

The Foreseeable Victory:  
A Justification for the Federal Use of Force in the Civil War

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## Introduction

The years between 1861 and 1865 saw the loss of six hundred and twenty thousand Americans in what would come to be known as the bloodiest conflict in American history: the Civil War.<sup>1</sup> A country that was united in a war against the Mexicans little over a decade before found itself sundered amidst a conflict that threatened to destroy the Union that their forefathers had worked so long to create. Throughout the land, men were compelled to bear arms, either in the blues of the Federal Army or in the grays of the newly-founded Confederate States of America. Yet this unfortunate and costly war was not always seen by both sides as the preferred method of solving their long-standing differences. Instead, compromise was the preferred medium of negotiating the two sides' frequent disagreements. When the Civil War finally did break out in 1861, it would be the era of politicking that preceded it that would ensure that both the North and the South were unprepared for the struggle ahead. Yet despite this lack of readiness, both sides were not without their comparative advantages and disadvantages. In the eyes of many, the South could brave the Federal onslaught and come out victorious by means of its willing and able citizenry, its access to important trade arteries, and all of the European support that "King Cotton" could buy. Yet it would be due to the Union's advantage in its ability to procure manpower from many sources, its industrial might and its superior infrastructure that the South's rebellion was doomed to failure from the onset and that the Union's use of force was an appropriate gamble.

### **An Era of Politicking: Compromise Breeds Unpreparedness**

In the years prior to the War, the country attempted to resolve issues of contention like the expansion of slavery and the power of state vs. federal government through a variety of agreements. In the newly settled frontier lands west of the Mississippi, slavery became an especially divisive issue with various factions coming into conflict over whether or not territories joining the United States should be devoid of slavery. In 1820, the Missouri Compromise tried to peacefully settle this controversy by allowing Maine to enter as a free state while Missouri was free to practice slavery.<sup>2</sup> This attempt at cooperation could be seen again following the Mexican-American War when the Senate, fearful of Southern insurrection, struck down the Wilmot Proviso, which would have prevented slavery from expanding into the newly conquered territories. Instead, California was admitted as a free state while Utah and New Mexico were allowed to decide the issue for themselves in what came to be known as the Compromise of 1850.<sup>3</sup> From this agreement, the Southern states were also granted tougher fugitive slave laws, which resulted in the Supreme Court ruling in favor of Southern slave owners and upholding their claim of ownership over runaway slaves hiding in the Northern states in the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850.<sup>4</sup> Yet while seen by their designers as being effective ways of avoiding conflict, the slew of treaties and court rulings of the pre-Civil War period only ended up delaying the bloodshed. Instead of addressing these issues with the accumulation of greater manpower and equipment, the Federal government chose instead to rely on legal means to solve the emerging crisis, thus leaving the nation militarily unprepared and its fate uncertain. Likewise, in the South there was an aversion to open conflict with the Federal government outside of the legal sphere. Yet despite their mutual unpreparedness for military confrontation, both the Confederate and Federal governments were not without their respective strong points.

## **The Confederate Advantages**

### *A Weak Federal Military*

At the beginning of the war, the Confederacy benefited from a variety of factors. Upon seceding in 1861, the Confederate States of America (i.e. the CSA) was faced with a relatively small Federal Army consisting of only 1,080 officers and 14,926 enlisted personnel.<sup>5</sup> Many of these soldiers were spread throughout the western territories and still more were stationed in garrisons in the South where they were completely surrounded by Southern sympathizers, such as in the case of Fort Sumter. Of the one hundred and ninety-eight line companies in the Federal Army, all but fifteen were scattered in isolated posts along the frontier while the remaining forces were positioned along the Atlantic coast and the border with British Canada.<sup>6</sup> According to the historical work, *The United States Army and the Forging of a Nation, 1775-1917*, the Federal Army was also hindered by the very nature of its structure, which organized troops into departments under the command of a general who was responsible both for running the department and conducting field operations.<sup>7</sup> These generals found themselves bound to the President, the General in Chief and the Secretary of War to make many of their policy decisions and were without any semblance of an expert staff to help make their logistical needs feasible.<sup>8</sup> The result was a cumbersome system that impeded the smooth movement of Federal troops and supplies as well as the recruitment of men.<sup>9</sup>

*Experienced Military Leadership*

As war loomed, many Southern men answered the call to serve as military leaders for their new country. The Confederacy boasted some of the nation's top military schools, with established institutions like the Virginia Military Institute and the Citadel, which were prepared to continually supply the Southern cause with well-trained officers who had the tactical knowledge necessary to consolidate spaced-out militias and to lead the large field armies to come.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, the CSA could count upon the defection of dozens of experienced officers who had received the rigorous training offered by the United States Military Academy at West Point.<sup>11</sup> Of the one thousand and eighty officers in the pre-war Army, two hundred and eighty-six ended up serving the South during the conflict, with many of these defectors having experience as regimental commanders.<sup>12</sup> Included among these were men like Braxton Bragg, John Bell Hood and Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson, who had fought in the Federal Army in the years prior to the Southern secession and who later used their immense collection of military skills and knowledge in the service of the Confederacy.

