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## The Patriot True Story: What Really Happened In Mel Gibson's Movie

By Hannah Shaw-Williams

10-13 minutes

Roland Emmerich's 2000 historical war epic *The Patriot*, which stars Mel Gibson as an American revolutionary leader called Benjamin Martin, has become classic [Independence Day viewing](#) - but how much of what's shown in the movie happened in real life?

In *The Patriot*, Benjamin Martin is a veteran of the French and Indian War who is called upon to vote for South Carolina joining the [American War of Independence](#). Martin is initially impartial, explaining that he believes in the cause but is not willing to fight in a war for it. Because he is not willing to fight himself, he is not willing to vote to send others to fight. However, his neutral stance comes crashing down when a group of Redcoats attack his home and their leader, Colonel William Tavington, murders one of his sons. Regretting his earlier inaction and determined to get revenge, Martin recruits a militia and leads them in a highly effective guerrilla campaign against the British forces in South Carolina.

*The Patriot* has been widely criticized for its unfair villainizing of the British, its invention of a war atrocity that didn't happen, and its sugarcoating of slavery. But while it may be more historical fiction than historical fact, the movie is partly based on true events and people. And when it comes to depicting the battle strategies used by both sides in the War of Independence, *The Patriot* demonstrates some impressive historical accuracy. Here's a breakdown of what parts of the [Mel Gibson](#) movie really happened, and what parts definitely didn't happen.

General historical accuracy

### Benjamin Martin Is Mainly Based on Francis "Swamp Fox" Marion

There was no Patriot militia leader called [Benjamin Martin](#) who fought in the Revolutionary War, and the details of Benjamin's life and family are fictionalized. However, in the DVD featurette "True Patriots," screenwriter Robert Rodat explains that Benjamin is based on several different real historical figures: Francis "Swamp Fox" Marion, Thomas Sumter, Nathanael Greene, Andrew Pickens and Daniel Morgan. [Francis Marion appears to have been the primary influence, since many details of Benjamin's character - including his role in the French and Indian War, his use of guerrilla warfare tactics, his gathering and leadership of militiamen, and his use of ambushes to gather intelligence - are lifted straight from Marion's biography.](#)

Historical Figures/  
Characters Martin/Marion

Creating a fictional character rather than using any one historical figure gives *The Patriot* an excuse to leave out details that would have been harder for modern audiences to tolerate in a supposed hero. For example, the African-American characters who work in Benjamin's home and fields are said to be freed slaves who are devastated when they're forcibly taken away to fight for the British. Francis Marion, however, was a slaveowner who had a reputation

for raping his female slaves, and during the war he targeted and executed freed slaves who were suspected of working with the British. He was also known for his persecution and slaughter of Cherokee Indians, which in the movie is rewritten as a single wartime incident that Benjamin Martin considers his greatest shame and regret. An anonymous source from Sony Pictures told *The Guardian* that the movie was originally supposed to be a factual biography of Marion, but "They couldn't go ahead once historians had given them chapter and verse on the Swamp Fox, so they had to change his name."

### William Tavington Is Loosely Based On Banastre Tarleton

*The Patriot's* main villain is the cartoonishly evil William Tavington, played by Jason Isaacs, who is based on the real British soldier and politician Sir Banastre Tarleton. The real Tarleton led British forces at the Battle of Cowpens (the focus of *The Patriot's* third act), and was charged with the task of rooting out and capturing the "Swamp Fox" when Marion proved troublesome to British forces in South Carolina. Like Tavington in the movie, he was unsuccessful. Tarleton was given the nickname "the Butcher," but it wasn't because of a pattern of brutal treatment of civilians.

The nickname stemmed from a single battle, the Battle of Waxhaws, during which Tarleton was shot down from his horse and trapped underneath it. While he was unable to give orders, his temporarily leaderless men continued to kill Continental soldiers, many of whom were surrendering or not resisting. The Continental Army used the "Waxhaws massacre" in a propaganda campaign against the British, with a focus on Tarleton as the villain of the story. The campaign was very successful, and "Tarleton's Quarter" caught on as a saying that meant taking no prisoners. However, Tarleton was not the child-murdering monster that William Tavington is portrayed as in *The Patriot*, and Tavington's most monstrous act definitely never happened.

### The British Did Not Burn A Church Full Of Civilians

Easily the most controversial scene in *The Patriot* is when Tavington corners a group of townspeople - including women and children - who have gathered to pray in church, and orders his men to padlock the doors and burn the church down with them inside it. While there were civilian casualties and buildings burned in the Revolutionary War, there is no record of anything like this being committed by either side. *The Patriot* has been heavily criticized for this scene, both because it misleadingly villainizes the British army and because it cheapens the horror of a similar real-life atrocity.

A version of this church-burning was committed almost 200 years later by an SS Panzer Division during World War II, when the villagers of Oradour-sur-Glane in Nazi-occupied France were rounded up and massacred. At one point people were herded into the local church and grenades were then thrown in after them, with machine gun fire used to cut down anyone trying to escape through the windows. The victims included 247 women, 205 children and three priests.

### The Patriot Heavily Sugarcoats Slavery

The other main area where *The Patriot's* historical inaccuracy is considered particularly egregious is its sugarcoating of how slaves and freed slaves were treated by the Continental Army in general, and Francis Marion specifically. The black characters in *The Patriot*

Historical Figures/Characters  
Tavington/Tarleton

British Atrocities  
church burning

Slavery

are portrayed as freed men and women who earn a living by working Benjamin Martin's land, and who love his family and are treated like family themselves. As mentioned earlier, this was definitely not the reality for Francis Marion's slaves.

Both the British and the American armies tried to motivate slaves to fight on their behalf by offering them their freedom and even some payment after a period of service, and many slaves fled to fight for the British against their former owners. In *The Patriot*, however, the Martin family's freed slaves being rounded up to fight for the British is treated as a sad moment, whereas Occam being donated to Benjamin Martin's militia by his owner and earning his freedom through service is framed as a triumphant storyline. Director Spike Lee was particularly vocal about his disgust at how *The Patriot* "dodged around, skirted about or completely ignored slavery," calling it "pure, blatant American Hollywood propaganda. A complete whitewashing of history."

