

Research paper on the influence of the american civil war on poster designs durin...

[War](#), [Civil War](#)



Introduction

The American Civil War stood out as perhaps the most catastrophic historical event in the history of the United States (US). The sheer propensity of the armed conflict between Union and Confederate forces resulted to more than 600, 000 deaths of soldiers from both sides – a number that rendered en masse military recruitment and conscription. The pressure to reach victory was strongly felt among the ranks of Union and Confederate forces that both sides did not hesitate to advertise their need to reinforce their respective regiments. Posters, perhaps the most sophisticated and effective advertising means at the time when the American Civil War happened, served as a prominent advertising channel for Unions and Confederates as they bid for victory.

This study focuses on the impact of the American Civil War on poster designs made during 1861 to 1865. Was the American Civil War a matter of utmost urgency to the US, to the extent of dominating poster designs made in its duration? Did poster designs made during 1861 to 1865 reflect the exigency of the American Civil War among Union and Confederate forces? Were there any differences between Unions and Confederates with regard to their poster designs made during the American Civil War? The following questions form the core concern of this study, which hypothetically posits that posters have become the main advertising conduits of both the Unions and Confederates in their cause for achieving victory in the American Civil War, hence the turnout of the poster designs made during 1861 to 1865.

Elaborating the context for this study is a brief discussion of the causes of the American Civil War, including significant events leading to the start of

armed conflict in 1861. Examples of Union and Confederate poster designs made during 1861 to 1865 follow with particular details contextualized within the American Civil War. An analysis of the messages conveyed by Union and Confederate poster designs serve to tackle the main question this study posits, as it tests the hypothesis that posters made during the period reflected the intense desire of Union and Confederate forces to emerge as victors of the American Civil War.

Causes of the American Civil War

The American Civil War was primarily a rift between the northern Union and southern Confederate states over the issue of slavery. The northern Union states favored the abolition of slavery, while the southern Confederate states vehemently rejected such proposition. The climax of the issue transpired when the southern Confederate states formed the Confederate States of America (CSA) following the election of Abraham Lincoln, a renowned abolitionist, as President in 1860. Although the formal installation of Lincoln to the White House in 1860 triggered the American Civil War, the turmoil between the northern Union states and southern Confederate states resulted from the buildup of events leading back to the early 1800s, which includes the rise of abolitionism, the Antebellum Period and the 1860 presidential elections.

Abolitionism

Slavery is an issue that has factionalized much of the US. The northern Union states favored the abolition of slavery, while the southern Confederate states vehemently opposed such measure. Abolitionism, a movement that

advocated the gradual or complete removal of slavery in the US, is an issue even the Founding Fathers had problems with. Thomas Jefferson, a known slaveholder, expressed his condemnation of slavery in the portions he has written on the draft of the Declaration of Independence. Benjamin Franklin, who also owned slaves, was a member of the Pennsylvania Society for the Abolition of Slavery. Since 1776, gradual abolition of slavery ensued in the northern Union states; in 1804, slavery has been completely eradicated. During said period, several slaveholders freed their slaves from captivity as they were motivated by the victory of the US in the American Revolutionary War.

Legal efforts to eradicate slavery throughout the rest of the US came first with the signing of the Act Prohibiting Importation of Slaves by Jefferson, then President, in 1807. Outside the presidency, Jefferson forged his support for several abolitionist movements, most notably the Missouri Compromise. However, opposition to abolitionism was strong among the southern Confederate states, all of which threatened to secede from the US should they face measures forcing them to remove slavery. The southern Confederate states deem slavery as an essential component of their economic activities, which are mostly agricultural as they produce raw materials such as tobacco, sugar and cotton. The urban northern Union states have set themselves further apart from the rural southern Confederate states with regard to the foregoing aspect.

Antebellum Period

The Antebellum Period refers to the period between the end of the War of 1812 and the start of the American Civil War in 1861. During the Antebellum Period, abolitionism gained ground as a popular issue of contention throughout the US, within which it gained approval from northern Union states and rejection from southern Confederate states. The Industrial Revolution paved way for the industrialization of the northern Union states, rendering slavery unnecessary in the first place. In contrast, agricultural activities dominated the southern Confederate states, hence their avowed intention to keep slavery as a practice. The rise in domestic and international demand for cotton required the southern Confederate states to maintain and improve the production of their vast cotton plantations. With more land acquisitions coming in through the Indian Removal act, the southern Confederate states were able to expand cotton production, consequently requiring them to enlarge the slave labor market. To ensure agricultural productivity, slave ownership became even more rampant in the southern Confederate states, to the point when even the offspring of slaves became slaves as well. Eventually, slave rebellions transpired as a reality within southern Confederate states during the Antebellum Period. Various rebellions have caused the deaths of many slaves, who rebelled due to the constantly unfair treatment they received from slave owners.

