

For years the historians have discussed the American Civil War and its consequences for the United States. Many historians argue that to understand the United States, a student must study the causes and outcomes of the war. Civil War historian Shelby Foote stated that the war defined us as a people. It gave us our national identity. Everything in our history before the Civil War culminates in the great tragedy and everything in our history after the Civil War can be traced back to the war and its aftermath.¹

Many discussions about the war include the topic, “What if the South would have won the Civil War.” The answers to this debate range as far and wide as the size of the American continent. No matter what the answer to the above question is, the South lost the war, at least from a military standpoint. The question then becomes “Why did the South lose the war?” The question is simple, but the answers are complex. The number of people with an answer to the South’s military woes seems to rival the number of historians of the American nation.

In November of 1958, historians met at Gettysburg to discuss the reasons the South lost the war. Historian David Potter believed it was the leadership of Lincoln and the lack of leadership of Jefferson Davis that led to the South ultimate defeat. Richard Current argued that the North had a superior armed force and it is a miracle the South survived as long as it did. T. Harry Williams made the point that the North had superior military leadership when compared to the South.

¹ Burns, Ken, The Civil War, volume IX, PBS documentary.

The discussion did not end at Gettysburg in 1958. Many other historians have developed their own theory as to why the South lost the Civil War. Some have bordered on the fringe of historiography. An example is Grady McWhiney and Perry Jamieson's argument that the South lost because of its Celtic background, which caused them to continuously attack even though the situation called for a defensive position.

In the September/October issue of American History, the subject of why the South lost the Civil War was brought to the forefront again when Carl Zebrowski asked ten Civil War historians why the South lost. Answers ranged from superior manpower and leadership in the North to the problems the South had in fighting a war and holding on to the states' rights ideal.²

In this debate over the reasons the South lost the Civil War, a student may lose sight of the fact that the North won the Civil War. The South believed it was fighting for many of the ideals laid forth by Thomas Jefferson, Samuel Adams, George Washington, and others in the American rebellion against the King of England. No doubt these men stir any American's soul and the democratic ideals and freedoms they fought for in the 1770s. Despite this passion that the South was fighting for, they were overwhelmed by the advantages the North had, which led to the North's victory over the South in 1865.

While no one can single out just three reasons for the North's victory over the South, a combination of three factors benefited the North and their war cause against the South's rebellion. The three factors were the North's great economic advantage to finance the costs of war, the North's superior political leadership, and the North was luckier than the South.

² Zebrowski, Carl, "Why the South Lost the Civil War," American History, September/October 1995, pp. 24-29.

The first of the main factors that led to the North's victory was the great economic advantage the North had over the South. This advantage of the North can be traced back to the colonial days of the American colonies. As urban centers such as New York, Philadelphia and Boston began a commercial based economy of manufacturing and trade, the South built an economy based on agriculture. While both economies can be the basis for accumulating gold, the northern industrial base could attract gold on a steady basis, whereas, the Southern economy could attract gold only during harvest seasons.

In the time of the Civil War, as with any other war, the need for gold to finance the war campaign was strong. In order to raise the money needed, both sides issued paper currency in exchange for specie and a promise to redeem the paper with specie after the war. However, as with any issuing of paper money, inflation began to be a problem. While neither economy could withstand long-term inflation, the northern industrial base could withstand short-term inflation better than the agrarian South could.³ In the North, the paper currency was readily traded for goods and services, which helped keep the inflation rate at a minimum.

In addition, the northern industries had been using paper money since the time of the Continental dollar. However, in the South the use of paper money was a thing to be hated. The South was the leading opponent to both national banks, in part because of the issuing of paper money. As the South issued paper money, the drain on gold became apparent. In an economy measured in years, instead of the North's measurement of months, the effect on inflation was harmful.

³ McCandless Jr., George T., "Money, Expectations, and the U.S. Civil War," American Economic Review, June 1996, p. 662.

As the specie was being drained out of the South, the only hope was for an influx of goods, and possibly specie from Europe. However, at the outbreak of the war, England decided to not get involved with the American problem and sought out cotton for its textile mills from other places, namely India.⁴ Without an influx of specie into the South, the economy could not withstand the paper currency and the South's distrust of the currency.

Meanwhile, the Northern industries continued to be able to make or trade its war supplies and transport them efficiently throughout their industrial network, which allowed much of the specie to remain in the North. This allowed the effects of the inflation in the North to be only a short-term problem, while it continued to be a long-term problem for the South.⁵

The problem of not being able to raise enough of a war machine to fight against another nation that can raise a large war machine was troublesome for the South. From the sheer economic power of the North when compared to the South, it is astonishing the South was able to win as many victories as it did. However, this great economic advantage can not be viewed as the only reason the North won the war. Many groups of people have been able to overcome great economic odds to defeat a stronger opponent (i.e. the American colonists versus the British Empire). For the South, the economic disadvantages become a real problem as other issues started to work against the South.