### **The Patriot Is Most Historically Accurate In Its Battle Scenes**

Ironically, the aspect of *The Patriot* that might seem the most ridiculous is actually where it shines the most in terms of historical accuracy. The film portrays two key battles of the Revolutionary War: the Battle of Camden (which Gabriel and Benjamin observe from a distance) and the Battle of Cowpens (the final battle of the movie). The sight of the American and British forces stiffly marching towards each other across a field and then standing still and fully exposed in regimented columns while firing their rifles may seem strange compared to more modern tactics of trench warfare and defensive fighting positions. However, at the time firearms took a long time to reload (at best, a soldier could fire around three shots per minute) and were not particularly accurate even when aimed perfectly (the scene of Benjamin and his two sons sniping Redcoats with pinpoint precision is very unrealistic).

This meant that the key to victory in open battle was holding formation and firing as quickly as possible, because in formation soldiers became greater than the sum of their parts. Forty men standing in formation and firing in the same general direction would land more shots than those same forty men scattered across the battlefield and trying to aim at specific targets. And while one line of soldiers dropped down to reload, the line standing behind them could take aim and fire the next volley of shots. Victory could also be won by forcing the opposing side to break their own formation, which in the Battle of Camden was achieved through a bayonet charge that the American forces were unprepared for, and which caused them to panic and scatter.

The American soldiers at the Battle of Cowpens were led by General Daniel Morgan, one of the men that Benjamin Martin is based on, and the scene in which militia members are asked to fire only two shots and then feign a retreat really did happen. The plan was designed to draw the British forces forward, believing they had the Americans on the run, only to lead them into a prepared volley of musket fire immediately followed by a bayonet charge. The actual deaths and injuries inflicted by this surprise attack were arguably less important than the emotional shock of it, which broke the already strained morale of the British soldiers and caused many of them to flee, surrender, or simply collapse to the ground. While *The Patriot's* actual story may be largely fictionalized, the movie does a great job of showing the effectiveness of both line formations and guerrilla tactics during the Revolutionary War.

Battles  
Camden and Cowpens

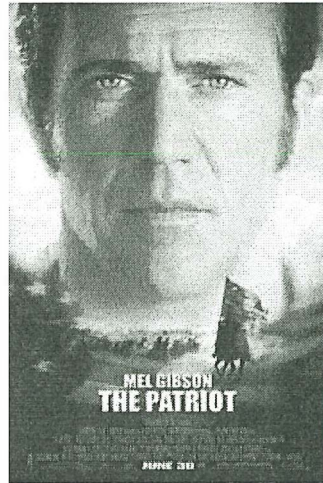
Cowpens

[historyonfilm.com](http://historyonfilm.com)

## The Patriot

HoF

11-13 minutes



Rating: ★★★★★

Users: [ratings]

Columbia, 2000, 165 minutes

Cast: Mel Gibson, Heath Ledger, Joely Richardson, Jason Isaacs, Chris Cooper, Tchéky Karyo and Tom Wilkinson

Screenplay: Robert Rodat

Producers: Dean Devlin, Mark Gordon and Gary Levinsohn

Executive Producers: Roland Emmerich, Ute Emmerich and William Fay

Director: Roland Emmerich

### Historical Background

The British had been taken by surprise by the American colonists' rebellion in 1775, which started the American Revolution (1775-1783), but a major defeat was inflicted on the rebels at New York City in September 1776. Hoping to deal the rebellion a fatal blow, Philadelphia, the capital of the colonies, had been captured in September 1777 but instead of capitulating, the rebel army reformed and continued to fight. Worse, the surrender of a British army under Lieutenant General John Burgoyne to Major General Horatio Gates at Saratoga on October 17, 1777 convinced France to enter into a formal alliance with the American colonies, thus widening the conflict.

By late 1779, the war in the north had reached stalemate, so the British shifted operations to the south, thought to be overflowing with loyalists, and Charleston, South Carolina fell on May 9, 1780 after a lengthy siege. Gates, the hero of Saratoga, rashly led an army of exhausted, starving Continentals (the regular army) and raw militia into battle against an equal number of redcoats and Tory regulars at Camden, South Carolina on August 17. The redcoats charged, most of the militia ran away, and the Continentals were surrounded and slaughtered. The British thought that they had finally subdued the Carolinas. They were wrong.

### Plot Summary

Benjamin Martin (Mel Gibson) is a plantation owner and a representative to the South Carolina assembly. When he refuses to vote in favor of revolution, Gabriel (Heath Ledger), his oldest son, joins the Continentals, against his wishes. Following brief scenes of the Continentals being crushed by British redcoats and then freezing in a winter camp, presumably Valley Forge, the story jumps forward four years to Charleston's surrender. An army is sent from the north under Major General Horatio Gates to prevent the British from gaining control of the Southern colonies. When the two armies meet at Camden, Gates leads the rebels to defeat, and the Virginia Continentals are massacred by the Green Dragoons after they had surrendered. When a member of his family is killed by Colonel William Tavington, the commander of the Green Dragoons, Martin joins the war.

A skilled guerrilla leader, Martin leads a band of partisans to keep the British too occupied in the Carolinas to move north and threaten the main rebel army under George Washington. Infuriated by the havoc wreaked by the partisans, Major General Charles Cornwallis, British commander in the south, authorizes Tavington to use brutal tactics to scourge the guerrillas. The ruthless methods are effective and the British retake the initiative. When a rebel army under Major General Nathanael Greene is cornered at Guilford Courthouse by Cornwallis, the situation is desperate but Martin suggests a plan that could lead to victory.

