



For Honor and Liberty's Cause: Daniel Morgan, Revolutionary Leadership, and Purpose

Handout A: Narrative

BACKGROUND

American colonists developed a unique identity during the 18th century that, over time, separated them from their British counterparts. Resistance to British rule during the lead up to the Revolutionary War instilled a fierce sense of individualism in the colonists, especially those living on the frontier. The frontier was the great democratizer of the age, as survival depended far more on individual spirit and hard work than it did on class standing. Living in the vast, untrodden wilderness, families were generally isolated from the community and thus developed a temperament that shunned external control. Additionally, those living on the frontier generally had a Scotch-Irish heritage, which instilled additional hatred of British rule. These frontiersmen were among the most patriotically devoted to the cause of individual American liberty.

Daniel Morgan typified this individualistic culture. A self-made man who worked on the frontier, Morgan left home at the age of 17 following a fight with his father. He battled Indians in the Virginia mountains as part of a group of rangers. He hated the British because of mistreatment he suffered at their hands during the French and Indian War. Ultimately, Morgan put his rugged individualism toward a higher purpose in life as a leader in the fight for American independence.

NARRATIVE

In the late spring of 1755, Daniel Morgan was a wagon driver in British Major General Edward Braddock's force. The American colonists were fighting alongside the British army in the French and Indian War, and Braddock had been assigned to take Fort Duquesne (modern-day Pittsburgh). During the march, a haughty British officer insulted Morgan. This was typical behavior for English officials, many of whom believed that the colonists were ill-bred and undisciplined. Morgan knocked the officer down in one blow, a breach of military discipline that instantly resulted in a court-martial on the spot. Morgan was sentenced to be whipped hundreds of times, an ordeal that usually resulted in death. After the punishment was over, Morgan's back was severely bloodied, and his skin hung down in tatters. It was an experience that the twenty-year-old would remember for the rest of his life.

Two decades later, when the Revolutionary War began, Morgan found his purpose in life. He raised a unit of Virginia riflemen, who were determined to gain independence. During the summer of 1775, he marched his men to fight the British force that was besieging Boston. Later, Morgan and his riflemen marched hundreds of miles through the New England and

NARRATIVE

Canadian wilderness to assist the Continental Army in besieging Quebec. They rowed canoes over dangerously swollen rivers, marched overland in rain and snow, and were forced to eat leather and soap after losing their supplies. Finally, in late December, they assaulted the fort at Quebec in a blinding snowstorm. Morgan's face was grazed by shrapnel during the fight, and he fell off a barricade onto his back before being taken prisoner. In great pain, he refused to surrender his sword to a British officer and instead handed it to a priest he saw, stating, "Not a scoundrel of those cowards shall take it out of my hands."

Despite the American defeat at Quebec, General George Washington praised Morgan for his "intrepid behavior" in the assault and the "inflexible attachment he professed to our cause...which he perseveres in." In January 1777, after being freed in a prisoner exchange, Morgan was given command of 500 riflemen and sent to upstate New York. There, his forces assisted in the American victory at the Battle of Saratoga. Morgan's commander, General Horatio Gates, praised the Virginian, stating, "Morgan, you have done wonders." Gates informed Congress that, "Too much praise cannot be given to the Corps commanded by Colonel Morgan."

Morgan led from the front in all of these battles and never asked his men to do something he was not willing to do. One time, as an officer watched two soldiers strain to move a boulder blocking a road, Morgan asked why the officer was not helping. When the officer said it was beneath his status, Morgan sarcastically replied, "I beg your pardon. I did not think of that." He then bent down to help roll the obstruction away.

Morgan was ailed by a bad back, which left him in constant pain. Additionally, his finances were strained because of the time he spent away from his farm. Nevertheless, he possessed a fierce dedication to the American cause and left for the Carolinas as the war shifted south. There, he continued to be an essential part of the effort for independence. His courage and tactical finesse helped him defeat a British force at the Battle of Cowpens, despite commanding a force made up of mostly of an undisciplined militia. Abigail Adams called him the "rising Hero in the South" and the Continental Congress gave him a gold medal as thanks for his "complete and important victory."

After the battle, Morgan had to return home, as he suffered immensely from his back, hemorrhoids, and a very high fever. He tried to return to the fight later, but admitted, "I have been broke down in the services of my country." Morgan's purpose led him to fight bravely on the front lines, and his intrepid leadership inspired his soldiers during many key battles of the Revolutionary War. Although Morgan is mostly forgotten today, his fellow generals recognized his great contributions to the cause of liberty. One of his commanders, General Greene, once famously said, "Great generals are scarce—there are few Morgan's to be found."