Alan Farmer explains why the North won the American Civil War.

On 10 April 1865, General Robert E. Lee, having just surrendered to General Grant at Appomattox, wrote a farewell address to his soldiers. ‘After four years’ arduous service, marked by unsurpassed courage and fortitude’, declared Lee, ‘the Army of Northern Virginia has been compelled to yield to overwhelming numbers and resources.’ According to Lee, the Confederacy lost the American Civil War not because it fought badly but because the enemy had more men and guns – indeed more everything. Historian Richard Current, reviewing the statistics of Northern (or Union) strength, concluded that ‘surely in view of disparity of resources, it would have taken a miracle … to enable the South to win. As usual, God was on the side of the heaviest battalions’.

Yet not all historians would accept that the Union’s superior resources were the prime cause of Confederate defeat. Many insist that the Confederacy lost – rather than the Union won – the Civil War. Did the Confederacy defeat itself or was it defeated?

Union and Confederate Advantages

The Union certainly had considerable advantages. There were 22 million people in the North compared with only 9 million in the South (of whom only 5.5 million were whites). The North had a much greater industrial capacity. In 1860 Northern states produced 97 per cent of the USA’s firearms and 94 per cent of its pig iron. Even in agriculture the North enjoyed an edge. The Confederacy hoped to make good its lack of materials by trading with Europe, but the Union used its naval strength to impose an increasingly tight blockade. The Union was further aided by the fact that four slave states – Delaware, Missouri, Maryland and Kentucky – remained loyal to the Union. Nor were all the people within the 11 Confederate states committed to the Confederate cause. Pockets of Unionism existed, especially in the Appalachian Mountains. Slaves were also a potential fifth column. Throughout the war there was a steady flow of blacks fleeing to Union armies. The North converted first their labour and eventually their military manpower into a Union asset.

Nevertheless, in 1861 most Southerners thought that the Confederacy was favourite to win the war. The Confederacy’s sheer size – 750,000 square miles – was a major asset, making it difficult to blockade, occupy and conquer. Confederate forces did not have to invade the North: they simply needed to defend. The fire-power of the rifle-musket meant that battlefield tactics now favoured the defender. The Union, having no option but to attack, was bound to suffer heavy casualties. Southerners hoped that Northern opinion might come to question high losses. If Northern will collapsed, the Confederacy would
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win by default. geography gave the confederacy an important strategic advantage. in the crucial theatre of the war – north virginia – a series of rivers provided a barrier to union armies intent on capturing richmond, the confederate capital. slavery, which might seem to be a confederate weakness, enabled the south to enlist more of its white manpower than the north.

the confederacy also had important psychological advantages. southerners were defending their own land and homes – a fact that may have encouraged them to fight that much harder than northerners, who were fighting for the more abstract pursuit of reunion. in 1861 most southerners were confident that, man for man, they were better soldiers than northerners. the antebellum south placed more emphasis on martial virtues than the north. in 1860 most of the military colleges in the usa were in slave states. the elite of the nation’s generals had all been southerners. most military experts assumed that farmers, who knew how to ride and shoot, made better soldiers than industrial workers. confederate victory in the first major battle at manassas seemed to confirm this assumption.

missed confederate opportunities

at many stages, events on the battlefield might have gone differently. historians stress different moments when the confederacy was either unlucky or missed opportunities. confederate forces might have been more pro-active after first manassas. the trent affair could have brought britain into the war on the confederate side. had stonewall jackson been up to par in june-july 1862 lee might have triumphed even more spectacularly in the seven days battles. who knows what would have happened had lee’s battle orders not fallen into union hands in maryland in september 1862?

the confederacy had its chances in 1863. given more inspired generalship, grant might have failed to capture vicksburg. lee might have done better at gettysburg, especially if stonewall jackson had not been killed at chancellorsville. there were still good opportunities for the confederacy in 1864. lincoln’s re-election in november 1864 very much depended on (belated) military success. the alternative was a victory for the democrat party, parts of which were committed to peace. perhaps president davis might have taken up general cleburne’s proposal to redress the south’s manpower shortage by conscripting slaves. in short, the confederacy was not inevitably a ‘lost cause’.
Political Leadership

Superior leadership is often seen as the main reason for Union victory. However, in many respects, the Confederacy was well led. While President Lincoln’s superiority to Jefferson Davis might seem self-evident, Lee could think of no one in the South who could have done a better job than Davis. Davis certainly worked hard and did his best to inspire Southerners. The Confederate government is often charged with failing to efficiently manage the country’s economy and finance. The main criticism is that it printed too much money, thus fuelling inflation which ravaged the economy and lowered Southern morale. However, given the Union blockade, inflation was inevitable. Despite its economic problems, the Confederacy maintained over 3 per cent of its population under arms – a higher figure than the North. In terms of the management of military supply, the Confederacy could boast some organisational successes. Ordnance Chief Josiah Gorgas, for example, built an arms industry virtually from scratch and kept
Confederate armies better supplied than had seemed possible in 1861. The main problem was the shortage – not the management – of resources.

