

MILITARY HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF MASSACHUSETTS

ROTC ESSAY COMPETITION TOPIC

October 14, 2008

Background

A historian has written, "The United States has usually prepared for its wars after getting into them. Never was this more true than in the Civil War".

For decades prior to the Civil War the Union was rent by antagonism and divisiveness between North and South over the issue of slavery, particularly as it pertained to Western expansion. Whether new states should be admitted to the Union as free or slave was a matter vitally connected to the maintenance of a delicate balance of power between the two sections of the country. During the 1840's and 1850's a succession of crises took place, and with each of these events the threat of secession or war or both intensified, until at last what had been feared and predicted came to pass.

Purpose and Content of the Essay

When war finally came, in 1861, it found both North and South unprepared. Given all the prior warnings, why was that so? The answer to this question should compose the first portion of your essay.

Your essay should also compare and contrast the readiness of the two sections to wage war. What were the advantages and disadvantages on each side at the outset? In responding to this question you should take into consideration the human resources and preparedness of both the army and the navy on each side, including the caliber of military and civilian leadership, and such factors as logistics and transport. Consider also the industrial and agricultural resources of North and South.

Given the comparative advantages and disadvantages of the two foes, did it make sense, in your opinion, for the Union to respond to Southern secession with military force? And, on the other hand, did it make sense for the Southern states to secede, inviting the likelihood of war?

With the benefit of hindsight we know who won the Civil War. But given what you know of conditions at the outset of the war, do you think it was inevitable that the North would be victorious? Explain your response.