

STRATEGY, TACTICS AND OUTCOMES DURING THE CIVIL WAR

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There has been much debate over the years following the Civil War about regarding whether the less favorable outcomes on the battlefield were actually due to tactical failures, or due simply to widespread failures in strategy and administration. In arguing for the former Paddy Griffin supports the former by arguing that the war was won by the North simply because it was better able than the South to formulate and execute a more superior strategy for inflicting psychological damage, and gaining the overall logistical advantage.¹

Stating that “Lee lost the war,” Griffin is making the argument that Lee’s Southern chivalry and an “old world” view of military strategy got in the way of reality on the battlefield thereby putting his army in the position of being overrun by a superior force that he, as well as the entire Confederacy were ill-equipped to repel. To Griffin, it would be the generals who would be willing to embrace the “new age” of modern thinking by abandoning the “old world” professional code of chivalry, e.g., Grant and Sherman, who would come out on top at the expense of those who would cling to the past.² Although he dispels the modern war view of T. Harry Williams, Griffith argues that the Civil War was a major turning point in the evolution of the United States Army from an old to a new way of thinking about war, the role of the commander in war, and the manner in which war

¹ *Griffith, Paddy, Battle Tactics of the Civil War*, First published in the United Kingdom by Crownwood Press, 1987, and in the United States by Yale University Press, New Haven Ct. 1989, pg. 18..

² *Griffith, Paddy, Battle Tactics of the Civil War*, pg. 23.

should be fought. He argues that for the first time the United States military abandoned its long held acceptance of foreign military doctrine, and began to tackle warfare in a uniquely American way, and on a much larger scale.³

Griffin makes another important point which is counter to the thinking of most modern military historians, arguing that the introduction of rifled weapons had little impact on battlefield tactics. While Griffith makes the argument that the introduction of the rifle had little effect upon the tactical operations of the infantry, cavalry, or artillery, he goes on to attribute the high battlefield casualty rates to commanders who were unable to think strategically, thereby creating a tactical imbalance between attack and defense resulting in numerous indecisive battles fought with high human costs.⁴

On the other hand, Grady McWhiney and Perry Jamieson take the opposite view making the argument that battlefield tactics of the 1860s were not just influenced by, but altered by the introduction of several new technologies, the rifle being only one example. During the Mexican War, American tactics assumed the use of close-order formations, the musket, and the bayonet charge. The positive outcomes of the Mexican War are credited with developing a mindset in the American military establishment that weaponry and tactics could overcome enemy field fortifications. According to McWhiney and Jamieson, the total Southern acceptance of this mindset, especially when coupled with the

³ Griffith, Paddy, *Battle Tactics of the Civil War*, pg. 24.

⁴ Griffith, Paddy, *Battle Tactics of the Civil War*, pg. 17.

replacement of the smoothbore musket by the rifle, caused the Confederates to literally destroy themselves making bold and repeated attacks. They go on to attribute much of this mindset in the southern military culture to their ancestral Celtic temperament. McWhiney and Jamison argue that these innate southern characteristics coupled with outdated flawed military tactics led to the military defeat of the South.⁵

Griffith argues that during the Civil War the importance of artillery was at the short range with the Napoleons firing grape and canister into a charging infantry column.⁶ When considering this employment of artillery, Griffith is basically arguing that the introduction of the rifle had little impact upon the artillery operating at its most effective short range. While McWhiney and Jamieson would probably not disagree entirely, they would probably add that while the rifle did not destroy the effectiveness of the “big guns” it did serve to limit the role of the artillery to the defensive.⁷ According to McWhiney and Jamieson, the failure to recognize how rifled weapons would place emphasis upon a tactical defensive position, especially when used in conjunction with field fortifications tended to render the use of close-order formations something akin to mass suicide.

⁵ Jamieson, Perry D., and McWhiney, Grady, *Attack and Die: Civil War Military Tactics and the Southern Heritage*, The University of Alabama Press, Tuscaloosa, AL., 1982, pg. 125.

⁶ Griffith, Paddy, *Battle Tactics of the Civil War*, pg. 171.

⁷ Jamieson, Perry D., and McWhiney, Grady, *Attack and Die: Civil War Military Tactics and the Southern Heritage*, pg. 125.

While early tactics favored the use of the bayonet charge as part of the tactical offensive, by the time rifled weapons were in widespread use, most battles were decided long before the attackers got close enough to fix bayonets.⁸ The futility of the bayonet charge as well as the close order formation attacking fortified positions were the most significant changes in infantry tactics seen during the war.

According to McWhiney and Jamieson the introduction of the rifle rendered the cavalry useless against infantry, completely refuting Griffin's argument for the effectiveness of the cavalry saber charge. While Griffith argues that the cavalry played a central role in the war,⁹ McWhiney and Jamieson see that arm pretty much relegated to intelligence gathering, as well as other support functions to the infantry.

Tactics, Strategy and Terrain

Without question, the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia performed brilliantly, recording several important victories in the Eastern Theater while the Confederate Army of Tennessee had only one significant victory in the war, that at Chickamauga. In an effort to get at the root reasons for the disparity in the performances, Richard McMurray takes a good hard look at the conditions which faced each army in the field. In an attempt to level the playing field between the two armies, Murray makes the point that the Army of Tennessee operated in the

⁸ Jamieson, Perry D., and McWhiney, Grady, *Attack and Die: Civil War Military Tactics and the Southern Heritage*, pg. 78.

