
Introduction

Why another history of a war that has so fascinated so many Americans and led to so much spilled ink over the century and a half since its ending? Quite simply, as with all great events, new perspectives continue to influence our understanding of the war that ripped apart the American Republic in the mid-nineteenth century. The Civil War combined an unprecedented movement and projection of military forces across a continent on a scale made possible by the Industrial Revolution with the psychic mobilization of two contending nations that the French Revolution had foreshadowed. It represented a momentous change in the character of war from the conflicts of the previous century and a half. Nevertheless, the American Civil War forms an integral element in the overall development of the Western way of war, influenced undoubtedly by the peculiarities of geography, politics, economics, and intellectual perceptions that shaped the developing nation at that time.

Thus, one cannot judge the war as an exceptional event separate from the powerful influences of what was also occurring in Europe. Instead its American participants found themselves influenced by the wider patterns of social, political, and military revolutions that for a brief, short-lived period in history gave the Western world global dominance in terms of its military and strategic power. Despite the war's revolutionary aspects, its belligerents, and, most importantly, its leaders, still faced the same inherent uncertainties in armed conflict Thucydides would have recognized over two millennia before and which Clausewitz described as "friction" several decades before the American conflict.

The far-reaching implications of that era of Western military dominance remain with us to this day, even as that supremacy has faded considerably since the end of the world wars. Indeed, an historically inaccurate belief that Western military dominance came about exclusively from technological changes in warfare continues to haunt American defense policy. Recently, Donald Rumsfeld's vision of network-centric warfare sought to remove much of war's uncertainties through the innovations of late twentieth-century information and communications technologies, along with a proliferation of precision-guided munitions embedded in new surveillance technologies. In the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War, military and civilian pundits even argued enthusiastically that the technological sophistication of America's military had caused a revolution in war that would alter not only the character of war but its fundamental nature as well.

The penchant of Barack Obama's administration to employ drone strikes and commando raids in place of serious strategic choices follows in Rumsfeld's footsteps in its desire to use technology to banish uncertainty from warfare, albeit from a different ideological viewpoint. Both Obama and Rumsfeld, as well as too many others, have subscribed to a special conceit of our era—that technological change provides the primary motive force for historical change. Unfortunately, a version of this belief has remained prevalent among historians who continue to cite the introduction of the rifle musket as the primary factor in explaining why Civil War battles tended to be indecisive and why the war dragged on as long as it did.

Regardless of the aspirations of modern military futurists and technicians, military historians have actually examined at some length periods of great change in the waging and conduct of war in the West since the seventeenth century. In a conference at the end of the 1990s examining "revolutions in military affairs" since the seventeenth century, and in the wake of the US military's decisive defeat of Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait, a group of historians—including well-known scholars such as Geoffrey Parker, Holger Herwig, MacGregor Knox, and Clifford Rogers as well as one of this volume's authors—found technological change to be only one of a number of factors in explaining the seismic changes in Western military practice at certain points in history. They presciently warned American policy makers of the dangers in assuming technology by itself "would confer upon America an effortless superiority over all potential opponents in the coming century."¹

Even in our own more anxious era, American military policy remains wedded to technical solutions for challenges as diverse as Islamist terrorists, cybersecurity threats, and rising tensions with the People's Republic of China. The Civil War's important place in the larger evolution of Western warfare provides no obvious and simple solutions to early twenty-first-century security problems, but by showing how technological change did and did *not* affect the course and outcome of a major war, it can help the reader build a framework for a more subtle understanding of how technology might affect future American conflicts.

The aforementioned historians also argued that there were two related phenomena driving the increasingly sophisticated and lethal approaches to wars among Western states, which eventually manifested themselves in the great American conflict. The first of these phenomena were the great changes in political, social, economic, and/or military patterns that have shattered the European framework of military and economic power at various times from 1610 to the twentieth century. One might best term them "military-social revolutions" which changed states and societies in addition to their armed forces. The second of these phenomena are "revolutions in military affairs," which formed a part of the larger military-social revolutions. Revolutions in military affairs have been more specific and constrained, and in their tactical or organizational innovations fundamentally altered the military capabilities of the major powers and their armies and navies, and later their air forces.

The first of the great "military-social revolutions" occurred in the seventeenth century and involved the creation of the modern state with its attendant bureaucratic and disciplined military organizations. On the other hand, the "revolutions in military affairs" of the time remained particularly important because with the reintroduction of the Roman system and discipline (modern parade ground commands are all derived from Roman commands), for example, European armies became directly responsive to the early modern states of Europe and as such they could be of use for both internal and external purposes.