**Confederate Military Leadership**

The key aspect of leadership in the Civil War, as in any war, was military leadership.

Robert E. Lee in 1863

Many historians claim that Davis and Lee, Davis’s most important military adviser and field commander, pursued a flawed military strategy. Davis chose to pursue what has been labelled an ‘offensive-defensive’ strategy. This consisted of placing conventional...
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armies in an essentially defensive posture to protect as much territory as possible, and launching offensive movements when circumstances seemed promising. Lee emphasised the ‘offensive’ in ‘offensive-defensive’, seeking to find ways to gain and hold the initiative. His penchant for attack has been particularly criticised. Arguably a more defensive strategy would have conserved manpower, thereby enabling the Confederacy to prolong the war and perhaps exhaust Union will. Historians Grade McWhiney and Perry Jamieson argue that Lee’s offensive strategy extracted a hideous price in battlefield casualties: the South literally bled itself to death in the first three years of the war. Emory Thomas claims that Lee learned the wrong lessons from General Scott’s successful offensive strategy in the Mexican War. Thomas thinks Lee admired ‘Scott’s bold strategy and probably developed a confidence in attacking that made him miscalculate against an enemy well led and armed with rifles instead of much shorter-range muskets’.

However, it is unlikely that a purely defensive strategy would have succeeded. General Joe Johnston was the Confederate exponent of defensive warfare. Refusing to stand and fight, he surrendered huge chunks of land virtually without a struggle in north Virginia in 1862 and in Georgia in 1864. This did not enhance Southern morale. Moreover, Confederate retreat often led to disastrous sieges and huge surrenders, for example Fort Donelson (1862) and Vicksburg (1863). Lee’s battles in 1862-3 were certainly costly: from Seven Days to Chancellorsville his casualties were 65,000 (of whom 10,000 died). But this effusion of blood served a purpose. The key to success lay in winning victories that depressed Union and bolstered Confederate morale. Victories might also convince Britain and France to recognize the Confederacy. Lee, like all Civil War generals, recognized the advantage of fighting on the defensive. But he also knew that a purely defensive strategy would result in the Confederacy being picked off at will. The only hope in Lee’s view (and surely he was right) was to retain the initiative and risk attack, hoping for a great Waterloo-type victory. As Prussia was to prove in the Seven Weeks War against Austria (1866) and in the Franco-Prussian War (1870-1), spectacular offensive victories could be won – despite the rifle-musket. On several occasions Lee’s strategy almost won him an annihilating victory. When finally forced on the defensive in 1864-5, he had to fight the kind of war the Confederacy could not win.

The Confederate leadership has been taken to task for attempting to fight a conventional rather than a guerrilla war. Influenced by the Vietnam War, some scholars envisage small groups of Southerners striking at the enemy’s extended lines of communication as frustrated Unionists sought to bring rebel soldiers to battle in the vast Southern hinterlands. Arguably Southern manpower would have lasted almost indefinitely while Union commitment eroded away. However, a guerrilla strategy in 1861 was inconceivable. A purely guerrilla-style war meant the loss of territory and thus of slaves, and this would have alienated most Southerners. A guerrilla war could erode Union will only as long as Southerners remained devoted to the cause. Irregular units could not have supplied battlefield victories of the magnitude Lee’s army won in 1862-3 – victories essential to national morale. Moreover, Davis needed to create a nation, with a successful
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national army, to win British and French recognition. Neither country would have recognised a fledgling Confederacy that relied on guerrilla units rather than on a formal army. Successful guerrilla wars have always benefited from dependable outside support, but no such support was available to the Confederacy. It should be said that there was considerable Confederate guerrilla activity in Florida, Tennessee, Virginia and Missouri (where it was particularly nasty). But when Davis called for an all-out guerrilla war in April 1865, there were no takers. Most Southerners recognised that a guerrilla war would simply extend the misery with little prospect of winning independence.