### Historical Accuracy

A scene early in the movie where Martin wipes out twenty redcoats on his own is undeniably incredible but unlike the nameless extras, British regulars were trained to use their bayonets and would have stuck him like a pig. It would have been more faithful to actual events to have Martin lead his neighbours to rescue his son but then Gibson's alpha male status would not have been established.

Blaming the defeat at **Camden** on Gates, Martin comments that going head-to-head against redcoats on open ground is suicide, which is an insult to the real Continentals. **Admittedly, they had been beaten by the British at Brandywine and Germantown during the Philadelphia campaign in 1777 but their only really serious defeat was at Long Island, New York, very early in the war.** After receiving training from Baron Friedrich von Steuben at Valley Forge during the winter of 1777-1778, the rebel army had forced the British to retreat at Monmouth Courthouse in June 1778.

**Tasked with raising a partisan band to prevent Cornwallis from moving north until a French army arrives, Martin protests that the militiamen are farmers who would be better off staying out of the fight, which is simply silly. Bands of partisans sprang up across South Carolina after the fall of Charleston, led by men who had served in the Anglo-Cherokee War (1758-61) and knew how to plan an ambush. The partisans usually fought against Loyalist units, but the nasty civil war in the South has been airbrushed out of the story. Despite Martin's misgivings, the partisans slaughter every force of redcoats that walks into their ambushes. While it is true that partisan bands operated freely throughout South Carolina, and the British only controlled the area inside their forts, the real Cornwallis was delayed by a fever that incapacitated much of his army.**

**In the movie's version of events, the revolution is nearly lost because General George Washington and the main Patriot army are being pursued by a much larger British army in the north, while Cornwallis has destroyed the rebel army in the south. This is**

Battles  
Camden

Militia

Historical Figures/Characters  
Cornwallis

blatantly false. The main British army was afraid to come out of New York City and face Washington. Although two rebel armies had been eliminated within three months early in the campaign, the rebels' fortunes had improved and the British army in the south controlled only the ground beneath its feet. After Major General Nathanael Greene took command of rebel forces in the south, Brigadier General Daniel Morgan won a victory at Cowpens against feared cavalry commander Colonel Banastre Tarleton, whose rash nature caused him to walk into a trap. Greene then lured a British army on an exhausting pursuit across North Carolina that culminated in a pyrrhic victory for the British at Guilford Courthouse on March 15, 1781. Realizing that the vision of recruiting a Loyalist army in the Carolinas was simply a mirage, Cornwallis abandoned the region and led his broken army into Virginia. Not only is the situation deliberately reversed in order to make the rebels underdogs, but Greene, the architect of victory in the Carolinas, is reduced to a cameo appearance and Morgan, probably the best battlefield commander in the rebel army, is only mentioned briefly.

Historical Figures/Characters  
Tavington/Tarleton

Historical Figures/Characters  
Cornwallis

Militia

Battle  
Guilford Courthouse

Historical Figures/Characters  
Cornwallis

As part of the effort to perpetuate the myth that the militia won the Revolution, the Continentals seem to exist primarily to provide the militia with support, so a key event during the final battle does not appear in the movie. During the real battle at Guilford Courthouse, Cornwallis had seen that a battalion of redcoats was losing a bayonet fight against an equal number of Continentals. Fearing a rebel victory, he ordered his artillery to fire into the center of the confused mass of men trying to kill each other, betting that the redcoats' discipline would let them reform first. He was right but either the director did not see the cinematic possibilities or it would have contradicted the leading role given to the militia.

Emmerich's use of Jean Reno for comedy relief in Godzilla (1998) had been so effective that fellow Frenchman Tcheky Karo was brought in for the Patriot. Although no French soldiers were involved in the southern campaign, it is a minor quibble, especially since the goal was to pay tribute to the French role in the war. However, showing him as hating the British was a bit much. British and French officers were professionals, who may have tried to kill each other, but there was little animosity and captured officers were always treated well.

**Comments**

The movie was originally supposed to be about Francis Marion, the best guerrilla leader of the American Revolutionary War, but British historian Christopher Hibbert had stated that Marion should not be presented as a hero, since there were strong rumors that he had had sex with his slaves. While Hibbert is a good historian, it seems a little bit hypocritical to say that it was okay to own people, force them to work for you and sell their children away from them but you could not have sex with them. Slavery was a repulsive, evil institution but history is full of horrible practices. Marion, like his fellow slave owners George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, was a product of his times, and it should be possible to tell his story without condoning the less savory aspects of his character, but the producers clearly feared the controversy. Although Martin is supposed to be a composite character of several guerrilla leaders, he closely resembles Gibson's usual screen persona. Martin prays a lot and has seven children because they were written into the script to attract Gibson, who prays a lot and has seven children. In fact, the Revolution takes a back seat to Martin's desire to keep his family together.

The 27 year-old Tarleton is replaced by a 37 year-old Tavington,

who would never have been able to ride a horse for several days straight in pursuit of rebels.

No opportunity is wasted to demonize the British. While Tarleton and other British cavalry commanders had burned and hung their way across South Carolina when chasing partisans, they did not execute wounded prisoners or kill women and children. The atrocities committed by Tavington resemble more the actions of the SS against the French resistance during WWII. Possibly screenwriter Robert Rodat had leftover material from his script for Saving Private Ryan (1998).

British Atrocities  
American prisoners

The movie has the tired subplot of a white bigot learning to recognize the value of a black comrade. While it is true that a few slaves did win their freedom through military service during the revolution, many of the delegates to the Continental Congress were slaveowners, and they had ensured that the Declaration of Independence did not include the 400,000 slaves in the colonies. Furthermore, Martin is deliberately made one of the tiny minority of plantation owners in the Carolinas who used free blacks, so the average viewer would think that black slaves were the exception, not the rule. Producer Dean Devlin has admitted that they had intentionally made Martin a non-slaveowner and Tavington as evil as possible to create a battle between good and evil. It is extremely frustrating since the commentary by the director and the producer shows that they had performed the research and understood the campaign in the south, but they clearly decided to not put any of it in the film.