Accompanying the creation of the modern state and its bureaucratic structure were lesser pre- and postquake shocks that altered the ability of the European powers to make war. In the intensely competitive framework of European politics and warfare in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the improvements by one army or navy

were followed almost immediately by similar adaptations by their competitors. For example, Gustavus Adolphus's tactical innovations with infantry and artillery in a disciplined tactical framework destroyed the dominance of the Hapsburg armies in Central Europe in the Thirty Years' War. The major European powers then immediately copied and improved on those innovations. Similarly, in its adaptation to the Second Hundred Years' War with the French (1689–1815), Great Britain, successor to the medieval English kingdom, developed far more effective methods of financing wars than had been the case in the past. That enabled the British to project their naval power on a global scale, while at the same time supporting continental commitments with substantial military and financial aid to their allies. The result was that Britain, weaker in terms of its economy and population, was able to defeat the French and dominate the global commons. Some powers, such as Spain with its decrepit finances, failed to adapt to the changes and soon fell by the wayside by comparison.

The second and third of the great “military-social revolutions” that transformed the character of war occurred in the second half of the eighteenth century: the beginnings of the Industrial Revolution in Britain and the French Revolution, first in France, then across the Continent. The Industrial Revolution allowed the British to dominate global trade throughout the quarter century of wars with Revolutionary and Napoleonic France, while supporting major military forces in Portugal and Spain and providing major subsidies that finally enabled their allies to mobilize sufficient military force to break Napoleon's armies in Central Europe in 1813. The enormous wealth generated by Britain's industrializing economy provided the British with the wherewithal needed to overwhelm Napoleon's battlefield genius indirectly. Moreover, the Industrial Revolution channeled much of Britain's growing population into industrial concerns and not revolutionary activities as was occurring in France.

Across the Channel, the French Revolution provided the ideology and ruthlessness to mobilize France's population and resources to carry on wars against the rest of Europe for a period that lasted almost twenty-five years. The French Revolutionary armies won relatively few battles, but with an almost endless source of manpower, the populous French Nation, they were able to batter their opponents into surrender. The continuation of the *levée en masse* between 1800 and 1814, with its conscription of young men, allowed Napoleon to rally two million

Frenchmen to his banners and destroy his opponents until they finally were willing to unite against the Corsican ogre.

But while those two “military-social revolutions” were altering the framework of European politics and strategy in profound ways, they did not merge. The British army on the Iberian Peninsula was in almost every respect an army of the ancient régime. The Duke of Wellington’s soldiers possessed infantry weapons that differed little from those carried by the Duke of Marlborough’s redcoats in the War of Spanish Succession a century earlier. On the other hand, Britain’s immense wealth, largely supported by the Industrial Revolution, allowed the Royal Navy to dominate the world’s oceans, created a cancer for the French and Napoleon by deploying Wellington’s Army to Spain, and supported the European armies on the Continent with major subventions. In 1813 British financial support played a significant role in allowing the Russians, Austrians, and Prussians to mobilize their manpower from their weak economic bases.

The fourth great “military-social revolution” occurred with the coming of the American Civil War and the First World War. Over the course of those two wars, the combination of the effects of the Industrial Revolution and French Revolution allowed the opposing sides to mobilize immense numbers of soldiers while projecting military power over great distances. Thus, the American Civil War represented the first incidence of a profound change in the character of war. In every respect, both sides in the American conflict drew on social and political forces similar to the French Revolution’s ability to mobilize popular sentiment for the purposes of war. Moreover, the advances of the Industrial Revolution provided not only the equipment to support great armies but also contributed directly to the battlefield, particularly in its logistical and transportation support.

By 1864 the Americans had in effect stumbled into modern war, the conduct of which had by that point in many respects come to resemble what was to happen in 1914. The Union had mobilized mass armies in the Eastern and Western theaters of operations that possessed, in historical terms, an unprecedented capacity in logistics, transportation, and communications. It was that combination of industrial power with the mobilization of manpower that allowed the North to bring the war home to almost every hamlet in the South. The mobilization of this power was not inevitable. The military potential of this combination of the Industrial Revolution with the French Revolution could

find fruition only if competent leaders emerged to guide the North's war effort. It depended to a great extent on political leadership at the top; imaginative financial innovation, at least in American terms; and military leaders who understood the connection between combat power and logistics.

