

American civil war tactics essay sample

[War](#)



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Abstract

American civil war was the first war properly fought with Rifle as a basic infantry weapon. The theorists and generals of the time failed to appreciate the impact of rifle on the battlefield and kept on fighting with the outdated tactical beliefs and concepts of musket era. The result was massacre on a large scale. This essay is an attempt to draw the conclusion that the lessons learnt at the Mexican war by American commanders were wrongly applied in civil war as after replacement of musket with rifle, the lessons were no more valid and tactical theory was required to be modified, which the generals of both warring forces failed to do during the course of war.

Armies have always been blamed to prepare to refight the last war.

According to B. H. Liddell Hart, “ The only thing harder than putting a new idea into a military mind is to get the old one out”. Almost in all cases the field officers of last war are generals of the next. The lessons which are brought out of the last war are normally ingrained in minds of these generals and they refuse to see the changing realities. Precisely this happened with the commanders of American Civil War. The last war which in their case was the Mexican war taught some lessons which failed to work in the battlefields of Richmond and Chickamauga.

Tactics always takes its cue from weapons technology of the time. The Mexican War was fought primarily with Muskets as an infantry weapon with rifle playing no major role. Almost all the battle tactics with Musket dated back to Napoleonic era and were written by the military theorists of that time. But by the time civil war was waged, the rifle had almost completely

replaced the musket. This necessitated major change in the tactics of battle, however the civil war generals' mind refused to review what it learned in the Mexican War.

Civil war proved to be a great butchery of its time. The suffering that ensued is beyond words. This was attributed to the faulty thinking about waging war by the generalship of both sides especially the Confederates. The wrong lessons of superiority of attacker were applied in the battlefields of civil war with disastrous results. Even then the confederate generals refused to learn and kept on applying the wrongly understood lessons of Mexican war in the battle against Federals till they bled themselves to death.

Mexican war was characterized by the superiority of aggressive tactics, the closed formations of line, column & square, offensive role of artillery ahead of infantry and the sabre charge of the cavalry. Field entrenchments with defenders armed with musket failed to stop the vigorous attacks. Reason was probably the limited effective range of defender's musket. Closed order formations delivered good results as they were the best way to deliver effective musketry. However by the time civil war was waged, rifle had replaced the musket and that provided so much enhanced firepower to the entrenched defender that one rifleman in the trench was equal to five in the open.. This necessitated that skirmishes and loose order should have been the tactics of choice in carrying out offensive and maximum possible destruction to the enemy should have been caused through entrenched defense with temporary and permanent fortifications.

Generals of American Civil war failed badly on this count. There were only a few generals like Gorge G. Meade & especially Joseph E. Johnston who could be proud on being ardent defenders. Most of them both Federal and Confederate were proud attackers who felt that it is attack and attack alone which carries the day. This dogma led to the widespread massacre seen in civil war and bled confederates profusely eventually causing their total and complete defeat.

All the confederate commanders except Earl Von Dorn made their forces suffer more than their opponents proportionately due their utmost believe of superiority of attack over defense. Troops under command John C. Pemberton suffered 25, 255 more casualties than they inflicted on enemy. In fact his troops suffered overall 50. 3% casualties which is a horrendous figure. This was due to fact that 7 out of 10 times, the confederate commanders chose to attack federals rather than taking deliberate defense.

The whole tactical concepts of the civil war were based on French theories of war drawn in post Napoleonic era and were successfully tested by American Generals in Mexican war. The presence of rifle had created a paradigm shift. No one of that time had grasped the effect of rifle totally on the defense. The efforts by war department to revise the tactical manuals failed on this count as changes were made only superficially and not fundamentally. All the tactical theorists of the period between Mexican War and American Civil War failed to understand the impact of introduction of rifle in entrenched defenses. Mahan was able to predict some changes but his message was somehow lost under his preference for attack over defense.

Rifling's impact to artillery was not as profound as infantry till the time of civil war and therefore artillery could not be employed ahead of infantry offensively. This was not at all realized by the commander of both sides. The saber charge of cavalry was also totally ineffectual against the defender behind entrenched defenses in civil war. Time and again the charges were repulsed with heavy casualties due to withering effect of the rifle. Both of these worked superiorly in Mexican war due to unavailability of rifle with the defenders in Mexican War.

It can be argued that rifle was employed during Mexican civil war as well but at that time it was considered a special weapon for special purposes. As the musket was an inaccurate weapon at medium and longer ranges, bayonet charge was possible by the attacker as he could come close enough relatively unscathed. It was also successful in some cases against field entrenchments as well. However bayonet was not effectively used in civil war as evident from the report of medical director of the army of the Potomac that little bayonet fighting was done in battle of Virginia, the hardest and bloodiest battle in civil war. The close ordered lines trained to a rhythmic marching speed of 90 or 140 steps per second with 13 inches distance between shoulders as taught by Scott simply gave too much lucrative target to the defender's effective rifle. Time and again piles of bodies were strewn across the battle fields within short spans of time due to the extremely heavy and accurate defensive fire. The lesson of supremacy of bayonet over firepower was probably correctly drawn in Mexican war but was incorrectly applied in Civil War as the source of firepower was no more the Musket but the legendary Springfield rifle.

Tactics always lag behind technology. However refusal to learn even after suffering is the biggest sin one can commit and this was exactly what was done by the confederate commanders. What worked in Mexican war failed to work in Civil war just because the emergence of new technology weapon, the Rifle. According to the authors of *Attack and Die*, not diplomacy, material or human resources but blatant application of lesson of Mexican war into the civil war without disregard to the changes that had taken place in the realm of technology was the prime reason for the bloodiness of the war, the disproportionate suffering and eventual defeat of Confederacy in the civil war.

References

McWhiney, G., & Jamieson, D. P. (1986). *Attack & Die*. Alabama: University of Alabama Press.