

Turning points in the civil war assignment



Analytical Assignment Turning points that occur during a conflict such as a civil war may be found in men, as well as forces of events. Turning points are the moments or acts which are thought to have had profound effects which are necessary to drive the war along the course which it took. During the American Civil War in the 1860's there can be a widespread debate over which actual event was the turning point in the war that led to a Union victory.

Most analysts refer to July 4th, 1864 when the Confederacy retreated from Gettysburg, Pennsylvania and Vicksburg, Mississippi surrendered to Ulysses S. Grant and the Union as the turning point for the North in the civil war. Historian James McPherson goes examines these events in great detail in Chapter 19 in his book, *Ordeal by Fire: The Civil War and Reconstruction* while James Rawley does the same in his book, *Turning Points in the Civil War* in Chapter 6.

James McPherson's writings have been geared towards advancing the arguments that the North was justified in crushing the rebellion in the South. He sees the civil war in the lens of not a war against the North and the South, but a war against slavery and against their emancipation; a war between progressive forces against conservative ideologies in the south. In his writings, he is quick to indicate that the North's win was inevitable, because of the relatively more polished military organizational capabilities and a vindication by history.

McPherson downplays the factual successes that the Confederate forces had on the different war fronts throughout his book as either mere short term

lapses in the organization of the Union forces rather than the actual inability to withstand the South's firepower (McPherson, 2009). Although McPherson appreciates that the northern forces were decisively defeated at Chancellorsville, Virginia, he insinuates that the win by the South at that point was its main undoing in the subsequent advance to Pennsylvania in the north through Gettysburg.

He argues that the use of the temporary momentum gained at Chancellorsville by the Confederate forces led by General Robert E. Lee was without doubt the foresight needed in the war, which made the Confederates add more forces to their ranks for the Pennsylvania assignment that was undoubtedly larger and in need of more personnel, weaponry, and resources. As Lee's men advanced towards Harrisburg, they were intercepted at Gettysburg and the encounter resulted in a three day long warfare.

In the Gettysburg battle, McPherson states that even with the momentum going with them, and despite putting up a valiant military offensive, they were unable to make any headway into the Union lines and were actually repulsed up to as far as Potomac. In the battles, McPherson describes the South's defeat at Gettysburg as having been crippling which is not commensurate with his explanations of what was going on in the Battle of Vicksburg (McPherson, 2009). At Vicksburg, Mississippi, McPherson says that the Union forces were not able to have direct fire aimed at the Confederates in whole of the Mississippi region.

He explains this away by writing that the South's forces were only saved from the North's onslaught by hiding in bluffs in the region; he says that the

Northerners led by General Ulysses S. Grant were not able to attack the Confederates behind the bluffs but proposed at bringing the region under a Union siege for about a half a year. He propounds that this was a tactical genius move highly justified by the capture of Vicksburg on July 4th, 1863, together with the largest Confederate Army detachment.

The Mississippi region was now wholly under the control of Union forces and the abilities of the Confederates was debilitated by the cut off in supplies from the South to their troops along the Mississippi River. The Union's victory at Vicksburg turned the tide against the South for the remaining war period. The siege by the Union forces is represented as effectively having broken the Confederate forces into two hapless groups, with one falling victim to the ravages of hunger, hence being unable to fight.

McPherson's account that the Confederates were unable to fight is not supported by his claims that the two groups of the Confederate soldiers continued waging war on two fronts even with the limited supplies occasioned by the cutting of the Texas supply corridor and the passage from Arkansas (McPherson, 2009). How could soldiers who were reeling from deprivation of all food supplies still engage in warfare? The siege claimed at Vicksburg is indefensible and seems fictional if interrogated in the light of their engagement in the subsequent battle at Chattanooga.

McPherson argues that thought the Confederate forces were now under the unfaltering General Bragg Braxton, they scampered for safety when faced with a strong Union army from the north at Chattanooga. He avers that the defeated Confederates opened a wide corridor for General William Sherman-

led Union forces to march through the Confederate region without facing any military resistance from the Confederates. James Rawley largely agrees that the Gettysburg and Vicksburg battles were as much as a turning point in the war as the Battle at Antietam.

Rawley truly appreciates that the South was a potent an army as the Union forces and were as close to victory as possible just before July of 1863.

Compared to McPherson, James takes a more balanced view of the war, drawing his many conclusions from past written accounts of the events of the war. In the Gettysburg battle, he affirms that the “ Union placed the larger armies in the field, but the Confederacy posed a more formidable threat” where “ Gettysburg provided the bloodiest battle,” (Rawley, 1989).

