**Materials for Morgan’s Plan of Battle at Cowpens**

**1 Conceptual Terms**

These historical concepts form the basis for analyzing, contextualizing, and synthesizing historical information.

*Change* - In the present day it is easy for students to see how things rapidly change in their daily lives. In history it is incredibly important for students to see how things have changed over time. Focusing on change over time will help students see that the past wasn’t just a set of things that happened, but that there is an underlying sense of movement that takes place throughout the past.

*Causation* - Students must have an understanding that events do not occur in a vacuum, and that those events had causes and ultimately consequences. To develop an understanding of causation and consequence students have to differentiate between single and multi-causation and begin to examine historical events through those ideas. Focusing on causation and consequence will allow students to begin to see the past as an evolving and interdependent continuum rather than as a series of disconnected events and people.

*Contex*t - Some of the most compelling history is the well-written narrative. In the narrative, history becomes a story, an alternate universe of sorts that sucks the student in. However those narratives have to be placed into the proper setting, else they are just stories without greater meaning. George Lucas perhaps did it best in 1977 when he rolled the opening sequence in Star Wars “*A long time ago… In a galaxy far, far away*…” In the end, understanding the historical context allows students to see where events of the past took place in reference to what was going on around them. The past is not just a series of things that happened, but instead becomes an interdependent and interwoven world where each person, place, or event is part of a greater whole.

*Contingency* - The easiest way to describe contingency is to say that every event in the past was dependent on prior conditions. Changes in those prior conditions would have led to different outcomes of some type. This idea of contingency is somewhat troubling because it can cast doubt on the inevitability of the past and therefore the present. Students need to be aware that the future has not been determined (from a historical standpoint) and that actions today reverberate in the future, just as actions in the past have reverberated to today.

*Complexity* - At its heart, complexity is in this sense historical rigor i.e. making sense out of numerous factors, stories, people, movements, and events. It is natural to want to produce a tidy order for the past that makes it easy to “see” and easy to understand. However history is not that tidy and is not that simple. The past is interwoven with a tremendous amount of “moving parts” that follow Newton’s laws of action causing reaction that ripples throughout the past. The idea of history as some monolith with clearly defined ideas of “good” and “bad”, or all-encompassing narratives should be dispelled.

*Corroboration* –Far too often students see something that is written (book, journal, print media) or online and take it for gospel truth. In the history field this is of grave concern since false information or skewed interpretation can lead to the development of an incomplete or inaccurate historical framework. Historians look for corroboration in the facts they study and in the interpretations they develop or use. Analyzing for consensus and commonality is an action that will help students discriminate between settled facts and accepted interpretations, and the milieu of historical falsehoods and poor interpretation that permeates the digital world.

Robert Brown and Fran Macko, *Classroom Historians: Building Student Understanding of the Past.* (Swedesboro, N.J.: AIHE, 2012), 113-115.

**2 Excerpt from *Kings Mountain and Cowpens: Our Victory Was Complete***

This excerpt provides the historical information that the students will use as the basis of their analysis, contextualization, and synthesis.

Morgan simply knew that Tarleton would attempt a powerful head-on charge with his infantry, their bayonets leveled and flashing, and would follow up with his dragoons. This was the Tarleton model that had been so successful in the South, and “Bloody Ban” wasn’t the type to change what had been successful. Tarleton would be looking to destroy and rout the Patriots before they could finish their retreat, seemingly to the Broad. Tarleton’s tactics were usually about as subtle as a thunderstorm, but they had proven to be extremely effective in other battles throughout South Carolina.

