

TRADING SPACE FOR TIME: THE CONFEDERATE ARMY'S STRATEGY REVISITED

A N D R E A P E Z Z A T I

ABSTRACT

The American Civil War is the preferred topic of many military historians and other grand strategy practitioners. It has been widely studied from social, political, economic, cultural, and military perspectives. A lot of books and articles focus on the reasons for the Unionists' victory or the Confederates' defeat. The thesis of the superiority in resources and manpower of the North has been the main explanation for a long time. Other works, like this paper, concentrate on strategy. The years before the start of the Civil War were characterized by great fervor concerning military strategy. The actions of Napoleon and the works of Clausewitz and Jomini had been influencing military thinking from the nineteenth century onwards, with the latter being a particularly strong influence in the United States. I argue that Confederate generalship, in particular General Robert E. Lee's, had an excessively aggressive posture. The focus on relentless offensives caused the depletion of the already limited resources and men of the Confederacy. I suggest that a defensive posture could have been more successful for the South. In particular, a defense-in-depth strategy would have allowed the Confederacy to trade space for time and, eventually, to exhaust the Union army and resources. I claim that through skilled use of Virginia's geographic features, the Confederate army could have created multiple defensive zones along a trenched front with strongholds positioned in various points for coverage and far and wide defense, leading to strong resistance, thus enhancing its chances for victory.

Keywords: American Civil War; defense-in-depth; Antoine-Henry Jomini; Gen. Robert E. Lee.

INTRODUCTION

The American Civil War (1861-1865) has engendered a lively debate among historians and strategic thinkers that is still lasting to this day. Dozens of books investigate the key factors of either the Union's victory or the South's loss, depending on the authors' preferred perspective (McPherson, 1996). While the thesis of the overwhelming numbers and resources of the North lost its impact, current literature tends to focus on military matters (McPherson, 1996; Dwyer, 1999). The strategic choices of the commanders-in-chief have been thoroughly assessed. The war broke out in a period of great fervor concerning military strategy. Napoleon's military thinking and endeavors were still enlivening discussions on the methods of warfare. Carl von Clausewitz's *On War* was published posthumously in 1832, while a few years later Antoine-Henry Jomini issued his *Summary of the Art of War* (1838). The latter was more appreciated than Clausewitz by the American military establishment. Jomini's work on the concentration of superior forces and interior lines of operations significantly influenced the conflict, even though "[d]uring the Civil War adherence to Jomini's principles was far from perfect" (Jones, 1970:128). His principles of war were more suitable for a defensive approach than for offense (Jones, 1970). If Jomini was carefully read, why had Rebel generals like Robert E. Lee decided to conduct an offensive war that ratcheted down his men-at-arms and depleted Confederate resources?

Starting from that point, this essay attempts to demonstrate that the South might have won the war with a defensive approach. In particular, it dwells on the possibility that the Southern army could have carried out a defense-in-depth strategy to exhaust the Union army, with the ultimate goal of forcing it out of the conflict. Defense-in-depth consists in

creating “multiple defensive zones” (Jordan et. al, 2016: 106) along a trenched front with strongholds positioned at various points for coverage and far and wide defense. Mobile units are deployed around the strongholds to provide support. The goal is to resist enemy assaults through the mutual support of strong points, infantry units and artillery. The main tasks of a defense-in-depth strategy are to slow down the enemy's advance by trading space for time and to force the enemy into a war of exhaustion (Jordan et. al 2016; Luttwak 2016). If the strategy is successful, the enemy will be worn out and demoralized. The defending commander could then mass an overwhelming force and prepare a counterattack.

This essay is divided into three sections. The first analyzes the strategy employed by the Confederacy throughout the war. It examines the influence that Jomini had on the strategic choices of the South's leadership. The second section demonstrates, with the benefit of hindsight, why a defense-in-depth strategy would have been a better strategic option for the Confederate Army, leading it to the final victory and, consequently, to independence for the South. The final section restates the thesis and recapitulates the main points.