He refers to other writings on the war as having provided much guesswork on the losses in the various battles and tabulates the losses of lives by both sides as found in numbers and losses by Livermore Thomas (Rawley, 1989).

His detail of accounts and keys to victory are very much the same as McPherson and mentions the same keys to victory for the Union forces as McPherson. McPherson’s account of the battles is much more detailed and if a student were reading about the battle for the first time, they would come away from McPherson’s book with much more knowledge than after reading Rawley’s.

Rawley tends to focus much more on the losses and casualties of the Confederate Army after Gettysburg. The tabulation gives a depiction that the warring sides suffered closely comparable loss of lives. For the Gettysburg battle, the Confederates suffered 3, 155 deaths against the Union’s 3, 903

deaths (Rawley, 1989). This statistics dismisses McPherson's representation of the events at Gettysburg that allude to massive losses and a crushing defeat for the South. Rawley goes into detail of the losses each of the seven Corps of the Union Army and the three Corps of the Confederate Army.

In addition he discusses the casualties of each army's Cavalry and Artillery Corps and the lone death of civilian Ginnie Wade. Rawley goes into more detail of the aftermath for the Confederacy and their view that Gettysburg was not so much of a disaster but a mere setback in achieving their goal. In the end, Rawley writes that the holding out of both sides in the battle largely played a role in keeping Europe out of the war (Rawley, 1989). If the South had suffered a debilitating defeat as McPherson wants his audience to believe, then England would have intervened and recognized the Confederate as a separate republic from the Union.

Rawley provides a more detailed account of the South's successes after Pennsylvania before the defeat at Gettysburg; successes in Shenandoah Valley, Chambersburg, Carlisle and "terrified Harrisburg with a cannonading only four miles from the state capital," (Rawley, 1989, p 41). In fact Lee established headquarters for his missions in Fredricksburg. Major General George Meade of the Union forces was indecisive of when to commence attacks on the Confederates marching towards the capital with lots of time being expended on conversing between him and the council of war, this allowed the Confederates to go past Potomac.

President Abraham Lincoln regretted this indecisiveness by the war council and the major general. Had they acted swiftly, the Union forces would have

ended the war at this point. Rawley alludes to the near defeat of the Union forces by saying that the Battle of Gettysburg led the major general's letter of resignation which was not accepted by the President as he had shown "skill and valor" in the battle. The tide turned against the South in the subsequent battle at Vicksburg as it was put on its defensive as opposed to the offensive mode at Gettysburg (Rawley, 1989).

When discussing Vicksburg and its importance, Rawley focuses more on the fact that Vicksburg dominated the Mississippi River the free navigation of which was in actual fact and popular fancy of vast significance. It also commanded the rail connections between the cis-Mississippi Confederate states and those in the trans-Mississippi West, especially Texas. The Lone Star State, bordering on the Gulf and on Mexico, was thinly blockaded, and was a channel for supplies to the East. Resources through Mexico, beef and grain from Texas, and sugar from Louisiana went on to Confederate troops.

The Vicksburg campaign loomed as the most important event in the West in 1863. In the end, details of the siege and its aftermath remained the same as McPherson's. James work is built more on other historians' work who are diversified in the views about the South and the North. He uses multiple sources to come to his conclusion as to why July 4, 1863 was in fact the turning point in the Civil War. As a reader it can be beneficial to have such a wide range of accounts to learn from but on the other hand his writing at times seemed a bit choppy and patched together.

The constant citing of these multiple sources can get the reader to wrapped up in attempting to follow what information comes from which historian

Rawley constantly cites. It is clear what his approach is but using as many resources as Rawley's does may leave the reader wondering exactly what his viewpoints are on the biggest turning point in the war. McPherson's accounts on the other hand are tactically in support of the north's view of the battles at Gettysburg, Vicksburg, and Chattanooga. Furthermore, his approach to detailing why July of 1863 was the turning point in the war the clear and concise.

His structure and detail offer the reader much more than Rawley and his use of resources connect the events for as easier read. In conclusion, if an educator had to choose between the two sources to use in a secondary, undergraduate, or graduate course, both would be valuable books to use. However, McPherson's book has more to offer overall and would be the better choice. References: McPherson, J. (2009). *Ordeal by Fire: The Civil War and Reconstruction*: McGraw-Hill. Rawley, J. (1989). *Turning Points of the Civil War*. Nebraska: University Of Nebraska Press