In the mid-nineteenth century, the Europeans, on the other hand, remained locked in the framework of limited conflicts, or at least that is how they interpreted their experiences. One is struck by the differences between the American Civil War, the Crimean War (1853–56), and the German Wars of Unification (1866–71) that occurred during the same years in Europe. Admittedly, the Europeans came perilously close to seeing the results of a marriage between the two revolutions. In 1870 Otto von Bismarck, the iron chancellor of the emerging German state, unleashed German nationalism and popular enthusiasm against the French, who replied in kind. But a combination of the gross incompetence of French military leadership and the competence of the German general staff destroyed France's professional army within a matter of months, long before the French could effectively integrate the new levies with the regulars. So Europe's military-social revolution in modern warfare had to wait until war broke out in 1914.

In North America, the fruits of the Industrial Revolution created the North's ability to project military power over continental distances. Those combat and logistical capabilities allowed Union armies to drive deep into the Confederacy's heartland and break the will of Southern whites to continue the struggle. Here it is important to emphasize a factor that far too many historians of the war have ignored—namely, that the Confederacy controlled, especially by European standards, immense territory. For example, the distance from Baton Rouge to Richmond exceeds that from the Franco-German frontier to Moscow, and even Napoleon's invasion of Russia, launched from bases in East Prussia and Poland far removed from metropolitan France, did not have to control the vast territory Union armies needed to conquer and hold.

One of the major problems Union strategists confronted in the conduct of military operations lay in the projection of military power over continental distances rarely seen elsewhere to that time. Furthermore, despite its relative weakness when compared to the Union in terms of its industrial potential and capacity, the Confederacy mustered enough of a manufacturing base to force the Union to fight a costly war for four long years. The contribution of the Industrial Revolution,

namely railroads, steamboats, and the telegraph, allowed the Union forces to overcome the tyranny of distance, which had defeated even the great Napoleon in his invasion of Russia.

The creation of that logistical infrastructure took a sustained period of time, and it was not until 1864 that Union armies, particularly in the West, possessed the necessary logistical means to conduct operations over continental distances. Yet one should not underestimate the importance of Union industrial strength in the early war years. The creation of an armored, steam-driven riverine fleet by late 1861 enabled Ulysses S. Grant, a then-obscure Union commander with a checkered prewar history, to launch the war's most important strategic move in February 1862, the strike at Forts Donelson and Henry in Tennessee, which gave the Union control of the Tennessee and Cumberland Rivers and central and western Tennessee with its agricultural bounty and its iron-producing facilities. The move represented a success from which Confederate forces in the West never fully recovered.

That brings us to another essential point. To wage this great war, the contending sides had to create everything out of whole cloth. None of the vast structure and production necessary to equip and prepare the massive Union armies of 1864 for the great campaigns of that year existed at the war's outset. In 1860 the Army of the United States was little more than a minuscule constabulary force, the purpose of which was nothing more than to kill Indians, keep the peace among the fractious settlers, and maintain small garrisons in the forts scattered along the coasts of the United States. Staff functions, particularly in logistics, to coordinate and support the huge Union armies dispersed over the vast distances of the Confederacy did not exist. Indeed, the creation of a million-man army, 600,000 in the field, by 1864 represented a massive mobilization of citizens and industrial production the likes of which the world had never before seen. Given the fact that the opponents had to support those armies over continental distances, one gains an appreciation for the unprecedented accomplishment of Northern leaders in beating plowshares into cannon and muskets.

That success—the creation of the forces to build and sustain a successful four-year, continent-wide war which by itself was not inevitable—required skillful political and military leadership. In the end Union victory was a monument to the ability of the American people and their political system to innovate and adapt. It should also have represented a dark warning to the Germans of 1917 and 1941,

who paid not the slightest attention to the implications of what the Americans had done from 1861 to 1865 in creating massed armies supported with all the accoutrements of war out of the Old Army, which displayed little of the basic requirements for a modern army. Thus, with nary a thought, the Germans brought an unwilling United States into both world wars.

