

Why did north  
america win the civil  
war?



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Reasons for the North's victory in the American Civil War are manifold, and it is unwise for the historian to attribute total decisiveness to any one reason. Abraham Lincoln's inspirational leadership; greater industrial wealth and manpower; superior military strategy; the possession of a powerful Navy; the introduction of black soldiers into their ranks; the decision of European nations not to recognize the Confederate's secession: all of these reasons and many others are argued to have been decisive for the North's victory. The wise historian seeks to view the effect of these reasons in combination rather than as separate influences. To take one instance, the North's naval blockade of Confederate ports was crucial for suffocating the export power and economy of the South, but this tactic was greatly strengthened by the decision of Britain not to break to blockade. Or to take another example: from the outset the North had far greater manpower than the South, but this advantage was consolidated by the incorporation of black slaves into that pool of manpower and by conscription policies that drew upon this manpower more effectively than those of the South. This essay then measures these various reasons *in toto*, asking how each affected the other and how ultimately they combined to prove decisive.

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Historians on all sides agree that President Lincoln's leadership during the American Civil War was a dominant reason for the Union's ultimate victory. Lincoln's political acumen and diplomatic skill, his knowledge of military strategy, his judgment on all fronts, and above all his moral authority and vigor made him indispensable to the Union's cause. What is more, there was something unique in Lincoln's dedication to the Union. In a certain sense *he*

was the Union — or at least a powerful symbol for it. Lincoln's famous phrase ' *My paramount objective is to save the Union* ' <sup>[1]</sup> could be a motif that resonated throughout the North, and his unique commitment to the office of the President, to the Constitution and to the principle of democracy were of inestimable benefit to the continued conviction and morale of the North's troops and civilians and to their various successes.

None of Lincoln's wartime acts was more consequential than when he issued the Emancipation Proclamation of January 1863. By declaring the freedom of all the slaves of the Confederacy, Lincoln transformed the American Civil War from what was originally a contest to maintain the Union into a struggle for freedom and democracy. This united the North in a moral purpose and gave solidity and resilience to the Union. Whilst Lincoln's military decisions were often shrewd and decisive, it was his courageous legislative and constitutional decisions that contributed most to the North's victory. Lincoln had campaigned for his presidency with the promise of pursuing democracy and legitimate government; yet the circumstances of the war forced him to threaten these beloved principles for the duration of the war. Lincoln put into abeyance *habeas corpus* , called-up the militia, manipulated the press, made declarations of martial law where it could not strictly be justified militarily, allocated finance before congressional approval, suppressed draft riots with soldiers, and issued many other measures like these. Lincoln's made extraordinary use of these executive powers and yet was not seduced by them. Thus he had a perhaps unique resistance to the temptations of personal power and this shone out to his soldiers and citizens who viewed him as a noble commander for whom they would willingly fight and die. By

this strong and vigorous leadership President Lincoln stood for many people as an emblem of the Union itself. Lincoln also had a genius to peer beyond the implications of the Civil War for the Union alone. He detected in the conflict — as few men could — the larger future issue of democracy in the civilized world. Lincoln understood that the Union represented to many Europeans and others a symbol of democratic expectation and promise: the defeat of the Union in America would threaten the growth of democracy elsewhere in the world. He wrote: ‘ *This is essentially a people’s contest ... to demonstrate to the world that those who can fairly carry out an election can suppress a rebellion; and ballots are the rightful successors to bullets* ’ [2] and this conviction sustained his leadership through many crises. It is of course a conviction whose widest implications were known only to Lincoln himself.