THE INFLUENCE OF JOMINI: AMERICAN CIVIL WAR STRATEGIES

Jomini was a major advocate of Napoleon's way of war (Elting, 1964). The concentration of superior forces against a weaker enemy at some decisive point became one of his most cited concepts (Reardon, 2012). Besides, his emphasis on “interior lines of operations,” maneuvering, and logistics (“the art of moving armies”) found implementation in the Civil War, during which both Union and Confederate armies utilized the telegraph and the railway to move troops swiftly from one point of the front to another, to mass forces to numerically overwhelm the enemy (McPherson et al., 1992: 50-51). For example, before the Battle of Manassas (July 21, 1861) General G. T. Beauregard of the Confederate

Army telegraphed to request support. Eventually, the units commanded by General J. E. Johnston arrived by railroad and the South achieved the numerical superiority that contributed to the victory (McPherson et al. 1992). On another occasion, before the Battle of Shiloh (April 6-7, 1862), the use of telegraph and railways allowed President Davis to order a concentration of forces so vast within a brief time-lapse that an author claimed that “Napoleon, depending on human and animal mobility only, had employed [that kind of concentration] only within a single theatre of war” (McPherson et al., 1992: 57).

While Unionist generals employed more prudent strategies, enraging President Lincoln because they preferred maneuvering over assaults, Confederate commanders were far more aggressive and often took the initiative. In fact, General Robert E. Lee pursued a war of annihilation. He aimed at drawing the North to a decisive battle instead of securing Southern territories and planning a dogged defense (Freedman, 2013). His strategy was, at times, successful. He won many important engagements, among which was the Seven Days' Battle (June 25-July 1, 1862). Following the Jominian principles of concentration of forces and internal lines of operations, Lee amassed a 96,000-strong army at Richmond because General McClellan's Army of the Potomac was dangerously advancing towards the capital. Initially, General Lee wanted to adopt the tactic of “turning movement” by sending a force to the enemy rear. However, the maneuver failed, and he had to order burdensome frontal attacks. Eventually, the North retreated but the Confederacy lost more than 19,000 soldiers, namely 20% of its army (McPherson et al., 1992). The strategy adopted by Lee thus proved to be notoriously costly. It was the consequence of choosing to accept the battle against superior numbers, at a time when the defense had both the strategic and the tactical advantage.

McWhiney and Jamieson (1984) in their book *Attack and Die*, a telling title, provide a clear explanation. Confederate generalship was influenced by the tactics and art of command employed in the

Mexican War (1846-1848). The main offensive weapon was the smoothbore musket, which was short-range and imprecise. The standard tactic was deploying an in-line formation with soldiers in close ranks to concentrate the fire and improve effectiveness. The infantry aimed at advancing after every volley to get closer to the enemy. Skirmishers, in a more dispersed formation, supported the musketeers' effort by harassing enemy troops through intermittent fire, to slow down their progression and break their line. When the enemy was at hand, a bayonet fight kicked in. The artillery was used extensively both for defensive and offensive purposes. The cavalry was deployed to cover the flanks, as a raiding party, for pursuit purposes or to do reconnaissance. It was not appreciated as an assault regiment, to the point that horsemen often dismounted to fight on foot. Alternative tactical orders were the column and the square. The former was deployed for shock and direct assaults while the latter was used to defend against the cavalry. The in-line formation, column formation, and square formation proved to be effective during the Mexican War. Hence, mindful of that success, American generalship brought them to the battlefields of the Civil War (McWhiney and Jamieson, 1984: 27-37; Phillips, 2011: 565-566).

In 1862, Brigadier-General Silas Casey, a commander of the Union Army, published *Infantry Tactics*. It was a field manual for the army, useful for understanding methods of warfare in the Civil War. The 'formation in order of battle' was composed of two close lines of troops. The front line and the second line were put together in blocks and divided into companies (eight in total), each of them formed by two platoons. Two further companies of skirmishers were placed behind the two main lines to guard the flanks and were ready to intervene to slow down the enemy's advance. Put together, the ten companies formed a regiment. Noticeably, there was no space for cavalry. His work being a manual for infantry, Casey might have omitted it on purpose. The only mounted soldiers mentioned are the officers, who should be on a horse for better mobility and view through the

battlefield (i.e., for better coordination and communication with the troops).

