion, by an armed minority *against* the bulk of the people. Its aim is not simply to dislodge a ruling group, but to spread terror among the people, to injure, harass, and disrupt the economy. Its long-run chances of victory are slight. The strategies proper to the two types of warfare reinforce these differences. The more scrupulously the guerrillas refrain from harming the civilian population, the more solemnly and securely the populace will support them, while the more vigorous the counter-revolutionary terror raids, the more bitterly hostile will the populace become. Short-term successes for guerrillas therefore promote victory in the long run; short-term gains for counter-revolutionary bands anger the people still further and insure long-run defeat.

It was this sort of harassing force that Lord Dunmore established on the Virginia coast. Dunmore began in June 1775 with 100 regulars and a few ships anchored off Norfolk, where he was kept supplied by the preponderantly Tory town, dominated by Scots merchants and their factors and clerks. When in early October Dunmore was angered by rebel newspapers in Norfolk, he sent a detachment of soldiers ashore to seize the press and paper as well as the persons of two of the printers. The local militia was called out to stop the outrage, but the apathetic militiamen failed to lift a finger to protect the printers. The mayor and aldermen of Norfolk sent the governor a feeble *pro forma* protest; so mild, indeed, was Norfolk's indignation, that shortly afterward a Town Meeting invited Dunmore to occupy the town.

The Virginia rebels decided to take action against renegade Norfolk, and soon 300 local militia of adjoining Norfolk and Princess Anne counties met at Kempsville, in Princess Anne. Dunmore, adding some Negroes and Scottish clerks to his forces, marched against the rebels. The Americans skillfully trapped him in an ambush, but they fled in panic at the sight of the British. Greatly emboldened by his victory, Dunmore proclaimed martial law on November 7 and set up the king's standard for the colony. In a few days, 300 citizens took an oath of allegiance to the crown at Kempsville, as did 500 more at Norfolk. Soon, 3,000 took the oath in Princess Anne, Norfolk, and Nansemand counties, the inhabitants of Princess Anne pledging themselves to support Dunmore and the crown to the last drop of their blood.

On November 17, with imagination and daring lacking in his fellow British commanders, Lord Dunmore decided to exacerbate the contradictions in American society by offering freedom to any Negro slaves who would join his armed forces, thereby permanently enraging the conservative slave-holding Virginia planters who would probably not have sup-

ported the British in any case. Soon he was able to organize two regiments of Tory militia, the Queen's Own Loyal Virginia Regiment and the Ethiopian Regiment, composed of runaway slaves. The conservative Committee of Safety leading the rebel cause at Williamsburg was now finally forced to act, sending two regiments of militia against Norfolk with the aid of a regiment of North Carolina militia. The rebels, over 900 men led by Col. William Woodford, faced Dunmore's 500 at Great Bridge, near Norfolk, on December 11, 1775. Dunmore, in the foolish European manner exemplified by Howe at Bunker Hill, chose to make a direct, massed, frontal assault on the entrenched rebel positions. Rebel musket and rifle fire thoroughly smashed the British as they came forward, and the British suffered sixty casualties, while only one rebel was wounded. Dunmore, decisively defeated, fell back to his ships, and Norfolk was recaptured by the rebel forces.

The Virginia army, on occupying the Norfolk area, recommended that the entire population of the region be forcibly removed to the interior, to prevent any trade or intercourse with Dunmore's ships. While this recommendation was never really put into effect, a reign of terror was launched against the Tories in the area. Their homes destroyed and plantations seized, the bulk of them fled the colony. Some went to Scotland, others to England and the West Indies. Many joined the British army in Boston.

The Tories were angered at being so callously abandoned by Lord Dunmore, who paid little attention to them and treated even those who fled to his ship with scant consideration. The case of the Sprowle family is a particularly poignant one. One of the wealthiest men in Virginia and for several decades president of the Court of Virginia Merchants, the ardently Tory Andrew Sprowle fled to Dunmore's ship as the rebels entered Norfolk. The revolutionaries destroyed his urban properties and confiscated his plantation. This was too much for old Sprowle, who died soon after. His wife Katherine, also on Dunmore's ship, obtained permission from Dunmore to visit her son, imprisoned as a Tory in a North Carolina jail. When she landed, the Williamsburg Committee of Safety refused to allow her the visit and sent her back, but now Dunmore cruelly refused to let her board the vessel. Booted back and forth between the two sides, and not allowed a resting place, she was finally able to obtain passage to Scotland. She was placed on a modest British pension list, but was arbitrarily cut off by Lord Dunmore, while her Virginia plantations were sequestered and sold by the Virginia government.

On New Year's Day, Dunmore received well over a hundred regulars and much arms from Boston and St. Augustine. Emboldened by the reinforcements, he promptly shelled Norfolk, deliberately firing warehouses on the docks used for cover by the rebel forces. The revolution-

aries used this incident as a convenient cover for brutally putting a large portion of Tory Norfolk to the torch. It is estimated that Dunmore's naval fire that day destroyed fifty houses valued at over 3,600 pounds sterling, but that the rebels deliberately destroyed nearly nine hundred houses valued at over 110,000 pounds sterling. In February, the ruling Virginia Convention made it official; at its order, the rest of Norfolk—over four hundred houses—was deliberately and savagely burned to prevent Dunmore from ever again using it as a base. Thus did these "moderate" revolutionaries in a "consensus" America pass a harsh collective sentence upon the people of Norfolk. Yet, in the propaganda war, the rebels were able to lay the blame for the burning of the city upon Dunmore, who, the previous October, had desperately but unsuccessfully tried to burn the coastal town of Hampton as punishment for the people's burning of a grounded British warship.

Outside of Norfolk, the Virginia rebels tended to be more lenient, and in December 1775 the Virginia assembly offered pardon from arrest and confiscation if the Tories would take an oath of allegiance to the new Virginia government. However, enforcement often differed in accordance with race. Thus, in May 1776, thirteen whites and twelve Negroes were arrested for Tory activity and sent to Williamsburg for trial. The Virginia Convention tried the cases in June; the Negroes were sent to forced labor in Virginia's lead mines, while the whites were either freed or given parole.

Ousted from his Norfolk base and failing to rouse the west, Dunmore intensified his plunder and terror raids up and down Chesapeake Bay and along the Virginia coast. He ardently intercepted shipping, seized tobacco, and burned plantations, and many Negroes seized the opportunity to supply the British and to join Dunmore's forces, naturally enraging still further even the most conservative planters. All in all, nearly two thousand Negroes ran away to join his fleet, even though only the Negro soldiers, and not their families, had been offered freedom. The slave exodus from coastal Warwick and Northampton counties was particularly heavy, but a severe smallpox epidemic decimated their ranks and ruined their potential effectiveness.

His troops thus ravaged and his supplies running low, Dunmore decided in the summer of 1776 to give up and join the British fleet in the north. Several hundred of the healthiest remaining Negroes were taken north with the fleet, but Dunmore perfidiously shipped many others into slavery in Florida and the West Indies.