Perhaps the most inspiring and experienced of the South's officers was General Robert E. Lee. In 1829, Lee graduated second in his class from West Point, where he had been especially adept in his knowledge of artillery and tactics.<sup>13</sup> As a Colonel in the Union Army, he served with distinction in the Mexican-American War and gained additional combat experience from fighting on the frontier.<sup>14</sup> While initially reluctant to support the secession of the Southern states, Lee's loyalties lay in his home state of Virginia, which influenced his decision to take up command of the Army of Northern Virginia in 1861.<sup>15</sup> Lee's experience combined with his sheer resolve and inspiring image would lead the South to victory in the battles to come while giving the Southern people a leader under whom to fight to the end.

*Economics, International Support and the Small Arms Trade*

Additionally, the Confederacy's cotton production and exportation gave it both an economic and political edge over the Federals as it contributed to a favorable standing among the nations of Europe, many of whom relied on the South for their cotton needs. Throughout the 1850s, the price of cotton rose as demand increased from foreign markets. The Confederacy was able to use cotton as security when taking out loans and bonds from foreign governments, eventually leading to \$7,678,591.25 in revenue for the CSA that could be used to wage war.<sup>16</sup> Yet perhaps the biggest beneficiary of the cotton trade was the British Empire, the greatest military and economic power of the era. Before the war, nearly a quarter of the British population was dependent on the textile industry for employment and a tenth of the nation's wealth was derived from the cotton business. With such a weighty investment in the South, England joined France in granting belligerency status to the CSA in the spring of 1861.<sup>17</sup> While not willing to commit itself to actively taking part in a war against the United States, the South began to receive arms shipments in the form of British Enfield rifles, numbering 700,000 by the conflict's end as well as French-made .44 caliber LeMat revolvers.<sup>18</sup>

*Geography and Population*

While cotton was an important bargaining tool of the Confederacy, the South's geographic positioning and its subsequent access to major trade arteries was also advantageous. The Mississippi River cuts through four of the eleven states of the former CSA, providing a vital means by which to transport goods and men from state to state while connecting the valuable Confederate-controlled ports of Memphis, Washington and New Orleans. From these locations, the CSA enjoyed access to the trade markets of the West Indies where cotton, sugar, livestock, and other commodities could be exchanged on foreign markets. While geography was important,

the fervent devotion of the majority of white Southerners was also a boon to the Confederacy. Years of poor relations with the Northern half of the country over divisive issues like slavery had disenchanted many Southerners. Of particular importance was the fear that the anti-slavery views of Northern abolitionists and Lincoln's policy of disallowing the further spread of slavery would economically damage the South and eventually lead to the economic inviability of slavery and the subsequent freeing of Southern blacks. With slaves making up 39% of the Southern population and outnumbering whites in areas like Mississippi, there was a fear among Southern whites that emancipation would destroy the white power structure.<sup>19</sup> Wealthy slave-owners who would lose everything should this come to pass, played off the fears of the poorer whites and helped turn many average Southerners into fervent supporters of secession who would rather die than see a black man as their equal.<sup>20</sup>

### **Why the Union Prevailed**

#### *Military: The Union Army*

While these advantages gave many hopeful Southerners the belief that the Confederacy had a chance of defeating the Federal Army, the Northern United States had the upper hand over the South in a variety of areas. Despite the small size of its military at the War's beginning, the North still had a standing army of professionals, something that the Confederacy lacked apart from a relatively small number of officers and men who had defected from the Union ranks. It would not be until 1861 with the election of Abraham Lincoln to the presidency that steps would be taken by the Provisional Confederate Congress to transform its spread-out militias and state governments into a singular military and political front via the March 6 passage of "an Act to provide for the public defense".<sup>21</sup> Despite European trade involvement, the CSA was also without a great deal of modern small arms or cannon, possessing one hundred and twenty

thousand old muskets and a mere fifteen thousand rifles compared to the five hundred and thirty thousand mostly-modern small arms in the Federal arsenal.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, the Springfield model rifle preferred by the Federals was cheaper to manufacture than the British Enfield rifle being sold to the South, costing a mere fourteen dollars a piece to produce in government arsenals and even less in private gun works.<sup>23</sup>