The effect of Lincoln’s leadership upon the war was strengthened by the quality of his generals and their superior military strategy. Pre-eminent amongst his generals was one man: Ulysses S. Grant. The outcome of the contest between General Grant and General Robert E. Lee was decisive for the North’s final victory. At the outset of the war Grant captured Fort Henry and Fort Donelson, won the battle of Battle of Shiloh and saved the surrounded Union forces at Chattanooga. These early victories led President Abraham Lincoln to appoint General Grant as *lieutenant general* or commander-in-chief of all Union forces – a rank specially created by Congress or him. General Grant’s military strategy was characterized by the distribution of his troops over wide areas and their coordinated attack upon several Confederate positions simultaneously. This theme emerged most

strongly in Grant's famous Overland Campaign against General Lee's forces which commenced in May 1864. Grant's cleverly diverse strategies were difficult for the Confederate forces to predict: Grant his attacks between direct assaults, prolonged sieges and rapid counter-attacks. Grant's military style was described as ' *that of a bull dog* ' because he forever pressed forward, refusing to submit until the enemy had been defeated or surrendered. This tactic led to the slaughter of tens of thousands of General Grant's men and to him being called ' the butcher'; historians agree however that General Grant's use of these tactics – and President Lincoln's indulgence of them – were essential for breaking down the Confederate forces and for finally overcoming them. Moreover, General Grant was perhaps the first general in American history to glimpse the concept of ' *total warfare* ' whereby it was necessary to destroy an enemy's economic foundations – factories, farmlands, industries etc., — as well as to defeat them in battle. The strategies employed by General Grant in the Overland Campaign finally proved decisive when he fought to a draw at the Battle of the Wilderness and the Battle of Spotsylvania Court House, before finally forcing General Lee's surrender at the Appomattox Court House April 9, 1865.

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The superior natural resources and manpower of the North meant from the outset that they were likely – if there was no foreign intervention – to win the war rapidly and with relatively light casualties. In 1860 the twenty-two states that would later continue in the Union had a total population of 22 million; the eleven states of the Confederacy had a population of 9 million (4 million of whom were slaves). In simple military terms this meant that the North had

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a far larger reservoir of manpower from which to draw either volunteer or conscript soldiers. Moreover, the North boosted its numbers by assimilating large numbers of black slaves who escaped from the southern states. The North had the further advantage of a superior railway system which allowed them to swiftly transfer troops from one battlefield to another. Moreover, the South made serious errors in its policies of conscription. At the beginning of the war the Confederate made the decision to rely upon volunteer soldiers for its armies. One historian wrote of the consequences of this decision that ‘*Conscription would have been less odious if it had been made the exclusive policy of raising armies at the outset ... It might have been regarded as a scientific way of allocating the man power of the country and distributing fairly the burdens of war*’ (Moore, 1963). When the South belatedly turned to conscription men felt bitter and acrimonious about the policy; yet had it been issued at the outset it might have been received more favorably. The North was fortunate in its policy of conscription. They too had the eloquent appeals of President Lincoln with which to recruit new soldiers. In February 1861 Lincoln declared “ If all do not join now to save the good old ship of the Union this voyage nobody will have a chance to pilot her on another voyage.” [3] This was an ominous warning that boosted recruitment significantly. Anticipating a rapid victory the North conscripted its soldiers for a three-month period only; whereas the South demanded one year’s service. Neither three-months nor one year were of course adequate to meet the needs of either army, but whereas southern fighters became disillusioned with the length of their conscription, the Union’s soldiers often gladly signed to fight again after their initial short period of conscription. This had a tremendous effect upon morale. In July 1861 after the first Bull Run the

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Union's forces had suffered heavy defeats and the Union's soldiers feared that their lives and properties would be threatened if they chose not to re-enlist. This necessity supplied President Lincoln with 500, 000 extra troops at the vital moment. The South however convinced by the Bull Run that it was assured victory delayed for the whole summer and autumn the introduction of a policy of re-enlistment; thus when conscription was implemented through force in November Confederate soldiers were thoroughly demoralized by being called to fight again. The Confederate Provisional Congress introduced the inept and foolish ' bounty and furlough act' in Dec. 11 1861 which gave generous but confusing freedoms to soldiers who chose to re-enlist. This incompetent decision disrupted the organization of the Confederate armies at a dangerous moment and weakened them considerably. The Confederate however weakened its potential manpower base by prohibiting the incorporation of its 4 million black slaves into its ranks for most of the war.