Another notable controversy that characterized the Antebellum Period is the Nullification Crisis. South Carolina, a southern Confederate state, declared the unconstitutionality of federal tariffs imposed in 1828 and 1832 within its jurisdiction given their adverse effects to the agricultural exports and

industrial imports to the state. Given the fractious consequence of the Nullification Crisis on the relationship between state and federal governments, South Carolina made preemptive measures by building up its military in case of an armed backlash from the federal government, which promptly prepared militarily as well to compel the state to abide by the federal tariffs. Eventually, both the South Carolina state government and the federal government managed to prevent any armed conflict when the former accepted a revised federal tariff adjusted for South Carolina. Nevertheless, South Carolina continued to rebel against the federal government, which it greatly associated with the northern Union states, hence becoming the first among the southern Confederate states to secede.

1860 Presidential Elections

The northern Union states and southern Confederate states ultimately fell out when the Republican Party standard-bearer Abraham Lincoln became president in 1860. Lincoln, a popular abolitionist, gained much of the votes during the 1860 presidential elections when the Democratic Party separated into two factions, each supporting the abolitionist north and the anti-abolitionist south. Furthermore, the rise of the Constitutional Union Party further weakened the political base of the anti-abolitionists, causing the Republican Party and Lincoln to dominate. The southern Confederate states recorded almost zero votes for the Republican Party, given its stand as a supporter of abolitionism. Thus, seven of the southern Confederate states formally seceded to form the CSA days before Lincoln underwent formal inauguration. Ultimately, the decision of the states that formed the CSA to secede was formed out of their contention that the stand of the federal

government to implement abolitionism disrespected their rights to autonomy as states. Further pressures between the Unions and Confederates eventually led to the American Civil War in 1861, which ultimately led to the downfall of the CSA in 1865 due to the military superiority of the Union forces.

Union Poster Design Examples

Poster Name: Rally, boys for the union, Goodwin's Battery of Breech-loading Light Artillery! Soon to take the field! Let the Rebels take warning! Now is the time to serve your country! No skedaddlers wanted! Fall in boys!

Image Creator/Publisher: Baker & Godwin, New York

Description: The poster, which is made as a recruitment poster for the light artillery division of the Union forces, features colored graphics presenting three persons – a citizen on the left, a personified female figure of the Union in the middle, and a soldier on the right. The citizen, with reference to the personified female figure of the Union, is talking to the soldier, saying, “ We will come. We know our country's need, and will respond to her call” The soldier responds by saying, “ Americans! Your country calls. Your cherished institutions and your Noble Flag are threatened by rebels and traitors”

Poster Name: For Maj. Gen. Banks' Expedition

Image Creator/Publisher: N/A

Description: An early example of a poster that finely targets its intended audience, the poster announces a recruitment drive for the 12th Massachusetts Battery. Despite the lack of color, the use of graphics and

uncluttered messages makes this poster unmistakably Union in origin. A first glance at the poster already gives the viewer an idea of its message – recruits get \$138 as they leave their states and receive \$75 as postwar compensation. The emphasis on the monetary compensation gives off the impression that recruits are up for a prize bounty upon recruitment – a convincing message that greatly benefits the 12th Massachusetts Battery as well.

Confederate Poster Design Examples

Poster Name: Freemen! Of Tennessee!

Image Creator/Publisher: Neal & Roberts, Printers, Tennessee

Description: The poster features a full-length message of the cause of the CSA against incoming Union forces in Tennessee, hence calling for the recruitment of forces for the Confederacy in the state. Without any graphics whatsoever compared to typical Union posters as shown previously, the poster has sought to portray the Confederate cause in Tennessee with captivating textual imageries such as the “ beauty and booty” description given to the “ Yankee War”, referring to the American Civil War. The poster indicates the claims made by the Confederates against the Unions, which the former has accused of promising their forces of Confederate lands and the beautiful women living there.

Poster Name: Men of Virginia, To the Rescue

Image Creator/Publisher: N/A

Description and Analysis: The poster, which originated from Virginia, is typical of Confederate-style posters – all-text, no images. The message in the

poster provides a telling urgency of the period when it was printed - Virginia formalized its defection to the CSA via referendum on May 23, 1861, seven days before the date indicated on the poster. Therefore, indicating that the “men of Virginia” is “to the rescue” is a timely message shown by the poster; Virginia proved to be a crucial addition to the CSA, with its close proximity to the seat of the federal government of the Union (Washington, District of Columbia) and its historical status as one of the first 13 Union states. Nevertheless, unlike Union examples, the dramatic appeal of the poster declaring the entry of Virginia into the American Civil War somewhat floundered with its use of text-heavy prose typical of old-fashioned poster advertising. While the intent of the poster may have been to inform people of the full details regarding the entry of Virginia, text-heaviness still stood in the way of its bold declaration that men of Virginia are coming to the rescue - one that deserves a more eye-catching medium.