Some historians think Lee’s strategic vision was limited to Virginia, where his influence concentrated Confederate resources at the expense of the West. The result was that the Confederacy lost the West and thus lost the war. Such criticism is unfounded. Lee was commander of the Army of Northern Virginia: Virginia was thus his rightful priority. If anyone was to blame for a Virginia-focused strategy it was Davis. In fairness to Davis, it seems highly unlikely that the Confederacy could have won the war by concentrating most of its forces in the West where military conditions, especially control of the major rivers, favoured the Union. Virginia, the Confederacy’s most important industrial state, had to be defended. In Virginia, geographical conditions very much favoured the defender. It thus made sense to send the best men and resources to the best army (the Army of Northern Virginia) and the best general (Lee!). Indeed Davis might be criticised not so much for his preoccupation with Virginia, but instead for dividing scarce resources more or less equally between East and West. However, Davis knew that the Confederacy could not survive long without both Virginia and the West. He had to try and hold both, with limited manpower and limited talent.

Many of the Confederacy’s problems in the West stemmed from its poor commanders. The first overall Western commander, Albert Johnston, allowed Union forces to break through the Tennessee and Cumberland river defence line. Beauregard made plans not based on realities. General Bragg quarrelled with everyone and had a poor record. General Joe Johnston did little but retreat. General Hood was responsible for a series of costly defeats in 1864.

Nevertheless, claims that skillful Union and incompetent Confederate generalship explain the outcome of the war are not convincing. The Union did finally find the winning team of Grant and Sherman. Grant, often regarded as the war’s best soldier, displayed his talent when capturing Fort Donelson (1862) and Vicksburg (1863). Overall commander from March 1864, he slugged it out with Lee in Virginia and won the war. Sherman’s capture of Atlanta and his marches through Georgia and the Carolinas weakened the South logistically and psychologically. However, the Union army had more than its fair share of blunderers. Inept Union generalship actually gave the Confederacy a chance of victory. Even Grant and Sherman were far from supermen. Their 1864-5 campaigns were won because their forces were larger and better equipped than those of the enemy. Within a framework largely shaped by Davis and Lee, Confederate forces fought numerous battles, raised civilian hopes, stretched Northern will to the limit on more than one
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occasion but ultimately failed to achieve independence. This failure does not mean that the offensive-defensive strategy was flawed. There was no other rational strategy. Lee deserves to be held in high regard. Despite being outnumbered in every major campaign in which he fought, he won stunning victories. If other Confederate generals had fought as well, the war might have had a different outcome.

Confederate Will

Today, many scholars insist that the Confederacy could have won if the Southern people had possessed the will to make the necessary sacrifices. There is a tendency to believe that once Southerners got past the heady summer of 1861, with victory at Manassas fading and the prospect of significant sacrifice looming, morale plummeted. As desertion and disaffection increased, Confederate resistance collapsed from internal stresses that rendered further struggle impossible. Historian Merton Coulter declared that the Confederacy lost because its ‘people did not will hard enough and long enough to win’. Arguably, the Confederacy failed to generate a strong sense of nationalism. Accordingly, when the going got tough, Southerners found it tough to keep going.

In reality, however, Southerners had a strong sense of distinctiveness – a belief that they shared cultural values at odds with those of the rest of the nation. What particularly set them apart was slavery – the ‘cornerstone’ of the Confederacy. The strength of patriotic feeling in 1861 produced 500,000 volunteers for military service. Southern politicians, clergymen and newspaper editors, invoking memories of 1776, did their utmost to secure support for the Confederacy. The war, which gave Southerners a new set of heroes and which also created a unifying hatred of the enemy, strengthened feelings of national identity. So did military service. Historian James McPherson found evidence of very strong patriotism in the letters of Southern soldiers. Most believed they were fighting for freedom and liberty. Even during the awful winter of 1864-5 most soldiers faithfully discharged their duty. Thousands of courageous Confederate troops, for example, mounted impressive – but hopeless – assaults against well-positioned Federals in the battle of Franklin in November 1864. Historian Gary Gallagher suggests that the most nationalistic Southerners were young officers. Reared among the sectional controversies of the 1850s, they had few, if any, doubts about slavery, attributed base motives to Northerners in general and Republicans in particular, and supported secession. Once fighting began, their personal example in combat inspired their men and their achievements nourished patriotism and resolve among civilians. Devoted to the Confederacy, they remained outspoken advocates of continued sacrifice until the last days of the war.

Far from being a reason for defeat, the strength of Confederate nationalism explains why most Southerners fought as long and hard as they did. In the summer of 1864 Northerners almost threw in the towel when they suffered casualty rates that Southerners had endured for more than two years. 260,000 Confederate troops died in the war – a quarter of the
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white male population of military age. A further 200,000 were seriously wounded. The Confederacy’s death toll was far greater than France’s in the Franco-Prussian War. Nobody suggests that Frenchmen in 1870 did not have a strong sense of national identity. Yet France lost. Nationalism does not ensure invulnerability to those who possess it.