The North was also highly industrialized in comparison to the South, and this allowed the North to produce munitions and military equipment that should have sustained and proved decisive against the largely agricultural economy of the South. To many historians it seems remarkable that the American Civil War lasted four years given the economic and manpower supremacy of the North. The Confederate however had the vital advantage that it needed only to protect its territory to assure victory (it could declare independence if the North remitted); the North however needed to attack. This attack consumed far greater resources than those needed for the defence of the southern states, and this is the principal reason why the conflict was so protracted.

Eventually the superior supplies, industry and manpower of the North proved decisive.

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‘ I never saw such fighting as was done by the Negro regiment ... The question

that the negroes will fight is settled; besides they make much better soldiers in

every respect than any other troops I have ever had under my command’

(Union General Blunt) [4]

A principal reason for North’s victory in the American Civil War was their early realization that by incorporating black soldiers into their forces they would gain a vital manpower advantage over the South. In contrast, the Confederate’s slothful and belated realization of the need to enlist black soldiers was a strong contribution to their defeat.

Historians estimate that as many as 180, 000 black soldiers, in 163 units, were assimilated into the Union ranks during the American Civil War (McPherson, 1982) – and numerous others joined the Union Navy. This number represents as much as 10% of the Union’s total armed forces. The participation and influence of black forces in the war was enabled on July 17, 1862, when Congress initiated two Acts permitting the enrollment of black soldiers in the armed forces; though official enlistment began in September of that year after the issue of the Emancipation Proclamation. The Union



forces swiftly comprehended the importance of this decision and began to enlist black soldiers and sailors in large numbers. This enlistment was hindered however by the Union's (and Confederate's) prejudiced assumption that blacks would not be courageous and valiant soldiers. As General Blunt's words tell, this assumption was quickly overturned amongst Union generals when black regiments were involved in a series of victorious battles against Confederate forces. The 1<sup>st</sup> Kansas Colored Volunteers were a powerful example of the influence that black soldiers could have upon the outcome of the war: contributing greatly to the success of the Battle of Island Mound, the Battle of Port Hudson, the battle of Honey Springs and many others. Perhaps the most significant single contribution of black soldiers to the war was when on July 17, 1863, they led the assault of the 54<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts against Fort Wagner. The desire of black soldiers to enlist in the Union forces was enhanced when Confederate forces committed atrocities against black such as the one at Fort Pillow. Events such as these, coupled with the existing idea amongst black slaves that the Union was fighting partly for their emancipation, led far greater numbers of black soldiers to join the Union than the Confederate.

In sharp comparison, the Confederate army reacted viscosly to the idea that black soldiers could play a decisive role in the outcome of the war. Although sixty to ninety-three thousand (Glathaar, 1996) blacks were involved in the Confederate in some form or another, the overwhelming majority of these were in non-fighting positions - musicians, cooks, cleaners and so on. Only at the end of the war did the Confederate wake up to the huge pool of manpower that they had thus far ignored. Indeed, for most of

the war the participation of black soldiers in Confederation forces was legally prohibited. President Jefferson Davis made a serious and costly error when in 1864 he refused the suggestion of General Patrick Cleburne that the Confederate employ black troops in its forces in return for their freedom if they survived the war. Only in January 1865 after a further recommendation by General Lee to the Confederate Congress to permit the enlistment of black soldiers was a document signed (Order 14) allowing this to happen. The lateness of this decision meant that that war was almost over before considerable black enlistment by Confederate forces could begin. Consequently, this failure of the Confederate was one of the most serious of the entire war and expedited their defeat.

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The Union's victory in the Civil War was much aided by the failure of European nations to give diplomatic recognition to the cause of the Confederacy. European recognition of the independence of the Confederacy would have enabled the southern states to call upon European nations to intervene in the civil war to uphold the Confederation's right to independence. It was vital therefore for the North that this did not happen; fighting European forces as well as the Confederation armies would have seriously injured their chances of success.