Slavery

Putting aside the countless historical errors, it is an enjoyable movie. The romance between Gabriel and his girlfriend is charming. Martin's second eldest son does not want to wait another two years because the war might be over by then, and Martin's earnest hope that it will be is quite touching. In addition, Gibson deserves credit for portraying Martin's helplessness when his family is threatened by a large number of redcoats.

The campaign in the Carolinas is fascinating and one day someone will make the movie that it deserves, instead of a misleading jumble of fact and fiction.

baltimoresun.com

## 'Patriot' history is hit and miss

Chris Kallenbach

6-7 minutes

To modern eyes, the battle scenes in "The Patriot" look pretty ludicrous, with columns of marching soldiers advancing upon one another across open fields. Why, one good strafing run, and all those soldiers are toast.

But there was no such thing as a strafing run in the 18th century, when the American Revolution was fought. And, as suicidal as such formations may look today, they were far less so 200 years ago. What you see on screen, it seems, is pretty much what you would have seen on the day of the battle itself.

Score one for Hollywood.

"It was really very accurate in that regard," says Frederick resident Timothy J. Shannon. "The movie does a good job in depicting 18th-century tactics."

Battles  
General

When it comes to guys in three-corner hats shooting muskets, Shannon knows what he's talking about. A specialist in early American history, he teaches at Gettysburg College and can be seen on the History Channel's "History or Hollywood" tonight, discussing how well "The Patriot" corresponds to reality.

It turns out that "The Patriot" does pretty well depicting the specifics of battle scenes. But beyond that, the movie has problems - particularly when it comes to who was fighting whom, who carried the day, and why.

Battles  
General

In "The Patriot," Mel Gibson plays Benjamin Martin, a militia leader based largely on Francis Marion, the famed "Swamp Fox," whose guerrilla tactics helped keep the war alive in South Carolina, where conventional soldiers on the colonialists' side were not faring well. According to the film, it was the untrained, ragtag soldiers of the citizen militia who made the American victory possible, preying on British soldiers who may have known how to shoot and march in formation, but little about taking on real fighters.

Not quite, Shannon says.

"The film attempts to show how you've got these dunder-headed Brits versus the much more savvy Americans, who knew how to handle a musket and a rifle," he says.

"The Patriot heroes of the film are the militiamen, who hide out in the swamps and learn how to take advantage of the British. But what was even more important to winning the American Revolution was the Continental soldiers learning to fight on the British model. The Patriot cause was really helped when George Washington concentrated on turning his army into a group of professional soldiers."

Militia  
Continental Army

Shannon says the militia didn't know how to engage in precision drills or take commands. "They were not very good at facing up to pitched battle against the British," he says. "The militia, when faced with well-trained, well-armed British troops, threw down their arms and ran away."

At one battle, Shannon notes, the American commander lined up



the militia with their backs to the river, specifically to make it more difficult to flee.

How embarrassing! But wait - there's more.

"The Patriot" suggests that the vast majority of Americans supported the Colonial cause, which is also a stretch. In fact, battles often pitted Americans against Americans, particularly in the South. "The war often degenerated into rival bands of Patriot and Loyalist militia duking it out with each other," Shannon says.

Patriot s vs Loyalist

But perhaps no aspect of "The Patriot" has raised a ruckus with purists more than the two main characters: Gibson's Benjamin Martin and his cruel nemesis, Col. William Tavington, portrayed with sneering imperiousness by Jason Isaacs. Martin is depicted as a pacifist family man who fights only after his son is killed; who treats black slaves as his equals; and who runs rings around the stuffy British Gen. Charles Cornwallis.

Tavington, in part based on real-life English soldier Banastre Tarleton, is a tyrant who kills his prisoners, shoots young boys, and, at one point, herds an entire community inside a local church, padlocks the door and burns it down. His conduct is contrasted with Cornwallis, who insisted that his soldiers fight with honor. Critics on the tea-drinking side of the Atlantic are incensed, claiming that Francis Marion was, in real life, a slave owner who raped his slaves. Tarleton, says the London Times, was a "dashing officer loved by his soldiers. He was no bloodthirsty villain."

Historical Figures/Characters  
Martin/Marion

Shannon says he can't corroborate claims that Marion forced himself on his slaves, but he says it's a safe bet that the real-life counterpart to Gibson's character didn't view black people as equals. He also doubts that a family of freed blacks living on an island off the shore of South Carolina would welcome their former owner with open arms, as happens in "The Patriot."

Slavery

But Shannon says he's most disturbed by the film's treatment of slavery. Few whites were as enlightened in 1777 as they are portrayed in "The Patriot." In fact, slaves had a better chance of earning their freedom by joining the British cause than the American - England's King George III promised to free slaves who fought on the British side.

Slavery

In one scene, a South Carolina slave reads an order issued by Gen. Washington, promising freedom in return for service to the Patriot cause. While such an offer was made, Shannon notes, it was never valid in South Carolina.

As for Tarleton, Shannon doesn't think he ever burned down a church full of people. But he definitely believed in making citizens suffer as much as the soldiers - the same scorched-earth policy practiced nearly 90 years later by William Tecumseh Sherman in the American Civil War.

Historical Figures/Characters  
Tavington/Tarleton

Shannon says the film depicts well the division within the British leadership over the best way to win this war. Tarleton thought success would be achieved by destroying the Patriot resolve and will to resist, Shannon says, while Cornwallis thought brutal tactics alienated people to the British cause.

But was Tarleton as evil as he's depicted in this film?

"I don't think so," Shannon says. "Still, he allowed his troops to bayonet and murder Colonial troops who were wounded or trying to surrender."

Historical Figures/Characters  
Tavington/Tarleton

Score another one for Hollywood.