Comparisons and Synthesis

One could see several contrasting details in comparing the sets of Union and Confederate posters shown above, although one could rightfully conclude that both sets of posters have portrayed the American Civil War as an urgent matter for both the Unions and Confederates. Therefore, it is noteworthy to emphasize that the American Civil War has a permeating effect on the poster designs made between 1861 and 1865. Both sets of posters expressed the need of both the Unions and Confederates to build their forces against one another, with defamation of either side being the most common theme between them. For the Unions, the Confederates were rebels and traitors, in

that they were the ones who seceded from the US to form the CSA.

Moreover, the term “ rebel” used by the Unions against the Confederates reflects the historical aversion of the latter towards abolitionism, which they constantly assailed due to its harmful effects to their agricultural economy.

For the Confederates, the Unions were invaders and rapists - terms explicated in light of the interest of the US against the formation of the CSA. The Confederates, considering their status as the side that has seceded from the Union, were very keen to destroy the image of the Unions, as noted in the way the message indicated in the poster was written. Thus, one could rightfully claim that both the Unions and Confederates were keen on using posters as propaganda defaming one another for the cause of the American Civil War, alongside their obvious calls for recruitment into their respective forces.

However, much of the striking differences lie within the way in which the posters were designed. Just by placing the posters side-by-side, one could already tell right away the obvious differences - the Union posters have a more sophisticated design highlighted by its use of graphics, while the Confederate posters employ a relatively straightforward approach as featured by text-heaviness compensating for the lack of graphics. Visually speaking, the Union posters have a more remarkable appeal provided by the graphics. Such made the Union poster less cluttered, design-wise; the graphics helped organize the header and the rest of the text neatly.

Moreover, the mere fact that the Unions have used graphics in the poster succinctly reflects the industrialized nature of the northern Union states, given the technological sophistication required in printing such material.

The Confederate poster, on the other hand, does not have any graphics in its design, as it only relied on textual information highlighting its main concern to instigate the people of Tennessee to take up arms against the Union forces. Making up for the lack of graphics is the claim the Confederates made against the Unions, which they blame for motivating their forces to attack states in the CSA in exchange for the lands and the beautiful women therein, hence forming the impression that they are invaders and rapists. Yet, one may not easily read the text containing claims made by the Confederates against the Unions in the poster, given the exaggerated superimposition of two sets of text sandwiching it – that of “Freemen! Of Tennessee!” at the top, and “To Arms!” at the bottom. Therefore, the average reader would only notice both of the foregoing texts in just one look – a consequence that may have mattered to the Confederates anyway, but nevertheless may have lessened the impact of the “invader-rapist” claims made against the Unions. The textual nature of the poster somewhat reflects the crude, if not totally background, nature of the Confederates in terms of their printing technology, which one could attest to their focus on agriculture.

Conclusion

The American Civil War has promptly influenced both the use and design of posters made between 1861 and 1865. The American Civil War prompted both the Unions and Confederates to utilize posters as their main advertising channels for propaganda and recruitment for their respective forces, thus leading to the production of posters with straightforward yet provoking

messages. Given the foregoing examples of posters, the Unions effectively portrayed the Confederates as rebels and traitors through an organized presentation of textual and graphic details, whereas the Confederates described the Unions as invaders and rapists through text-heavy claims intended to attract the attention of the Confederate population. Overall, both examples of posters reflected how both the Unions and Confederates treated the American Civil War as an urgent matter, as both sides desired to emerge victorious from it by ensuring constant reinforcements to their respective forces.

Design-wise, both sets of poster examples are strikingly different from one another, thus setting the Unions and Confederates apart in terms of printing technology. The Union poster, obviously the more sophisticated one due to its use of colored graphics, duly reflects the technologically proficient nature of the northern Union states, given the trend of industrialization active therein when the American Civil War started. The Confederate poster, with its relatively Spartan and text-heavy features, alludes to the emphasis of the southern Union states on agriculture and the consequent lack of technological advancements therein, particularly on printing technology. The replacement of graphics with detailed textual information may have been effective in terms of attracting the attention of its intended targets, but it is certainly not as captivating as the graphics-laden Union poster, since it is possible that the average reader may grow tired reading text-heavy information within a poster - a medium made supposedly for conveying messages quickly.

The eventual victory of the Union forces against Confederate forces in the

American Civil War has been due to the superiority of the former in terms of its forces and technological applications brought forth by industrialization. While this study does not conclude that discrepancies in printing technology for advertising on posters may have contributed to the failure of the Confederates to uphold and defend their cause effectively against the Unions, such point may become a focal one in future studies, particularly those that focus on the effect of different kinds of print advertising – graphic-laden versus text-heavy, to the rate of recruitment into forces during the American Civil War, among many others.

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