⁹ Griffith, Paddy, *Battle Tactics of the Civil War*, pg. 181.

West which was a vast territory having few resources, little infrastructure, and many complicating geographical features. By contrast, the East was more contained, with well-developed rail and road systems and ample natural resources. Accordingly, McMurray concludes that politics, geography, history, and economics were all pre-existing conditions, which operated to the disinterest of the Army of Tennessee, and in favor of the Army of Northern Virginia.

In addition, McMurray makes the argument that the distribution of command staffs of both armies allowed the Army of Northern Virginia to enjoy much of its early success, operating at the expense of third rate Union generals, while the Army of Tennessee faced the likes of Grant, Sherman, McPherson, Schofield, et al. In addition, he points out that the democratic social structures in the North produced urban young people from manufacturing sectors who became soldiers and fought against the Confederates in Virginia. Union soldiers in the West came from much the same rural roots as their Confederate counterparts, and held no pre-existing mythologies about the superiority of Southern fighting man. That was not the case in the East, as continued failures at First Manassas, Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville only served to reinforce preconceived notions about the superiority of not only the southern ability to fight, but a superiority in character as well. Both sides tended to believe the same thing. This cultural mindset in both the Union and Confederate soldier, as well as

civilians in both regions resulted in a situation pitting the Union soldiers with the least confidence against the more hard-line, confident Confederates in Virginia.¹⁰

McMurray's most important conclusion however, is that the Army of Northern Virginia was simply a better army than was the Army of Tennessee. It had better administration and a better commander. Much of the success of that army can be attributed to Lee's intelligence and character. He was adept at learning from his experiences, and was capable of devising bold and daring plans, and once developed, had the courage to put them into execution. Of course, in this regard the most important asset Lee had at his disposal until May, 1863 was that of Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson. But most important, Lee would accept responsibility for failures, a far cry from the norm of the day. The compounding effects of each of these personal qualities made Lee the only Confederate commander to have enjoyed any substantial success during the war.

The Maryland Campaign of 1862

From a strategic point of view, Joseph Harsh examines Lee's decision to enter Maryland in the late summer of 1862 based upon his [Lee's] understanding of Confederate war aims, existing policy, logistics, intelligence and a host of other details. When reading Harsh it is pretty clear that in his mind Robert E. Lee believed he was riding the crest of the Confederacy at a critical moment in history. This moment in history had presented the South its best opportunity to win independence. His army had just defeated John Pope at Second Manassas,

¹⁰ McMurry, Richard M., *Two Great Rebel Armies*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, NC. 1989, pg. 47.

and the Federal army now cowered in the area of Washington D.C., completely demoralized.

Politically, Maryland was straddling the fence as a border state harboring a large population of secessionists within its borders, while at the same time the French and English had been flirting with the idea of intervention into the conflict on the side of the Confederacy. As Lee saw it, there was no better time than the present to move his army across the Potomac.

Harsh points to two events, which cost Lee control over the campaign. The first of these was the loss of Special Order 191 which cost him strategic control. The falling into McClellan's hands of this order told the Union commander that Lee had divided his army and was likely on foreign soil without an adequate route of retreat back across the Potomac. Lee later proclaimed this to be the single most pivotal event in the entire campaign.

The second was the entry of the Federal army into Frederick, costing Lee operational control of the campaign.¹¹ However, as far as Harsh is concerned, the loss of Special Order No. 191 is not what cost Lee control over the campaign, it was the fact that he had grossly underestimated the speed by which the Federals would occupy Frederick, and that he simply tried to accomplish too much with limited resources in a limited amount of time.¹²

¹¹ Harsh, Joseph L., *Taken at the Flood: Robert E. Lee and Confederate Strategy in the Maryland Campaign of 1862* Kent State University Press, Kent, OH. 1999, pg. 480.

¹² Harsh, Joseph L., *Taken at the Flood: Robert E. Lee and Confederate Strategy in the Maryland Campaign of 1862*, pg. 252.

Harsh concludes that that the only possible way the Confederacy could have prevailed without benefit of foreign intervention, would have been to defeat the superior federal army would have been to resort entirely to guerilla warfare.¹³ In hindsight, it does not appear that support in the North for preserving the Union ever became so wobbly or wore so thin that any action taken by the Confederacy in Maryland or elsewhere would have caused the North to accept secession.

Harsh concludes that in most all of his strategic decisions, Lee was correct. While he recognized that he was riding the high tide of the Confederacy, in the end, Northern determination proved greater than Southern resources and the tide of the Confederacy simply ran too shallow, and the shore stretched too far.¹⁴

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Jamieson, Perry D., and McWhiney, Grady, Attack and Die: Civil War Military Tactics and the Southern Heritage, The University of Alabama Press, Tuscaloosa, AL., 1982.

McMurry, Richard M., Two Great Rebel Armies, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, NC. 1989.

¹³ *Harsh, Joseph L., Taken at the Flood: Robert E. Lee and Confederate Strategy in the Maryland Campaign of 1862, pg. 494.*

¹⁴ *Harsh, Joseph L., Taken at the Flood: Robert E. Lee and Confederate Strategy in the Maryland Campaign of 1862, pg. 496.*