The Patriot, directed by Roland Emmerich for Centropolis Entertainment, Columbia Pictures, and SONY Pictures Entertainment, is a stirring account of a little-known campaign of a war that has been largely ignored by Hollywood. It tells the story of Benjamin Martin (Mel Gibson), a South Carolina planter and widower with seven children. His horrific experiences in the French and Indian War make him unwilling to take up arms against the British when South Carolina votes for independence in 1776, though his eldest son, Gabriel (Heath Ledger), joins the Continental army. Martin is forced to take sides when the war literally comes into his front yard and British troops harm his family and burn his home. He assumes command of the local militia and becomes the scourge of the British, cutting their supply lines and attacking their outposts. Martin and his men pay a heavy personal price for their patriotism, but they persevere and play a key role in defeating the British army in South Carolina. After Gen. Charles Cornwallis surrenders, Martin and his men return to South Carolina to rebuild in their independent country.

This film is a well-told, well-acted, and handsomely photographed historical epic, and accolades must go to Emmerich and Gibson for tackling a subject that is certainly less than familiar to the average summer movie patron. Adding more credibility to the historical accuracy of this film was the participation of historians from the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History as consultants. The sets and scenery show much attention to historical detail. Colonial Charleston, the plantations, villages, and taverns—all convey an atmosphere of period authenticity. The Fort Carolina set is especially well done; the British built a number of such forts by constructing earthwork and palisade fortifications around plantation houses.

However, much of The Patriot is not historically accurate in the interpretation of broad themes or in specific details of the campaign in the South and of warfare in the American Revolution. Gibson acknowledged, "If one were to adhere to historical accuracy all the way, you'd probably have the most boring two hours on earth, but firstly it's entertainment and we've taken license with history to make it more compelling."

**Historical Figures/Characters - Martin/Marion**

Mel Gibson's character is a composite of several partisan leaders, most notably Francis Marion, Thomas Sumter, and Andrew Pickens. Like Marion, Martin makes his headquarters on an island in the middle of a swamp. Both Sumter and Pickens took up arms after their plantations were burned by the British. Aside from those facts, Benjamin Martin has little in common with his real-life counterparts.

**Loyalists**

The most serious deficiency of The Patriot is its almost complete omission of the Loyalists. A significant segment of the population of the Carolinas and Georgia remained loyal, and much of the fighting there was a civil war between Tories and Whigs. Though Loyalist provincial and militia units constituted one-half of the British army in the South, the film portrays only one Loyalist soldier, Captain Wilkins (Adam Baldwin) in Colonel Tavington's (Jason Isaacs) dragoons. Tavington is based on Banastre Tarleton, who commanded the British Legion, a Loyalist provincial regiment. The film gives the impression that Tavington's regiment is British and that Captain Wilkins is the only Loyalist in its ranks. No other Loyalist soldiers appear in The Patriot.

**Historical Figures/Characters - Tavington/Tarleton AND British Atrocities - American prisoners**

The atrocities committed by Colonel Tavington and his troops are highly exaggerated. Benjamin Martin first encounters this bloodthirsty officer after he has opened up his home to treat the wounded of both sides. Tavington has the British wounded removed, then orders the execution of the wounded Continentals and the burning of Martin's plantation. When one of Martin's sons tries to intervene, Tavington fatally shoots him in the back. Tavington and his men subsequently murder slaves who refuse to cooperate with them and go on a farm-burning spree in which they kill the wife and child of one of Martin's men. The culminating atrocity occurs when Tavington descends on the village of Wakefield, which is home to a number of Martin's guerrillas, and has the entire population locked inside the church, which he then sets ablaze.

**Historical Figures/Characters - Tavington/Tarleton AND British Atrocities - Church burning**

Though the real-life Banastre Tarleton was a ruthless and brutal officer, he never committed atrocities of the sort depicted in The Patriot. The most notorious episode associated with Tarleton was the Waxhaws Massacre on May 29, 1780. In that engagement Tarleton and his legion attacked a regiment of Virginia Continentals. The Virginians fired only one volley before the Tory horsemen broke their line. They then tried to surrender, but a killing frenzy took hold of the Loyalists and most of the helpless Continentals were mercilessly cut down. Three-quarters of the Virginians were killed or so badly wounded that Tarleton left them on the field. An American officer who saw the wounded after the battle estimated that the average number of wounds per man was sixteen.

Tarleton enthusiastically burned the farms of suspected Patriots and summarily executed suspected guerrillas—on several occasions in front of their families. Dastardly as Tarleton's actual behavior was, it pales in comparison to that of The Patriot's Colonel Tavington. There is no evidence that Tarleton executed wounded Continentals, nor that he killed women and children. The British had a very practical motivation for not killing their Continental captives, as it would invite retaliation against British prisoners. The Waxhaws Massacre occurred in the heat of battle and was exacerbated by the intense animosity between Tories and Whigs. In an interview, Gibson acknowledged, "Some of the worst crimes were committed between the Loyalists and the Rebels, the colonists themselves." However, when Tavington is preparing to incinerate the church with the villagers inside, Captain Wilkins, a Tory, is the only one of his men to express any reservations.

**Slavery**

The portrayal of African Americans and slavery in the movie has also been a subject of much controversy. Benjamin Martin is a prominent planter in South Carolina and thus would have owned slaves. In order not to stigmatize the film's hero, Martin does not own slaves but employs free black workers, probably the only such labor arrangement in colonial South Carolina. Later, Martin takes his family to a "maroon" community of fugitive slaves on the coast to hide them from the British. In reality, those slaves were hiding from the Patriots. Thomas Sumter often used slaves seized from Tory owners to pay his militiamen.

**Battles - Cowpens**

The military details of uniforms, equipment, and tactics also reveal inaccuracies too numerous to list here. All British soldiers did not wear red uniforms, and very few Continental soldiers had blue coats and white trousers. This latter fact was more accurately depicted in A&E's The Crossing, in which audiences see little uniformity in the attire of the Continentals. In the southern campaign most of the American army was militia, and the Continental contingent had no tents and had trouble acquiring clothing or provisions of any kind. The Patriot misses an excellent opportunity to show the true depth of suffering and deprivation that the Continental regulars endured for independence. The climactic battle in the film also bears little resemblance to the actual Battle of Cowpens, upon which it is based. Finally, the field artillery available to both sides could not fire exploding shells.