The Battle of Gettysburg

Given so much death and destruction, some scholars believe that Southerners came to doubt whether God was really on their side and that this helped corrode morale. This view is hard to substantiate. Southern Church leaders supported the Confederate cause until the bitter end. Most Southerners believed that God would ensure their success. Religious revivals swept through Confederate armies, especially in 1863-4. Many Southern soldiers equated duty to God with duty to the Confederacy. Rather than explaining Confederate defeat, religion played a vital role in sustaining Southern will. The notion that many Southern whites felt moral qualms about slavery, which undermined their will to fight a war to preserve it, is even less convincing. All the
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evidence suggests that most Southerners went to war to preserve their peculiar institution and remained committed to it to the end.

Recent scholarship has stressed that many groups within the South became disenchanted as the war progressed. Two-thirds of the Confederacy’s white population were non-slaveholders who may have come to resent risking their lives and property simply to defend slavery for slaveholders. However, McPherson found little if any evidence of class division in the letters of Confederate soldiers. Large numbers of non-slaveholders were ready to fight and die for the Confederacy from start to finish.

‘Historians have wondered in recent years why the Confederacy did not endure longer’, wrote historian Drew Gilpin Faust; ‘In considerable measure … it was because so many women did not want it to. It may well have been because of its women that the South lost the Civil War’. Severe hardship on the home front, Faust claims, led to a growth of defeatism which was conveyed by uncensored letters to Southern soldiers. Women told their men folk to put family before national loyalty. In reality, however, many Southern women remained loyal to the end, exhorting their men to stay at the front and fight. Increased privation, the experience of living under Federal occupation, and the loss of loved ones often reinforced rather than eroded loyalty to the Confederacy.

‘The devils seem to have a determination that cannot but be admired’, wrote General Sherman to his wife in March 1864. ‘No amount of poverty or adversity seems to shake their faith — wealth and luxury gone, money worthless, starvation in view within a period of two or three years, are causes enough to make the bravest tremble, yet I see no sign of let up – some few deserters — plenty tired of war, but the masses determined to fight it out’. Sherman’s subsequent actions underscored his belief that severe measures were necessary to break the dogged Confederate resistance.

There was some states rights obstructionism in the Confederacy; that was only to be – and was far less than might have been – expected. There were class tensions: there are in any state. There was war weariness: there always is. But even in 1864-5, letters, diaries and newspapers reveal a tenacious popular will rooted in a sense of national community.

As the war progressed, Lee and his Army of Northern Virginia embodied the Confederacy in the minds of most white Southerners. Lee’s military success sustained Southern hopes. Contemporaries understood the centrality of military events to national morale and, by extension, to the outcome of the war. In his second inaugural address Lincoln spoke of the ‘progress of our arms, upon which all else chiefly depends’. But for victories at Atlanta and in the Shenandoah Valley, Lincoln might well have lost the 1864 election. Lee won many, but in the end not enough, victories. The prestige and symbolic importance of the Army of Northern Virginia were such that few Southerners contemplated serious resistance after Lee’s surrender at Appomattox, despite the fact that he surrendered only a fraction of Southerners under arms in April 1865. Appomattox was the end of the Confederacy.
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Conclusion

When asked some years afterwards why the Confederates lost at Gettysburg, General Pickett replied, ‘I think the Yankees had something to do with it’. The Yankees also explain why the Confederacy lost the war. The Union defeated the Confederacy: the Confederacy did not defeat itself.

General Lee surrenders to General Grant

Given the Union’s strength, the Confederacy was always likely to be beaten. To win, the Confederacy had to wear down Northern will. A long bloody war was the best way to do this. The war was long and bloody but Northern will endured. The morale of Union soldiers was crucial. McPherson’s study of soldiers’ letters suggests that Northern soldiers were aware of the issues at stake and passionately concerned about them. In 1864 some 80 per cent of Union soldiers voted for Lincoln, proof that soldier morale still held strong. Federal victories from mid-1863 onwards helped sustain that morale. The Confederacy surrendered in 1865 because Union armies had demonstrated their ability to crush Southern military resistance. Defeat caused defeatism, not vice versa. A people whose armies are beaten, railways wrecked, cities burned, countryside occupied and crops laid waste, lose their will – and ability – to continue fighting. In war ‘heavy battalions’ do normally triumph. The Civil War was to be no exception. Unable to fight a perfect war, the stubborn Confederacy finally fell before the enemy’s superior resources. The final epitaph of the Confederacy should be ‘Expired after a brave fight’.

Issues to debate

- Can the Confederacy’s defeat be explained by poor generalship?
- How convincing are explanations for the south’s defeat that stress poor morale and a lack of Confederate will?
- Why did the Union win the Civil War?
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