Adding to both the North's and the Confederacy's problems, for that matter, was that the American leaders and populace found themselves misled by two basic assumptions at the war's outset. Each side believed that their opponents had little stomach for the fight. Northerners thought white Southerners remained at heart Unionists, while most Confederates had nothing but contempt for the human products of the industrializing North. Reinforced by a misreading of the Napoleonic wars a mere fifty years earlier, most soldiers and politicians also believed that one decisive victory on the battlefield would either end secession or gain the Confederacy its independence. In reality, decisive victory even in the last years of the Napoleonic wars had been a thing of the past, and it was even less likely in the age of rapid industrialization and the mobilization and equipping of great, massed armies.

The mobilization in 1861, in many respects seemingly ill-thought out, decentralized in the raising of volunteer regiments by the states, and led by officers who had no real preparation for the strategic and operational complexity of the conflict, created much confusion, some corruption, and processes that resulted in considerable difficulties in creating an effective strategic approach. Lincoln proved to be a fast learner, but even he made serious mistakes in his initial assumptions. None of the generals at any point in the war, except Grant and William Tecumseh Sherman in the North, grasped the war's larger strategic framework or its continental canvas. At every level it was amateur hour at the war's beginning. Only slowly and at great cost did a winning formula emerge. Learning on the fly on the battlefield is an expensive way to come to terms with the business of a major war. Thus, it is not surprising that extraordinarily high casualties resulted—casualties that demographers have recently raised to close to three-quarters of a million deaths from a population of thirty million.

A second aspect of the Union and Confederate deployments in the Eastern and Western theaters of operation is worth noting. One of the crucial aspects of military effectiveness—the ability of military organizations to defeat their enemies at minimum cost to their soldiers and

marines—that historians have not given sufficient attention to is that of the culture of particular armies, navies, and air forces. Not surprisingly, “military effectiveness” is a subject of great interest to the modern American military, which sponsored important scholarship on the topic during the 1980s by the more senior of this volume’s authors. In that larger multiauthor project, the authors defined military effectiveness as “the process by which armed forces convert resources into fighting power. A fully effective military is one that derives maximum combat power from the resources physically and politically available.”²

In the Civil War, each of the major armies developed particular cultures, which helped determine their battlefield prowess. For example, two factors helped to shape the Army of the Potomac: the dominance of career regular army officers at all the higher levels and the choices that its first commander, George McClellan, made in selecting that army’s brigade and division commanders. Thus, its army’s commanders throughout the war were generals who rarely, if ever, took risks, and who suffered more often than not from the bureaucratic mind set of the Old Army. It was not necessarily that most of the Army of the Potomac’s leaders were West Pointers. After all, academy graduates held nearly all of the highest positions in the major Civil War armies. Rather, it was the case that the Army of the Potomac acquired and maintained throughout the war the Old Army’s worst habits as embodied in McClellan’s makeup: a prideful preoccupation with status and rank, a confusion of administrative consistency with military effectiveness, and an overly cautious and engineering orientated style of command. Exacerbating the Army of the Potomac’s proclivities was the fact that chance intervened with the result that its most aggressive generals died in battle: Philip Kearny at Second Bull Run, Jesse L. Reno at South Mountain, Israel B. Richardson at Antietam, and John F. Reynolds at Gettysburg.

The Union’s opponent in the Eastern campaigns, the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia, possessed an extraordinarily different culture, not because the makeup of its rank and file was different from that of its opponent, but rather because Robert E. Lee and his major corps commanders were aggressive risk takers who never failed to take advantage of what they regarded as an opportunity.

Ironically, given that historians have spilled so much ink over the battles in Virginia, Maryland, and Pennsylvania, the Union won the war in the West. There, Grant molded his Army of the Tennessee into

a military force that bore little resemblance in terms of its leadership to that of its Union counterparts in the Eastern theater of operations. Grant's division and corps commanders in the Army of the Tennessee moved aggressively, took risks, and for the most part seized the initiative, just as Lee and his generals did in the East. Grant took advantage of his relative distance from politicized Washington to foster among his subordinates a sense of mutual trust and loyalty. Its leaders wore the same uniforms as the Army of the Potomac, but their approach to operations represented a military culture of command that was night-and-day different from that of Union forces in the East.

On the other hand, the Confederate opponents of Union armies in the West showed little of the imaginative aggressiveness that marked Lee's leadership in the east. Confederate General Braxton Bragg displayed a perversely cantankerous personality in commanding the Army of Tennessee that drove his subordinates to mutiny. His superior, Jefferson Davis, only exacerbated matters by refusing to resolve the conflict between Bragg and his subordinates until the catastrophe at Chattanooga in late 1863 forced his hand. To add insult to injury for this hardest luck of American armies, in the middle of the Atlanta campaign in 1864, Davis replaced the competent Joe Johnston with John Bell Hood, who managed through reckless offensives to destroy the once proud Confederate Army of Tennessee by the end of 1864 in a series of costly and hopeless attacks.