In conclusion, The Patriot is a very entertaining film that uses the American Revolution in South Carolina as a backdrop to tell a story about the way the war affected a fictional family. "This is not historically accurate," said Mel Gibson. "In the broad strokes, yes—on other levels, it is sheer fantasy. It's a good thing that historians are going to harangue this and say, 'It's not accurate.' Good. It'll make somebody pick up a book."

theguardian.com

## The Patriot: more flag-waving rot with Mel Gibson

Alex von Tunzelmann

6-7 minutes

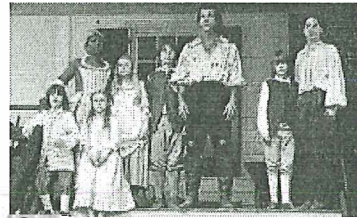
Director: Roland Emmerich

Entertainment grade: C

History grade: Fail

In 1776, Britain's American colonies rose up to fight for independence. The war drew in several European powers, and ended with the Treaty of Paris in 1783.

### People



The happy paterfamilias

South Carolina militia leader Benjamin Martin (Mel Gibson) is a humble single father whose hobbies include freeing slaves, being lovely to his seven angelic children and whittling rocking chairs. Martin is based on a sanitised composite of several historical militiamen, most obviously the "Swamp Fox", Francis Marion. In contrast to the virtuous Martin, the British Colonel Tavington (Jason Isaacs), based on the real Banastre Tarleton, is a sneering, sadistic monster. Tarleton was accused of various evils – including firing on surrendering troops at Waxhaw Creek – but the deeds attributed to Tavington here are wholly made up. Furthermore, for all Martin keeps banging on about Tavington breaking "the rules of war", there weren't any in the 1780s. There was an expectation that officers and soldiers would respect certain customs, but nothing was formalised until the first Geneva convention in 1864.

Martin - good vs Tavington - evil

### International relations



Facing up to the nasty Brit

In one scene, Tavington herds noncombatant men, women and children into a church, locks the doors, and sets it on fire. At the time of the film's release, some historians noted the similarity between this and the notorious Nazi massacre of French villagers in Oradour-sur-Glane in 1944. It is, however, nothing like anything that happened in the American Revolution. "This will be forgotten,"

British Atrocities  
Church burning

scoffs Tavington. It's a disgraceful attempt to sow the seed of a completely unfounded conspiracy theory, implying that the fact nobody has ever heard of the British army burning a church full of innocents in South Carolina doesn't mean it didn't happen. Well, it didn't. As the American historian **Richard F Snow** commented: "Of course it never happened – if it had do you think Americans would have forgotten it? It could have kept us out of World War I."

### British Atrocities Church burning

#### Politics



Not just out for a stroll

According to *The Patriot*, slavery was practically nonexistent in South Carolina and really not that bad, anyway. The few slaves shown are a cheerful lot, all of whom have been given their freedom to retire to a beachside cabaña. There's even a token slave in Martin's militia. "We will have a chance to make a new world," Martin's son Gabriel (Heath Ledger) tells him earnestly, "where all men are equal in the sight of God." "Equal," intones the slave. "That sounds good." Don't get your hopes up, old chap. It took the civil war to end slavery in the US, almost a century after *The Patriot* is set. Even then, South Carolina was on the wrong side, being so attached to slaveholding that it was the first state to secede from the Union after Abraham Lincoln's election.

### Slavery

#### Sex



Out of the straitjacket

In one of the film's weirdest scenes, Gabriel Martin is allowed to spend the night with his girlfriend before marriage, as long as he lets her mum sew him into a "bundling bag" – a neck-to-toe chastity straitjacket. These things did exist, though it was the girl who would have been sewn into one rather than the boy. Unlike in the film, her parents would usually sleep in the same room as the courting youngsters, though even this didn't always kill the mood. Contemporaries alleged that premarital pregnancies were par for the course in communities that allowed bundling.

#### War



Before the rout

The film's final setpiece looks vaguely like the Battle of Cowpens in 1781, with elements of the Battle of Guilford Courthouse. Martin grabs the Stars and Stripes and leads the charge towards General Cornwallis's troops. The Brits are taken by surprise, and defeated. It would have taken the real Cornwallis by surprise, too, for he was never defeated in South Carolina, and he wasn't even at the Battle of Cowpens. He won Guilford Courthouse. Tarleton lost Cowpens, though, unlike Tavington in the film, he survived and lived to a ripe old age. The real general whose victory against Cornwallis won the war, following the siege of Yorktown, was some bloke called George Washington. Here, all he gets is a passing mention.

## Battles Cowpens and Guildford Courthouse

### Verdict

Truth is the first casualty of Mel Gibson.

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## The Nazis, er, the Redcoats are coming!

11-14 minutes

### The savage soldiers in "The Patriot" act more like the Waffen SS than actual British troops. Does this movie have an ulterior motive?

By [Jonathan Foreman](#)

Published July 3, 2000 7:00PM (EDT)

The week before "[The Patriot](#)" opened in the United States, the British press lit up with furious headlines. "Truth is first casualty in Hollywood's War," read one in the Daily Telegraph. Another story, about the historical model for Mel Gibson's character was titled, "The Secret Shame of Mel's New Hero." The accompanying articles complained that the new Revolutionary War epic portrays British redcoats as "bloodthirsty and unprincipled stormtroopers" and "bloodthirsty child-killers."

The prizewinning historian and biographer Andrew Roberts called the film "racist" in the Daily Express, and pointed out that it was only the latest in a series of films like "Titanic," "Michael Collins" and "The Jungle Book" remake that have depicted the British as "treacherous, cowardly, evil [and] sadistic." Roberts had a theory: "With their own record of killing 12 million American Indians and supporting slavery for four decades after the British abolished it, Americans wish to project their historical guilt onto someone else."