This type of formation seemed, and had to be, ordered, disciplined, and organized. However, it proved not to be on many occasions. Attacking with a two-line formation was dangerous and prone to a high casualty rate because of two main factors: defense superiority and terrain conformation. Again, McWhiney and Jamieson provide useful insights. Defensive lines were armed with rifles. Rifles were more precise and powerful than muskets. In addition, they had a longer range. Since the purpose of defensive linemen was to halt the advance of the adversary, warding the enemy musketeers off was paramount, and the rifle was the most effective weapon to do so at a distance. During the Civil War, different battles ended with a similar outcome. The first line of the offense could not bear the firepower of defending riflemen and broke up. The second line would gather up to support the teetering front line by concentrating fire. Eventually, offensive lines would mix up chaotically with dire consequences – "Intermingling [of successive lines] destroyed formation and order, crippled the command system, and further increased the advantage of the tactical defensive over the offensive," McWhiney and Jamieson assert (1984: 82).

For instance, during the Battle of Shiloh (April 6-7, 1862) the attacks of the Confederate Army failed due to superior defensive firepower and geographical barriers (hillocks, swamps, rivers, etc.). In Murfreesboro (December 31, 1862-January 2, 1863) the same situation occurred. The rocky terrain and the dense cedar forest impeded the army to stay in a close-order formation. Notwithstanding this, General Bragg launched an assault. The difficult terrain, the Union Army's fierce resistance and Bragg's tactical oversights caused his successive lines to merge and, in the end, to withdraw (McWhiney and Jamieson, 1984). Intermingling occurred in many other battles (for example, in the Battle of Chancellorsville (May 1863), in the Battle of Chickamauga (September 1863), and in the Battle of

Sharpsburg (September 17, 1862), and it affected both the North and the South. Alternatives like column formation and mixed formation only worked with seesawing results. The combination of riflemen's firepower, artillery, entrenchments, and harsh terrain provided an advantageous starting point for the defense - something the Confederates did not understand.

Union Army commanders like Ulysses S. Grant were aware of the "dominance of the tactical and strategic defense," and chose to carry out a war of exhaustion (McPherson et al., 1992: 47). Officers recognized the importance of logistics, supply chain, and interior lines to wear the enemy out. The attempt to destroy the adversary, inferior in numbers but likely equal in quality, in its own country, with high morale (initially at least) to face and expel the invader, was deemed too risky. The optimal solution was to spare troops as much as possible by avoiding useless and bloody combats while focusing on disrupting the supply lines and logistics base of the South (railroads, telegraph stations, towns and villages, farms, and so forth). The influence of Jomini is clear. The Swiss military thinker, even though he was an admirer of Napoleon's strategy of annihilation, acknowledged the effectiveness of exhaustion (Jones, 1970: 127). The aim is to erode the enemy's will to fight instead of destroying its army. Although it is often associated with an offensive strategy, like annihilation and attrition, exhaustion can be employed as a defensive strategy too. About defense, Jomini (2004: 73) claimed that:

"A defensive war is not without its advantages, when wisely conducted. It may be passive or active, taking the offensive at times. The passive defense is always pernicious; the active may accomplish great successes. The object of a defensive war being to protect, as long as possible, the country threatened by the enemy, all operations should be designed to retard his progress, to annoy him in his enterprises by multiplying obstacles and difficulties, without, however, compromising one's own army [...] [T]he defense [...] desires delay till his adversary is weakened by sending off detachments, by marches, and by the privations and fatigues incident to his progress."

One can discern a number of key strategic and tactical guidelines from this excerpt. A defensive war can bring benefits if well-planned. Jomini insisted on the importance of taking the initiative to avoid the enemy choosing the place and time of the battle, and the methods of conducting it. Hence, the defense should be active rather than passive. The former refers to the ability to carry out preventive attacks or counter-attacks after the resistance. The latter consists in securing a position by holding out strenuously against enemy assaults without reacting. A defense-in-depth strategy aspires to safeguard strong points and contain the advance of the opponent. If successful, the commander may organize a counterattack to push back the enemy into its territory whilst carefully averting overstretching. The Confederacy did exactly that, however, by advancing imprudently beyond its exterior defensive lines. For example, after Generals Lee and Stonewall Jackson managed to withstand General Hooker's attacks at Chancellorsville (May 1863), Lee asked President Davis to cross the border and seek a decisive battle in the North (Murray and Parker, 2020). The Army of Northern Virginia invaded Maryland and Pennsylvania and suffered significant defeats at Gettysburg and Vicksburg (July 1863). At Gettysburg, Lee lost 30% of his army (22,638 soldiers) while at Vicksburg the army surrendered and was captured (McWhiney and Jamieson, 1992). Confederate leadership should have carried out a more conservative strategy as Southern states were not able to afford such great losses.