#### *Military: The Union Navy*

Another advantageous Union asset was its navy, which consisted of forty-two ships at the onset of the War.<sup>24</sup> While significant additions were needed, the Federal government was fortunate in that it did not have to petition nations like Britain to construct ships for them, as did their Confederate counterpart. Although the Federals were unable to blockade the entire coastline of the CSA with absolute efficiency, they had enough ships to halt traffic into the major ports on the Eastern seaboard and to launch several strategically important and morale-boosting raids early in the war, such as the 1862 capture of New Orleans, the gateway to the Mississippi River.<sup>25</sup> Without an adequate number of ships to defend its ports along the Mississippi, the Confederacy was doomed from the start to be cut in two and to have its trade network stymied; which is exactly what took place between April 1862 and July 1863, concluding with the surrender of the vital stronghold of Vicksburg.<sup>26</sup>

#### *Strong Executive Leadership*

Prior to the conflict, many Northerners were against the idea of going to war with the Southern states. Radical groups, like the Copperheads, were vehemently opposed to using military force and made their views clear with actions ranging from publishing political pamphlets to conspiring with Confederate agents.<sup>27</sup> Despite this, anti-secession leaders were able to use their political skill to fight the negative press and work for the preservation of the Union.

Perhaps no other governmental body was better able to accomplish this task than the Executive Branch under President Abraham Lincoln. He was opposed to the idea of secession and was in favor of defending the Union's integrity at all costs, stating in his inaugural address that "[...]in contemplation of universal law and of the Constitution the Union of these States is perpetual. Perpetuity is implied, if not expressed, in the fundamental law of all national governments."<sup>28</sup> Yet Lincoln was also cautious and politically shrewd. He knew that an all-out attack on the Confederacy would be politically damaging and thus waited for the Confederates to act first, which came in the form of the attack on Fort Sumter.<sup>29</sup> This move would pay off for Lincoln in that it stymied Southern attempts to claim Northern aggression.<sup>30</sup> It was his preciseness and lack of impulsivity that would elevate Lincoln to the challenges of the struggle ahead.<sup>31</sup>

Coming into office, Lincoln was fortunate to find that many members of government shared his sentiments. Among these were Pro-Union Democrats Jeremiah S. Black, Joseph Holt and Edwin M. Stanton, who had taken control of the previous cabinet under Buchanan and who were strongly opposed to secession.<sup>32</sup> In appointing a new cabinet, Lincoln chose men with views similar to his own. Some of these choices ended in disappointment, such as in the case of Secretary of War Simon Cameron, who resigned in 1862 among corruption charges.<sup>33</sup> Yet for the most part, the men Lincoln chose would be critical in preserving the Union in the fight ahead. Among these were men like Secretary of the Treasury Salmon P. Chase, who used his financial skill to sell \$500 million in government bonds, which ensured that the Union had enough money to pay off the huge costs accrued from the war effort.<sup>34</sup> Also vital to the Federal war effort was Secretary of State William H. Seward.<sup>35</sup> His leadership was crucial in keeping Great Britain out of the War by orchestrating a peaceful resolution to the Trent Affair, which involved U.S. sailors removing Southern diplomats from a British ship.<sup>36</sup>

### *Population and Immigration*

The ability to more-readily procure manpower was another important advantage of the Federal government. The Census of 1860 reveals that roughly 22,000,000 people lived in the Northern part of the United States compared to only 9,000,000 in the South.<sup>37</sup> Of these 22,000,000, over 98% were free, with half of these able to participate as combatants in the ensuing conflict.<sup>38</sup> The CSA, however, had a slave population of 3,500,000 who were considered ineligible for military service, thus leaving a relatively small free population of 5,500,000.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, unlike the Confederacy, the Union enjoyed a steady stream of European immigrants who avoided the South and its slavery-centric economy in favor of bountiful job opportunities in the growing cities of the North. Of the 4,136,175 foreigners living in the United States at the time of the Census, only 5% (233,651) of these lived in the Southern states, thus leaving population growth in the Confederacy stagnant.<sup>40</sup> In the North, the Federal government could rely upon the influx of new peoples from Ireland, the German States, and other parts of Europe. The Irish alone added 150,000 much-needed troops to the Northern army, while other ethnic groups served with as much distinction as native-born soldiers, sometimes forming their own special units like the Italian Garibaldi Guard.<sup>41</sup> Those immigrants who were not recruited into the Union armed forces went to work in the manufacturing of weapons and supplies for the Union cause.<sup>42</sup>