I can only imagine how much angrier Fleet Street's pundits will be after they have actually seen the movie. "[The Patriot](#)" will not open in England until August, but when it does, Brits will see a supposedly authentic historical epic that radically rewrites the known history of the Revolutionary War. It does so by casting George III's redcoats as cartoonish paragons of evil who commit one monstrous -- but wholly invented -- atrocity after another. In one scene, the most harrowing of the film, redcoats round up a village of screaming women and children and old men, lock them in a church and set the whole chapel on fire. If you didn't know anything about the Revolution, you might actually believe the British army in North America was made up of astonishingly cruel, even demonic, sadists who really did do this kind of thing -- as if they were the 18th century equivalent of the Nazi SS. Yet no action of the sort ever happened during the war for independence, but an eerily identical war crime -- one of the most notorious atrocities of World War II -- was carried out by the Nazis in France in 1944.

As a film critic for the New York Post, I found "The Patriot" well made and often exciting. But I also found it disturbing in a way that many weaker, [dumber films](#) are not. [It's not just that it willfully distorts history in a manner that goes way beyond the traditional poetic license employed by Hollywood, it's the strange, primitive politics that seem to underlie that distortion.](#)

General comments

Historical accuracy

"The Patriot" is a movie that doesn't "get" patriotism -- in either a modern or the 18th century sense of the word. The only memorable, explicit political sentiment voiced comes when Gibson's character makes the rather Tory comment that he sees no advantage in replacing the tyranny of one man 3,000 miles away for the tyranny of 3,000 men, one mile away. The deliberate lacuna demonstrates a total lack of understanding of, or even a kind of hostility to, the patriotic politics that motivated the founding fathers.

You could actually argue without too much exaggeration that "The Patriot" is as fascist a film (and I use the term in its literal sense, not as a synonym for "bad") as anything made in decades. It's even more fascist than "Fight Club," that ode to violence, barely repressed homoeroticism and the rejection of consumer capitalism.

"The Patriot" presents a deeply sentimental cult of the family, casts unusually Aryan-looking heroes and avoids any democratic or political context in its portrayal of the Revolutionary War. Instead of such context, it offers a story in which the desire for blood vengeance -- for a son shot by a British officer -- turns Gibson's character into a "patriot." Meanwhile, the imagery piles up:

- In one scene towheaded preteens are armed by their father and turned into the equivalent of the Werwolf boy-soldiers that the Third Reich was thought to have recruited from the Hitler Youth to carry out guerrilla attacks against the invading Allies.
- In the film's most exciting sequence, Gibson is provoked by the foreigner into becoming one of those bloodied, ax-wielding forest supermen so beloved in Nazi folk-iconography: an 18-century equivalent of the Goth leader Arminius (aka Hermann the German) who annihilated two Roman Legions in the Teutoburger Forest.
- The black population of South Carolina -- where the film is set -- is basically depicted as happy loyal slaves, or equally happy (and unlikely) freedmen.

But the most disturbing thing about "The Patriot" is not just that German director Roland Emmerich (director of the jingoistic "Independence Day") and his screenwriter Robert Rodat (who was criticized for excluding British and other Allied soldiers from his script for "Saving Private Ryan") depict British troops as committing savage atrocities, but that those atrocities bear such a close resemblance to war crimes carried out by German troops -- particularly the SS in World War II. It's hard not to wonder if the filmmakers have some kind of subconscious agenda.

In one scene in "The Patriot," the British regulars murder wounded American POWs. In another, they order the execution of an American soldier captured in uniform. Both were common occurrences on the Eastern Front of World War II, but such war crimes by regular troops "never happened" in the Revolutionary War, says American Heritage magazine editor Richard Snow. (Of course, irregular militias, terrorist bands allied to both sides and Indian proxies did do some very nasty things.) And, sure, spies and traitors, such as Nathan Hale (American) and Major John Andre (British), were hanged. But regular troops on both sides observed the law of war that distinctions should be made between the former categories and uniformed combatants. "[The Patriot] is inventing a context of atrocities when what really happened was much more interesting," he says.

Snow says he understands the outrage in the British press. "I think that [they] should be upset. I would be pretty sore if I saw a British production of Shaw's 'Devil's Disciple' and it had Americans bayonetting the wounded after the Battle of Bennington."

British Atrocities  
American prisoners

The most outrageous of "The Patriot's" many faults is the way Emmerich and Rodat show the British troops committing a war crime that closely resembles one of the most notorious Nazi war crimes of World War II -- the massacre of 642 people (including 205 children) in the French village of Oradour sur Glane on June 10, 1944. The film mimics the horrible event with clear accuracy and turns it into just another atrocity committed by redcoats in 1780.

British Atrocities  
Church burning

At Oradour, the Waffen SS "Das Reich" division punished local resistance activity by first shooting all the men and boys. Then they rounded up the women and children, locked them in the town church and set it afire. (You can see Oradour today exactly as it was just after the Nazis carried out the ghastly mass-murder -- the French have left it to remain an empty memorial.)

There was one major case of British regulars burning a town during the Revolution. It was Groton, Conn., and the troops were under the command of Benedict Arnold. But the houses they burned were empty. Yet in "The Patriot" fictional British dragoons do exactly the same as the real life SS did at Oradour. They lock scores of civilians, most of them women and children, into a church and set it afire. According to both historian Thomas Fleming and Snow, no such incident took place during the Revolution. As Snow says, "Of course it never happened -- if it had do you think Americans would have forgotten it? It could have kept us out of World War I."

British Atrocities  
Church burning

By transposing Oradour to South Carolina, and making 18th century Britons the first moderns to commit this particular war crime, Emmerich and Rodat -- unwittingly or not -- have done something unpleasantly akin to Holocaust revisionism. They have made a film that will have the effect of inoculating audiences against the unique historical horror of Oradour -- and implicitly rehabilitating the Nazis while making the British seem as evil as history's worst monsters.