This analysis does not discuss whether the North's initial demographic and economic superiority was a major factor to explain the Confederacy's defeat. Nonetheless, it is an important element to explain, at least partially, why the South should have stayed on the defense. The Union had a population of about 22 million against the Confederacy's 9 million (Murray and Parker, 2020). If we consider the 3 million slaves, the children, the women and the elderly, the number of people able to fight decreases drastically. Hence, the South did not have as much manpower as the North to replace the eventual

losses within its army. The Confederacy's avoidance of useless battles and a thorough calculation of the risks that could be afforded were key to preserving its military force. Instead, Confederate commanders often took the offensive with the hope of finding a decisive battle that would compel the Union to abandon the conflict. Lee's obstinate assaults caused more than 120,000 deaths, that is 20% of the soldiers of his army (McWhiney and Jamieson 1992). He was the commander that lost most troops in the entire war. Besides, the Confederacy had an area of about 780,000 square miles. Such large territory was difficult to protect even with a much larger army, which the South did not have. Preserving as many men as possible was paramount to augment the South's chances of survival.

President Davis's primary objective should have been exactly that: survival. The strategy that would best fit such a circumstance would have aimed at safeguarding one's territory, if not in its entirety, then at least its critical strong points (capital city, industrial centers, main harbors, fundamental lines of communication). If successful, such an approach would dishearten the enemy and dissuade it from proceeding further in its military operations. As Jomini maintained, the defenders should try their hardest to "retard his progress, to annoy him in his enterprises by multiplying obstacles and difficulties, without, however, compromising one's own army" (2004: 73). Here lies Jomini's subtle appreciation of the notion of "exhaustion". The defenders stonewall their opponent through strenuous resistance by employing the most suitable strategy and tactics. The goal is to disrupt its willingness to continue the fight rather than seek a risky decisive battle. This paper's central claim is therefore that the best strategy for the Confederacy would have been a defense-in-depth strategy, possibly supported by scorched-earth tactics and guerrilla actions.

DEFENSE IN DEPTH: PRESERVING THE ARMY

Defense-in-depth is a relatively modern concept. The term was extensively discussed by the military strategist Edward Luttwak in the 1970s (Jordan et al.,

2016). Luttwak (2016) claims that defense-in-depth has been employed since the ancient Romans, who used it to protect the borders of their vast empire. According to him (2001: 148), a defense-in-depth strategy serves the purpose of building a "frontal zone," that is:

"neither preclusively protected nor abandoned. Instead that zone is selectively defended by self-contained forces that operate as islands of resistance, forming a grid rather than a line [...]. In modern wars, they have been applied in zones of maneuver. Shielded by favorable terrain or artificial barriers, organized and supplied to fight on their own, such islands of resistance serve to hold important passages along major avenues of approach or to shield valuable infrastructures such as airfields and major depots. But if there is to be a chance of victory, their main function must be to offer protected bases from which disruptive incursions and counterattacks can be launched, ideally in coordination with the main forces kept behind the frontal zone defended only in depth."

A good instance was the Hindenburg Line, a fortified multi-sector defensive area behind which the Germans took refuge in 1917 (Hughes, 1999). Its almost geometrical partition in different zones is quite useful to provide a general idea of how defense-in-depth can be employed.

The first zone would have either natural or artificial hurdles to slow down the enemy assault. Natural obstacles may be rocky terrain, a slope, a river, a swamp, and so forth. Man-made obstacles may be barbed wires, landmines, booby traps, *chevaux de frise*, et cetera. The second defensive line would include entrenchments or outposts, or both, where covering forces would concentrate the fire on the limping enemy. This "self-contained" force acts independently from the main defensive line and performs guard and screening tasks (US Army, 2021). If the attackers manage to overcome the 'killing zone', they will enter the third zone. This serves as a buffer area for the infantry to repel the assault and even begin a moderate counterattack if the opponent has been sufficiently impaired by the

first linemen's firepower. The fourth zone constitutes the major line of defense, and it could be located hundreds of meters away from the first zone. The commander could place a further zone of infantry or deploy the reserve that would form the fifth zone. The reserve would act as a last resort, as support or as a counter-attacking unit. The artillery would be positioned in the last sector (US Army, 2021).