### *An Industrial Base*

Entering into the war, the Northern United States enjoyed a small but established and diverse industrial base, something that the Confederacy sorely lacked. The Union had a numerical superiority in the way of skilled industrial laborers, with one million three hundred thousand workers at the start of the conflict as opposed to the meager one hundred and ten

thousand who worked in support of the Confederate economy.<sup>43</sup> The Federal cause also benefited from having much of their industrial base left intact despite the secession of half its territory. Of the 128,300 industrial sites in existence in 1861, the Federal government retained control of 110,274 once war erupted.<sup>44</sup> While the loss of the Southern market and its lucrative cotton revenue initially hurt the Union, the North used its industrial advantage to offset this, with war-related industries benefiting almost instantly from the conflict. Manufacturers in firearms and wagon-making received large military contracts while leather and shoe companies enjoyed a boost from the need for boots, saddles and other vital goods.<sup>45</sup> Additionally, the heavy blow that came with the loss of Southern cotton crops and coal mines was softened with the development of Northern resources. Between 1861 and 1865, the Northern wool industry increased its output 100% to offset the loss of Southern cotton and to meet clothing demands; while the coal industry increased output by 21%.<sup>46</sup> Regarding the transportation of these products, the Federals were also at an advantage. Prior to the War's start, the Northern United States had laid 22,000 miles of track in contrast to the South's 9,000.<sup>47</sup> Much of the Southern network was poorly planned, with four different gauges existing throughout the CSA and with many tracks dead-ending without close connections to other lines.<sup>48</sup> Additionally, the Confederate belief that the conflict would be over in a matter of months resulted in a lack of initiative to stockpile iron for the construction of additional track or for the repair lines damaged by overuse or sabotage.<sup>49</sup> While the South was hindered in its ability to rapidly transport troops and supplies to the battlefield, the North utilized its more-developed railway system to full effect.

## Conclusion

In 1861, many hopeful Southerners believed that the South could defeat the Northern Government by means of its willing and able population, its experienced military leadership, its access to important trade arteries and a trade-induced intervention by Great Britain or France. Yet ultimately, the Union's advantages in its ability to procure manpower from many sources, its industrial might, its strong executive leadership and its superior infrastructure doomed the South to failure from the War's onset and justified the Union's use of force. By 1865 a battered Confederacy had capitulated to the Federal armies. This humiliating defeat became the beginning of a new era in the South marked by racial discrimination, violence and widespread anti-Northern sentiments, the effects of which can arguably still be felt to this day. Much to the disdain of the Southern secessionists of the 1860s, no amount of patriotic songs, fiery speeches or lengthy proclamations of independence could shield their beloved Confederacy from its ultimate annihilation at the hands of an industrialized foe. Regardless of the objectionable morality of much of its ethos, it is safe to say that the average soldier of the outnumbered and outmatched Confederacy fought for what he believed to be right and did so with great distinction and valor. While this fight was ultimately one fought in vain, their sacrifices provide the current world with a valuable example of the pitfalls of underestimating one's enemy and neglecting his longstanding strengths. Jefferson Davis, the President of the Confederacy, best summed up the whole debacle when he noted that "it soon became evident to all that the South had gone to war without counting the cost."<sup>50</sup> Unfortunately, this lesson has had trouble sinking in even in the modern era. From the blood-stained beaches of Normandy to the arid deserts of the Middle East, nations and pseudo-nations alike have since continued to misunderstand their enemies, eventually paying the ultimate price for their ineptitude.

## Endnotes

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- <sup>1</sup> James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom* (Oxford University Press, 1988), 854.
- <sup>2</sup> U.S. Congress, *Chap XXII*, 16th Cong., 1st sess. (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1820), 797.
- <sup>3</sup> Public Broadcasting Service, “The Compromise of 1850 and the Fugitive Slave Act,” *Africans in America*, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4p2951.html>.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>5</sup> Brig. Gen. John S. Brown, ed., *American Military History Volume I: The United States Army and the Forging of a Nation, 1775-1917* (Washington: Center of Military History United States Army, 2005), 198.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 198
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 198
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 198
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 198
- <sup>10</sup> Brown, *American Military History Volume I*, 195
- <sup>11</sup> Thomas Nelson Page, *Robert E. Lee: Man and Soldier* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1911), 40.
- <sup>12</sup> Brown, *American Military History Volume I*, 199
- <sup>13</sup> Page, *Robert E. Lee: Man and Soldier*, 16
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 30
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 93
- <sup>16</sup> Dick Weeks, “King Cotton,” *Civil War Potpourri*, <http://www.civilwarhome.com/kingcotton.htm>.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, *Recapitulation: Population of the States and Territories by Color and Condition*, 1860 (Washington, Government Printing Office, 1864), 598.