Of course, Emmerich and Rodat would probably counter that they're just trying to show how nasty war can be. But the fact remains that in the real Revolutionary War the regular armies of neither side behaved in this way -- even in South Carolina in 1780 -- and only the Brits are shown committing unprovoked acts of bestial cruelty.

So it's no wonder that the British press sees this film as a kind of blood libel against the British people. To understand the import, just imagine a hugely successful foreign film (French, British, Chinese) about the Vietnam War that depicted Americans using thousands of Vietnamese children for medical and scientific experiments.

If the Nazis had won the war in Europe, and their propaganda ministry had decided to make a film about the American Revolution, "The Patriot" is exactly the movie you could expect to see -- minus the computer-generated effects, of course. (Doubters should take a look at Goebbels' pre-Pearl Harbor efforts at inflaming isolationist Anglophobia.)

It's just as well for Sony-Columbia that Emmerich, Rodat and Gibson didn't make a film that painted the French, the Chinese or even the Arabs into ur-SS war criminals. If they had there would probably be official government protests, popular demonstrations and boycotts. But they have still told a big lie about the war that brought the United States into existence, one that feeds an even greater lie about the war and the enemy the U.S. and Britain fought half a century ago. It's a shameful way to make money.

Historical accuracy

And it's particularly insidious when a film that goes to such lengths



## Historical accuracy

to avoid anachronism in Revolutionary period clothing, weaponry and battle tactics takes such license with the nature of the war. In the past, Hollywood has played with historical details in order to make a narrative more compelling or the look of a film more appealing. But it has been an unwritten rule of the American film industry that you try to hew vaguely to the generally accepted account of how things were in the past.

It's hard to define, but there is clearly a point where dramatic and poetic license shade into something much more sinister. If you made a film in which the slave trade was shown as two-sided with Africans shown as raiding Europe for slaves to bring to America, or one in which Jews were shown provoking pogroms by drinking the blood of gentile children, you would have passed that point, even if such films were exciting, well acted and starred Gibson.

I don't blame Gibson so much; he's only an actor and it's no surprise when actors either willfully or ignorantly overlook historical accuracy for a good role. (Especially when they receive \$25 million for their trouble, as Gibson did for "The Patriot.") But I'd like to introduce Emmerich and Rodat to the families of those massacred at Oradour.

### Jonathan Foreman

Jonathan Foreman is a staff writer for the New York Post.

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## escenic

By Ben Fenton in Washington 19 June 2000 • 12:00am

4-5 minutes

THE Patriot, a Hollywood epic set in the American War of Independence, comes to cinema screens next week with the timely warning: "The British are coming! The British are coming!"

But as with the recent furore over Hollywood revisionism in U-571 and Saving Private Ryan, some critics believe Paul Revere's legendary warning to his rebel compatriots should be augmented with the words: "Quick, hide the history books." **The Patriot, starring Mel Gibson, casts King George III's redcoats as war criminals and bloodthirsty killers bent on oppressing the doughty "American" freedom fighters in the conflict between 1775 and 1781.**

Patriots - heroes  
British - villains

But historians and critics have questioned the film's simplification of history, its authenticity and particularly the portrayal of the central British villain in the piece. Gibson, an Australian known for his performances as a victim of English cruelty and incompetence in Gallipoli and Braveheart, plays Benjamin Martin, a reluctant rebel whose experience fighting French and Indians in the Seven Years' War turned him into a pacifist.

But when the British, and particularly Col William Tavington with his Green Dragoons, come to Martin's plantation in South Carolina, arresting his eldest child to be hanged as a rebel and gratuitously shooting another son dead in front of his family, he takes up arms against the redcoats. The film shows Martin turning the skills he learned fighting the French and Indians against the British in the Carolina swamps.

Martin leads his colonists on a series of bloody raids against the redcoats. In one scene, Martin's children of 10 and 13 shoot British soldiers at close range. The snobbish and nasty Tavington and his thuggish troops are contrasted with the thoughtful and merciful Martin and his merry men. **Stephen Hunter**, film critic of the Washington Post and an historian of the period, said: **"Any image of the American Revolution which represents you Brits as Nazis and us as gentle folk is almost certainly wrong.**

Patriots - heroes  
British - villains

**"It was a very bitter war, a total war, and that is something that I am afraid has been lost to history." He said that the presence of the Loyalists (colonists who did not want to join the fight for independence from Britain) meant that the War of Independence was a conflict of complex loyalties.** In The Patriot, Martin defeats Tavington and Gen Cornwallis at the Battle of Cowpens, which leads to the victory of the "Patriot" cause.

Loyalists

Columbia Tristar, the film studio, says the character of Martin is "an amalgam" of historical figures but the principal model is clearly the Carolinian militia leader Francis Marion. Tavington, also said to be a fictional character, is clearly based on Col Banastre Tarleton, commander of the Green Dragoons.

Tarleton was the central hate figure of the rebel leadership in the southern campaign of the American Revolution, but historians now believe him to have been unfairly demonised. The conduct of his troops at the battle of Waxhaws in May 1780, when rebel colonists trying to surrender were killed by the Dragoons, led to the phrase "Tarleton's quarter" - meaning no mercy - being adopted as a rallying cry by the young "Patriot" army.

But there is no evidence that Tarleton, called "Bloody Ben" or "The Butcher" in rebel pamphlets, ever broke the rules of war and certainly not that he ever shot a child in cold blood. Scott Withrow, a historian at the Cowpens national battlefield site in South Carolina, said: "In effect, [Tarleton] was probably no more brutal than some other British officers and even some American officers."

Stephen Fleming, one of America's leading historians of the period, said he believed Tarleton's troops at Waxhaws acted in the heat of battle, that the rebels had refused to surrender and that the incident was exaggerated by the rebels, who were "very quick to call 'massacre'." Repeated telephone calls to Columbia Tristar and Mel Gibson, requesting interviews for this article, were not returned. The Patriot opens on June 28 in America.

Historical Figures/Characters  
Tavington/Tarleton

Historical Figures/Characters  
Tavington/Tarleton