Depth is achieved by creating multiple defense zones instead of a single-line formation. If one sector falls, successive ones could cover it. On the contrary, if the enemy breaks the single-line formation, penetration is successful, and defenders may not ever recover their positions. By employing the defense-in-depth strategy, an army accepts the occupation of land by the enemy. However, the "depth of the defense should prevent the enemy from rapidly exploiting its success," as it should fight and defeat several defensive sectors (US Army, 2021). The key is to trade space for time. A brilliant in-depth defense would exasperate the enemy, who would be forced to battle fiercely for one strong point only to discover ahead the existence of many similar other well-protected points. Constant assaults would turn against the attacking adversary as they would end up depleting its resources and crushing its troops' morale. Therefore defense-in-depth is an exhaustion strategy. Besides, the leadership of the defending force can concurrently deploy a scorched-earth tactic when pulling back towards another zone. It is crucial to destroy any equipment, infrastructure, supply center, and line of communications inside the "islands of resistance" that could be captured and utilized by the enemy to gain an advantage. Furthermore, if the defenders retain the "means and moral capacity," cavalry units can be sent to "launch raids against the supply columns, service units, and lesser detachments that the enemy advance itself brings within their reach" (Luttwak, 2001: 149).

As difficult as this strategy seems to appear at first sight, this paper asserts that with a defense-in-depth strategy the Confederacy could have won the Civil War and obtained independence and sovereignty.

One possible location for establishing a zone of deep defense in Virginia would have been the Eastern front, by far the best geographical area to defend. Although protecting the West would not have been impossible, the East was certainly militarily and politically more relevant for the Confederacy. Moreover, compared to the Army of Northern Virginia, Southern armies on the Western front had been struggling throughout the entirety of the war for various reasons (e.g., worse military leadership, fewer objectives of political relevance, larger front to defend) (McPherson, 1996). In the East, the Confederate Army could have taken advantage of natural obstacles, namely the Appalachian Mountains, the swamps in Virginia and North Carolina, and numerous rivers. The crucial strong point is Richmond, the capital. The first frontal zone could have been established a few miles from the North's capital, Washington - for example, at Fredericksburg (about 53 miles distant), where the Confederates won a battle in December 1862. Here, the main hurdle for the enemy would be the crossing of the Rappahannock River. The second zone could extend down to Spotsylvania Courthouse, where trenches or stonewalls could be built. The third could be established south of Lake Anna, where troops could have been positioned along the North Anna River. The main defensive sector, the fourth, should have been a few miles away from Richmond. Here would be located the major concentration of infantry. The reserve would be placed a few miles outside the city, with the artillery positioned around it. The presence of natural barriers, the application of trenches and barbed wires, the heavy firepower of the frontal lines, and the artillery fire would have significantly slowed down the Union Army, with the hope of causing maximum physical and moral damage. The goal would be to ward off the assault and, through moderate counterattacks and incursions by skirmishers and mounted arms, to force the North to retreat towards Washington. Meanwhile, guerrilla warfare could be conducted in the plains, at the border with Maryland. Irregular units and the cavalry could attempt raids to disrupt the main lines of

communications and supply lines. The objective would be to avoid or at least bottleneck reinforcements entering Virginia. The Corps in Tennessee would guard the border with Kentucky, whilst the Cumberland Mountains in western Virginia would offer a good natural barrier to retard potential backup.