The decision of European nations to recognize the Confederacy has been attributed to several factors. Firstly, the North's own diplomats proved highly successful in presenting their case to the European powers. This diplomacy was often forceful; W. H. Steward, Secretary of State, for instance instructed

C. F. Adams, Minister to England, to warn the British to avoid ‘*fraternizing with our domestic enemy*’ lest they risked an Anglo-American war. A key diplomatic strategy of the North was then to present the South as rebels who had no legitimate rights to independence. Historians argue further that widespread sympathy amongst Europeans for black slaves meant that they were further disinclined to interfere in the civil war (Roberts, 1987). Unseen and unpredicted factors too such as crises in Denmark and Poland distracted the attention of Europe away from the American conflict. The continued failure of the Confederate forces to win consecutive battles meant that they could not convince European nations that the south could maintain its independence if granted – and European nations were never likely to militarily or economically back an unsuccessful war.

The failure of the Confederate states to win European diplomatic recognition had much to do with the failures of their own diplomatic strategies. At the outset of the war the South predicted that since Britain depended heavily upon exports of southern cotton to sustain their own economy, that when the Union’s navy blockaded the export of this cotton Britain would be forced to intervene in the war. This intervention would ensure victory for the South and supply them with international recognition for their independence. Despite these predictions however Britain failed to enter the conflict and instead declared its neutrality in light of the blockade, as later did all other European nations. Britain had extended to the Confederation ‘*belligerent status*’ whereby it could draw international loans and trade internationally, but this fell far short of the military intervention and declaration of independence that the South had expected (Crook, 1975). What is more,

Britain had by its decision not to interfere militarily effectively condoned the blockade of the southern states by the North. Thus the effects of the British and European decision not to intervene were twofold for the Confederation. In practical terms, the South now had to confront the North alone and on an immensely more difficult single front. Psychologically, the morale and legitimacy of the secession had been bruised and damaged, and international approval effectively granted to the North.

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This essay must end with the point with which it began: no single reason was totally decisive for the North's victory in the American Civil War. That said, President Lincoln's unique leadership and the superior industrial resources and manpower of the North were finally the most dominant reasons. In the aftermath of the first Bull Run in 1861 the Union's forces were disillusioned and there was a danger that they would disintegrate because they had failed to seize the fast and easy victory that many had predicted they would. It required a man of President Lincoln's personality, stamina, skill and vision to solidify the Union forces and to foster their perseverance through the long war which he knew was ahead. Lincoln himself was this unifying force: he was an emblem for the Presidency for the Constitution and for democracy. The supremacy of the North's resources and manpower had been checked at the outset of the war by the need to attack the Confederate strongholds whereby the North consumed resources far faster than the South; yet despite this initial failure to make the advantage tell, these resources did finally overwhelm the Confederate defenders. Serious political and tactical errors by the Confederate during the Civil War meant that any slim chance of

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victory they had at the outset was washed away soon after the conflict began. The prohibition of black slaves from serving in Confederate forces and the delayed and ineffective introduction of conscription cost the South its opportunity to compensate for the North's superior man power. Likewise, the political assumption that Britain and other European powers would move to break the Union naval blockade and so proclaim the legitimate independence of the South backfired disastrously. Once these errors had been committed and the North's advantages handled effectively by Lincoln victory was assured.

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### Footnotes

[1] *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, Vol. 5. Letter to Horace Greely, p388.

[2] Words spoken by President Lincoln after the surrender at Fort Sumter April 14<sup>th</sup>, 1861.

[3] *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* edited by Roy P. Basler, Volume IV, “ Speech at Cleveland, Ohio” (February 15, 1861), p. 216.

[4] General Blunt after the defeat of General Douglas Cooper at Honey Springs July 17<sup>th</sup>, 1863.