The Confederate Army of Tennessee's less famous adversary, the Union Army of the Cumberland (originally the Army of the Ohio), had its own problems with a fractious command culture, including the notorious murder of a corps commander by a division commander during Don Carlos Buell's tenure as army commander, while the pettiness between William Rosecrans and Thomas J. Wood created a hole in Union lines that James Longstreet smashed through at Chickamauga in northern Georgia in September 1863. For all its faults, the Army of the Cumberland eventually produced a competent commander in George Thomas, and even the murderous subordinate division commander mentioned earlier, Jefferson Davis (no relation to the Confederate president), later proved a militarily successful corps commander himself.³ These very different leadership cultures played a key role on the course of increasingly complex campaigns.

Too much of the writing of the Civil War has been and remains dominated by the Southern white or "Lost Cause" narrative. Developed in

response to the catastrophic smashup of 1864 and 1865, that narrative argued that the Confederate cause was hopeless, overwhelmed by the masses of inept Union soldiers drawn from the dregs of the North's cities fighting against the incredibly skilled yeomen farmers of the Confederacy; that white Southerners bore little responsibility for the outbreak of the "War of Yankee Aggression"; and that Grant triumphed over Lee and the Army of Northern Virginia only as a result of a campaign of butchery with no skill. The segregationists who fought a rear-guard action against the twentieth-century civil rights movement even appropriated for themselves a somewhat historically inaccurate version of the old Confederate battle flag as their standard, and whose presence at public buildings throughout the South remains a point of controversy into our own century. In retrospect, Grant was a particular target not just for his role in crushing the Confederacy militarily, but because of his role in sponsoring political Reconstruction, the effort to bring some measure of justice to the blacks of the South. Little of this "Lost Cause" narrative focuses on what happened in the Western campaigns, where the performance of Confederate armies rivaled that of the Army of the Potomac in terms of sheer incompetence and where the Northern armies were skillfully dominant.

Over the past four decades, academic historians have demolished many of these myths. Nevertheless, too many of them remain alive among the great American public. The idea that white Southern armies consisted of hardy country folk up against the riffraff of Northern city dwellers has finally disappeared. So too has the overemphasis on the Eastern theater of operations with an understanding that the Union won the war in the West. Perhaps, most importantly, historians have consigned to the garbage dump the notion that the war was about "states' rights" and not about slavery. We are delighted to add our voices to those historians, like James McPherson, who have done so much to restore some balance to the history of the Civil War, and in this work we hope to help make accessible this significant body of scholarship to a larger reading public.

Lastly, from the Civil War there emerged a particularly American way of war, which goes beyond the historian Russell Weigley's formulation that after the Civil War American war-making tended toward the complete destruction of an opponent's military forces in the service of absolute victory. Instead, the American way of war that emerged from the conflict emphasized the logistical and operational projection of

military power over continental distances along with a ruthless desire to bring the consequences of secession home to every hamlet in the Confederacy. That American approach would show in great clarity in both of the world wars, although in the first the Americans and their allies failed to bring the consequences of the Reich's murderously flawed approach to the war home to the German people. And despite the frustrating and insurgency-laden aftermaths, the United States achieved the complete destruction of the relatively unified and cohesive Taliban and Baathist states that governed Afghanistan and Iraq in the early twenty-first century. Even in the present day of lawyer-approved drone strikes, the signature characteristic of American military might is its ability to project power across the globe with land, air, and sea forces.

This is not a history of the social and economic consequences of the war. Rather, its purpose is to examine the major factors that explain the course of the military campaigns and operations in the widest sense. The battles of the Civil War mattered; in the end they determined the winners and the losers and drove the course of world history. The breakup of the United States in the early 1860s would have had the most dismal consequences for the fate of Europe in the first decades of the twentieth century. Thus, not surprisingly, we are interested in military leadership, effective and ineffective leadership, and in critiquing the strategic and operational choices made by the political and military leaders of the opposing sides. Above all, we do not take a deterministic view of the war; the North confronted an almost insoluble task in crushing Confederate resistance because of both the distances involved and the tenacious nature of white Southern resistance. In the end the Union succeeded, but only by the barest of margins.