There may be many variables that could hamper the entire strategy. Confederate corps units in the West (Tennessee, Mississippi, Alabama, above all) should be able to monitor and defend those territories to prevent an enemy's possible turning movement from, for example, Kentucky and Missouri towards southern Virginia (i.e., to reach the rear of the Confederate Army's deep defense in Virginia). Texas, Arkansas, and Louisiana are not addressed here on purpose: since an effective economy of force is paramount to concentrate forces in Virginia while having a reasonable number of troops to defend part of the West, those territories could be sacrificed to avoid overstretching, as unreasonable as it may seem at first glance. Texas alone has a surface of about 270,000 square miles (Texas Almanac, 2021). It would be a complex task to preserve it without amassing a sizable army. This would mean depriving the Eastern theater - the primary 'island of resistance' - of critical resources and men. Another issue would be the South's naval capabilities. The Confederate navy was far inferior to the Union's, which imposed a blockade all along the coast from the Atlantic to the Gulf of Mexico and beyond (see map in Parker and Murray, 2020: 238). However, despite its industrial disadvantage, the South managed to acquire several ironclads to attempt to break the blockade, without success. Nonetheless, as a scholar pointed out, "[t]he 'home water' ironclads, [...] should be evaluated for their contributions to the overall strategy of defense. In this they achieved some successes" (Still, 1961: 343). The ironclad was befitting shallow waters; therefore, it was used mainly to guard interior sea lines of communication. The same could be done on the rivers of Virginia to provide a further line of defense within the defense-in-depth strategy.

Among other things, morale would be pivotal. Barricading in defensive positions could be frustrating but a strenuous defense, associated with considered counterattacks, could bring about a significant morale boost for the Southern armies. In addition, Confederates were fighting to protect their country against an invader. Many conflicts in history showed that morale is a key factor in shifting the war's outcome in favor of the underdog. In fact, the United States struggled so much in conflicts like the Vietnam War, the Afghanistan War, and the Iraq War because the enemy "successfully prioritized morale" and was willing to fight the invaders tooth and nail, despite the great discrepancy in strength, means and manpower (Karr and Ware, 2022).

CONCLUSION

It is a complex task to investigate whether the South could have won the Civil War and gained independence and sovereignty if its political and military leaders had used other combat strategies. This paper attempts to provide a different perspective from the usual approaches to explaining this conflict's ultimate outcome. In all truth, General Robert E. Lee's annihilation war almost succeeded: his victories in the Seven Days' Battle, Battle of Second Manassas, Battle of Chancellorsville, and the invasions of Maryland and Pennsylvania almost changed the tide of war in the Confederacy's favor (McPherson, 1996). Nonetheless, his passion for the Jominian initiative and aggressive maneuver strategies led to ferocious battles which, in the end, did not bring any significant achievement. Instead, the numerous combats of attrition he engaged in depleted Confederate resources and caused tens of thousands of Southern deaths. This essay analyzes the possibility that the South might have successfully carried out a defense-in-depth strategy, which is linked to a war of exhaustion rather than a war of annihilation. The main Jominian principle of war, that of the importance of interior lines of operations (or communication) and supply lines, endures - only this time, from a defensive perspective. This paper claims that the Confederacy could have taken advantage of

its territorial conformation and lines of communication to build up a deep defense in Virginia, aimed at repelling Union's assaults, halting its advance towards the great goal, Richmond, and wearing out its resources, men, and morale. The final purpose of this strategy would have been to force the North out of the conflict. With careful planning, a thorough economy of force, and great generalship, the strategy could have worked. It would have been extremely difficult for the North to break through the Confederate deep defense, against a highly motivated enemy who knew the battleground better to exploit the terrain in its favor. The offensive military strategies that were so widespread and appreciated before and during the Civil War did, in the end, condemn the Confederacy to defeat (McWhiney and Jamieson, 1984: 47):

"Whether or not Civil War commanders were much influenced by the advice of the theorists, the advice itself was inappropriate for the battlefields of the 1860s. After the middle of the 1850s, many of the major ideas of the theorists became dangerous: the emphasis on the tactical offensive, the idea that vigorous assaults would overcome entrenchments, the high regard for the bayonet, and the reliance on traditional, close-order formations."

Ultimately, this research focuses on military strategy in the American Civil War. However, it does not imply that the concept of defense-in-depth is historically ascribed to past conflicts. Lessons from the past hold valuable insights to study and understand strategy in current conflicts. Cross-disciplinary research by historians, military strategists, and political scientists could provide ideas on how past grand strategies can still have an impact on the way modern conflicts can be fought effectively and successfully in an era characterized by the employment of advanced technologies like artificial intelligence and drones.

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