<sup>20</sup> Frank E. Smitha, "Antebellum and Civil War in the United States," *Macro History and World Report*, <http://www.fsmitha.com/h3/h42-cw.html>.

<sup>21</sup> Congress of the Provisional Government of the Confederate States of America, *The Statutes at Large of the Provisional Government of the Confederate States of America*, 1st Cong., 1st Session. (Richmond, Virginia: R.H. Smith Printer to Congress), vi.

<sup>22</sup> J.W. Mallet and O.E. Hunt, "Ordnance of the Confederacy," *The Photographic History of the Civil War*, ed. O.E. Hunt (New York: The Review of Reviews Company, 1911), 158.

<sup>23</sup> O.E. Hunt, "Federal Ordnance," *The Photographic History of the Civil War*, ed. O.E. Hunt (New York: The Review of Reviews Company, 1911), 128.

<sup>24</sup> Kenneth J. Hagan, *This People's Navy: The Making of American Sea Power* (New York: The Free Press, 1991), 163.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 168

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 169

<sup>27</sup> Wood Gray, *The Hidden Civil War of the Copperheads* (New York: The Viking Press, 1942), 148-169.

<sup>28</sup> Abraham Lincoln, "First Inaugural Address," *American Constitutional Law*, eds. Donald P. Kommers, John E. Finn, Gary J. Jacobsohn (Lanham, Maryland Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004), 1047.

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<sup>29</sup> “Civil War (1851-1865): Military and Diplomatic Course,” *Answers.com*,

<http://www.answers.com/topic/civil-war-1861-65-military-and-diplomatic-course>.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Isaac Thomas, *The Words of Abraham Lincoln* (Western Publishing House, 1898), 124.

<sup>32</sup> “Abraham Lincoln Biography,” *Monster and Critics*,

[http://www.monstersandcritics.com/people/archive/peoplearchive.php/Abraham\\_Lincoln/biography/](http://www.monstersandcritics.com/people/archive/peoplearchive.php/Abraham_Lincoln/biography/).

<sup>33</sup> Lewis Lehrman, “Simon Cameron,” *Mr. Lincoln & Friends*,

<http://www.mrlincolnandfriends.org/inside.asp?pageID=84&subjectID=7>.

<sup>34</sup> Charles R. Geisst, *Wall Street* (Oxford University Press, 1999), 54.

<sup>35</sup> “The Trent Affair,” *US Department of State*,

[http://future.state.gov/when/timeline/1861\\_timeline/trent\\_affair.html](http://future.state.gov/when/timeline/1861_timeline/trent_affair.html).

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> *Recapitulation: Population of the States and Territories by Color and Condition, 1860*, 598.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 598

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 598

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 620-623

<sup>41</sup> Dick Weeks, “Ethnic Composition of Civil War Forces,” *Civil War Potpourri*,

<http://www.civilwarhome.com/ethnic.htm>.

<sup>42</sup> Sally Salamone, “Civil War and Industrial and Technological Advances,” *Book Rags*,

<http://www.bookrags.com/research/civil-war-and-industrial-and-techno-aaw-02/>.

<sup>43</sup> Michael Streich, “Northern Advantages in the Civil War,” *Suite101*, [http://us-civil-](http://us-civil-war.suite101.com/article.cfm/northern_advantages_in_the_civil_war)

[war.suite101.com/article.cfm/northern\\_advantages\\_in\\_the\\_civil\\_war](http://us-civil-war.suite101.com/article.cfm/northern_advantages_in_the_civil_war).

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<sup>44</sup> Dick Weeks, "Northern Industry in the Civil War," *Civil War Potpourri*,  
<http://www.civilwarhome.com/civilwarindustry.htm>.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Weeks, "Northern Advantages in the Civil War"

<sup>48</sup> Charles W. Ramsdell, "The Confederate Government and the Railroads," *The American Historical Review* 22, no. 4 (Jul., 1917), 797.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 795

<sup>50</sup> J.W. Mallet, "Work of the Ordnance Bureau of the War Department of the Confederate States, 1861-1865," *Southern Historical Society Papers, Volume 37*,  
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