In addition to the economic advantage of the North, it also had a political leadership advantage. Despite a lack of military training when compared to Davis, Lincoln proved to be a better wartime leader. Lincoln was able to unify the northern

⁴ Pelzer, J.D., "Liverpool and the American Civil War," History Today, March 1990, p. 48.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 51.

cause for the war and dealt with problems efficiently, while Davis could not bring the South together in their fight. From the very beginning, Lincoln articulated that secession was illegal and had to be stopped. In his inaugural address Lincoln said:

Plainly, the central idea of secession is the essence of anarchy. A majority, held in restraint by constitutional checks and limitations...is the only true sovereign of a free people. Whoever rejects it does of necessity fly to anarchy or to despotism. Unanimity is impossible. The rule of a minority, as a permanent arrangement, is wholly inadmissible; so that, rejecting the majority principle, anarchy or despotism in some form is all that is left.⁶

As problems arose in the North, Lincoln was willing to deal with them. When draft riots occurred in New York City during 1863, Lincoln was willing to use the military to stop the riots and bring order to the North.⁷ As the Liverpool merchants began to realize the cotton of the American South was superior to that of India's cotton, Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation to make the war a war over slavery. Since England had already outlawed slavery in its empire, the Liverpool merchants were not as willing to try to break the blockade to get the South's cotton. This leadership act deprived the South of much needed economic help.⁸

In contrast to Lincoln's leadership was the leadership of Jefferson Davis. Davis was never able to draft a consistent war strategy. The initial strategy of a defense with fortresses around the core of the Deep South was abandoned when the Confederate Congress voted to move its capital to Richmond. The South lacked the resources to be able to fight a two-front war, which the move to Richmond called for. Also, Davis was unable to get the people of the Confederacy to embrace the idea of uniting together for the cause of individual rights. In addition, Davis could not deal with the war problems

⁶ Lincoln, Abraham, "First Inaugural Address, March 4, 1861," A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents, 1798-1897, vol. III, (New York, 1896-1899), p. 243.

⁷ McPherson, James M., Battle Cry of Freedom, (New York: Ballantine Books, 1988), pp. 610-11.

efficiently. During the war, some Confederate armies were well supplied with shoes, but lacked food. While other armies were well supplied with food, but lacked shoes. Davis could not get the leaders of the armies, or the states, to share the scarce supplies, which doomed the morale of the Southern troops.⁹

Lincoln's leadership and Davis' lack of leadership gave the North a tremendous advantage in the war effort. It is impossible to know if Lincoln could have successfully dealt with the South's problems if he had been President of the Confederacy, but Davis was unable to and it was a great blow to the Confederacy's hopes. When combined with the economic power of the North, the leadership Lincoln provided the Union was a strong reason the North prevailed in the war.

Despite the lack of coherent leadership and economic problems, the South could have possibly pulled a victory out of the jaws of defeat. While the Union army was successful in the West, it could not take Vicksburg and Robert E. Lee was proving to be more than the Union generals could handle. However, the North had a string of good luck that can not be underestimated when examining why the Union won the Civil War.

The North's string of good luck began on the night of April 16. General Grant gambled on sending gunboats past Vicksburg during the night in preparations for his attack on the fort. The Confederates spotted the boats and opened fire on them. They fired 525 rounds and registered 68 hits, but amazingly sank only one of eleven transports and gunboats. A few nights later Grant sent more boats past the fort and had only one sank, despite being heavily fired upon by the Confederates at Vicksburg. This was an

⁸ Pelzer, 52.

⁹ Zebrowski, 26.

amazing feat by Grant and the luck of Grant's gamble paid off because he had amassed a powerful fleet south of the Confederate fort.¹⁰

Soon after Grant's luck at getting past Vicksburg, the North received another dose of good luck at the Battle of Chancellorsville in May of 1863. During the battle, one of the South's most capable generals and Lee's right-hand man was shot by South Carolinian troops. A week later, General Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson was dead. Not the work of a carefully crafted northern battle plan, but the work of confusion and friendly fire. With the loss of Jackson, the South had lost one of its most capable military leaders, and a man that Lee trusted greatly.¹¹

The final bit of luck the North received was during the third day at Gettysburg in July 1863. As Lee was preparing for a frontal assault on the Union line along Cemetery Ridge, the Confederates began an artillery bombing of the line to weaken and hopefully disband the line. The idea for Lee was to break through the line and split the Union position at Gettysburg forcing them to retreat and give the South a major victory. However, the artillery cannons of the Lee's army did not hit the line. Instead they were aimed to high and the shells flew over the ridge, behind the line. Unfortunately, there was no wind on the day and the gunpowder smoke clouded the vision of the Confederate leaders, who could not see that the artillery had had no effect on the Union line. Assuming the cannons were hitting their targets, Lee ordered the charge to Cemetery Ridge, which was disastrous. Pickett's Charge was a complete disaster for the Confederacy that began the road to the eventual defeat of the South.

¹⁰ McPherson, 627.

¹¹ Ibid., 642.

Had the luck been with the Confederates at Vicksburg, Chancellorsville, or Gettysburg the outcome of the war may have been different. Despite the economic and leadership problems of the South, if they would have been able to hold Grant off again at Vicksburg, if Jackson had not died at Chancellorsville from friendly fire, and/or the cannons at Gettysburg would have found their intended targets, the outcome of the war may have been different.

However, the South had a string of extremely bad luck in early 1863, and combined with their economic and leadership disadvantages, they could not overcome these circumstances. Despite these facts, it was amazing that the South was still able to hold on and fight the North until the spring of 1865. However, by the end of the Gettysburg campaign the war had taken a turn in favor of the North. There was now absolutely no chance of European aid to the Confederacy, which had been caused by the amazing string of luck of the Union armies in the early months of 1863. Unable to rally the Confederacy for a common cause, Davis could not handle these setbacks and the war was all but over. When Atlanta fell to General William Sherman in the summer of 1864 it was a matter of time before the South was forced to surrender.

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