If Morgan can be taken at face value, then he had planned to turn on Tarleton all along. He meant to string Tarleton throughout the Carolina backcountry, chasing the flying army ever deeper into the area and ever farther from Cornwallis. Once Tarleton’s army was worn out and footsore, Morgan would then look for an advantage and fight a pitched battle in a location of his choosing. In his after action report to Nathanael Greene, Morgan states:

*My situation at Cowpens enabled me to improve any advantage that I might gain and to provide better for my security should I be unfortunate. These reasons induced me to take this post, not withstanding that it had the appearance of a retreat.*

This statement seemingly makes it clear that Morgan had planned to turn and fight, but no matter the intentions and thought process that went into his decision, Daniel Morgan made Banastre Tarleton pay a steep price for pursuing his flying army through the South Carolina backcountry.

Given his belief about Tarleton attacking with his infantry in a head-on charge, Morgan’s chief goal would be to devise a plan that could neutralize or absorb the initial assault and allow his men to fight in a manner that better suited their unique style. Morgan would utilize the respective strengths of each type of unit in his corps to its advantage and attempt to minimize its weaknesses. Morgan’s army had a core of Continentals in whom he had total confidence, these remnants of the Maryland and Delaware Line would form the rock-solid base of the main battle line. To the flanks of these Continentals he would add the Virginia militia, former Continentals whose enlistments had expired and were fighting now as militia. The Virginians could be counted on to behave like regulars, and Morgan based his placement of this unit with that belief. The Continentals and the Virginians would be formed on and about the crest of the second hill in Tarleton’s front. Behind this main battle line William Washington would wait with his dragoons. They would be out of sight of Tarleton and would be used once the battle reached the main line or if there was a point of danger during the battle. Morgan augmented this cavalry force with forty-five mounted volunteer militia. On the crest of the first hill in Tarleton’s front would be the militia. They would be about 150 yards in front of the main battle line and would be expected to put up a prescribed amount of resistance. About 100 yards in front of the militia line would be a group of hand-picked riflemen who would act as skirmishers. Their job was to harass Tarleton into attacking, kill as many officers and men as possible and send him to spring the rest of the trap.

While Gates had tried to use the militia like Continentals at Camden, Morgan had no such intention at the Cowpens. As we have seen before, rifles cannot stand up to bayonets, and trying to do so would be an exercise in futility. With this in mind, Morgan devised a ruse: the skirmishers would goad Tarleton into a rash attack and would pick off as many officers as possible before being compelled to retreat to the militia line. The militia would fire three aimed shots (or two shots, depending on the account) and then would retreat around behind the Continentals. Tarleton would think he had a great victory in the making and would run headlong into the Continentals on the main line. Since the militia withdrawal was planned, the Continentals would not become demoralized by it and would put up very stiff resistance. While Tarleton’s infantry was trading volleys with the Continentals, the militia would reform and hit him in the flanks, and Washington’s dragoons would follow up from their concealed position and sweep the field of Tarleton’s cavalry. At least this seems to have been Morgan’s plan on January 16, though the element dealing with the reforming of the militia is shrouded in uncertainty to this day.

The decision to offer Tarleton battle had been made, and a plan to deal him a crippling blow had been developed. After dark on January 16, Morgan held a primitive council of war and explained his plan to the commanders. It stands to reason that Morgan asked for input from veteran militia officers such as McDowell and Pickens as to their thoughts on how to defeat Tarleton. The plan, as put into place on January 17, was undoubtedly affected by what these veterans had to say. While the men in the ranks may have been happy about the decision to turn and fight, undoubtedly many of the officers, including the militia leaders, were apprehensive about the prospect. As the commanders left the council, their men were encamped just on the northern edge of what would become the Cowpens Battlefield. Morgan’s corps had time to rest before the battle, unlike Tarleton’s army, which was slugging through the mud and mire, physically exhausting themselves before a shot could be fired.

That evening, Morgan proved that he was a true leader of men and understood those who served under him. Thomas Young stated in his memoirs, “It was upon this occasion I was more perfectly convinced of General Morgan’s qualifications to command militia than I had ever before been.” Morgan stayed up most of the night walking among the men, encouraging them, helping them and reassuring them. Young goes on to state that Morgan told the men that he would crack his whip over Tarleton as sure as he lived. As he went to the campfire of each company of militia, Young states that Morgan told the men: “Just hold up your heads boys, give them three fires and you will be free. Then when you return home how the old folks will bless you and the girls will kiss you, for your gallant conduct.” This was the exact type of encouragement that the militia needed in this grave hour. Each officer was ordered that his men have twenty-four rounds of ammunition to begin the battle. This would ensure a sufficient supply for the engagement and would let Morgan know how much each unit had on hand at any particular time, based on the fighting that the unit had done. Before he stopped for the night, Morgan issued the sign and countersign for the evening: “fire” and “sword.” Fire and sword—two words that had to have emboldened the spirit of the militia, especially McDowell’s men, who had defeated Ferguson at Kings Mountain. Morgan claimed that he then climbed a tree and prayed as hard as a man could. With the stakes at hand, it makes sense that Morgan would beseech the almighty to help him in the cause.

In preparation for the coming engagement, Morgan’s baggage and supply wagons were sent north to cross the Broad. Messengers were sent out northward to hasten in reinforcements that were known to be on the move toward the Cowpens. Patrols were assigned to search for Tarleton lest Morgan be surprised by “Bloody Ban.” Morgan had laid his plan, and nothing was left but to wait on the enemy to arrive. Tarleton’s men had been on the road since 3:00 a.m., grinding toward the Cowpens. Just before daybreak, one of the patrols Morgan had sent out the previous evening spotted Tarleton’s force and went galloping to report. The Patriot patrol had been spotted, but it was of no consequence; Morgan now knew that the battle was about to begin.

Morgan ordered his men up and to their posts. He went from camp to camp chiding the men with the phrase “Boys, get up, Benny’s coming.” This wake-up call had to send a chill through men who knew about the massacre of Buford or heard other tales of Tarleton’s “quarter.” The morning was cold, and the men were in the ranks when the sun began to rise over Thicketty Mountain to the east. Morgan sent small groups of horsemen to ascertain the position of Tarleton and determine how fast he was moving and from which direction he was coming.

Just as he had the previous evening, Morgan went among the men to rally their spirits. He stopped on the front line and bantered with the militia there. He rhetorically asked the men who would be the best shots that day, the militia of North Carolina or the militia of Georgia. These men in the skirmish line were crack shots, and if their compatriots witnessed them missing a redcoat, they would bear the ridicule for many months to come. Morgan had shrewdly turned the killing of British infantry and dragoons into a competitive sport. Morgan went to other militia units and gave classic eighteenth-century pre-battle speeches. He appealed to the mens’ honor, their manhood and even their sense of revenge. It was recorded that when Morgan spoke to Pickens’s militia, he was pounding his fist in his hand and making large sweeping gestures as he spoke. Morgan finished up by going to the Continentals, a group that had been severely treated by Tarleton and the Legion at Camden. He asked them to remember battles where they had been defeated and treated roughly and told them that they had to play their part this day in defense of liberty by exacting their revenge on Tarleton. The men took this in stride and cheered for Morgan, and according to most accounts, the men were in a fine mood. Morgan rode back to the second hill facing Tarleton, now commonly referred to as “Morgan Hill,” and waited on his horse for the battle to commence. Thomas Young tells us that the morning was “bitterly cold…and the men were slapping their hands together to keep warm.” The stress and strain of battle was about to warm the men more than any campfire ever could.

Tarleton’s men emerged from the wood line shortly after dawn on January 17: the dreaded green-coated dragoons followed by the red-coated light infantry. James Collins stated, “About sunrise…the enemy came in full view. The sight, to me at least, seemed somewhat overwhelming.”

Brown, Robert W. Jr., *Kings Mountain and Cowpens: Our Victory Was Complete*, (History Press: Charleston. 2009), p.107-111.

**3 Fundamental Historical Concepts Chart**

This chart is used for students in each group to discuss and categorize their information.

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| **Change** | **Causation** | **Context** | **Contingency** | **Complexity** | **Corroborate** |
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