

Gone with the Wind

Why the South Lost the Civil War

by Richard E. Beringer,
Herman Hattaway, Archer Jones,
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Inevitability is an attribute that historical events take on after the passage of sufficient time. Once the event has happened and enough time has passed for anxieties and doubts about how it was all going to turn out to have faded from memory, the event is seen to have been inevitable. Different outcomes become less and less plausible, and before long what did happen appears to be pretty much what had to happen. To argue about what might have happened or whether and why the presumably inevitable turned out to be thought so strikes many people as a waste of time.

The crust of inevitability formed around the loss of the Lost Cause in the American Civil War is so thick by now as to discourage further curiosity about just why it was lost. Why bother about the reasons for losing if winning is inconceivable and a North America balkanized like South America is unthinkable? Anyway, how could the outcome have been otherwise given the North's vast superiority in manpower, material resources, industries, productivity, financial muscle, railroad mileage, communication facilities, and sea power—all that plus a righteous cause, the cheers of Karl Marx, and the wave of the future? Moreover, what about the

many other of its handicaps was that of having more than a third of its population enslaved, unavailable for military service, of doubtful loyalty, and in need of policing. Did not all this obviously add up to a revolution doomed "inevitably" to failure from the start?

To those who started it and its more objective observers at home and abroad then and since then, however, the war for Southern independence by no means appeared doomed from the start. Quite the contrary. Historical precedent and analogy generally favored the cause of the Confederacy and its hope of establishing its independence. Other movements for independence had overcome much greater disadvantages than the South suffered, and carried through to victory. The

disadvantages of the Confederacy are easily exaggerated and those of the Union commonly minimized or forgotten. It is a mistake to write off the slaves as a dead loss to the South. They made up a vital labor force that released for military service a large number of whites that would otherwise have been unavailable as recruits. The North undoubtedly enjoyed certain superiorities and advantages, but no one of them was conclusive, nor did all of them combined assure the success of Northern arms. The South surrendered in 1865 with men in arms and supplies at hand sufficient for it to continue the struggle indefinitely. Once that is admitted, the essential question of Confederate history—or for that matter Civil War history—becomes, Why was the Lost Cause lost?

Historians have come forward with numerous answers to the question and filled many shelves with their books. Few of them would pin everything on a single cause, but many go to surprising lengths in emphasizing the decisive importance of the one they favor. Among those most commonly favored as decisive are the

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deficiencies of President Jefferson Davis's leadership, errors of military leadership and strategy, mistakes of financial and economic policy generally, as well as shortcomings in transportation, communication, diplomacy, sea power, willpower, nationalism, and morale. And for a long time the most commonly favored of all the reasons for failure was the dogma of states' rights.

The long book under review is therefore not the first to address the subject. It is only the most comprehensive, sophisticated, and well-informed I have read. I would never have thought a committee could write a book, much less a book as valuable and worthwhile as this one, but these four historians did so. They are scattered from North Carolina to North Dakota, but they manage a meeting of minds and seem to write as one. At least no part of their book is identified by author, and while there is some repetition, there are no marked inconsistencies in style or substance. All are experienced Civil War historians with substantial publications in the field, some of them

addressed directly to aspects of the subject treated in this work. Their purpose here is not so much disclosure of new findings as reassessment and analysis of old interpretations and theories. While leaning to multicausal explanation, admitting that all causes are interrelated, and reluctant to cast out any completely, they, like others, nevertheless have a favored single cause to stress and say so plainly in their opening paragraph: "We single out the weakness of southern nationalism as what lawyers would call the proximate cause of Confederate defeat." Arguing such a proposition requires the authors to revise the importance previously assigned to other causes for the defeat as well as to justify their own theory.

Economic explanations have won strong

support all along. The figures from the 1860 census, so overwhelming and so readily quotable, show the North with more than ten times the South's industrial workers and with nine tenths of the nation's industrial production. At the beginning of the war the North produced twenty times as much pig iron as the South, twenty-four times as many railroad locomotives, thirty-two times as many firearms, and more than five hundred times as much general hardware. Why didn't Southerners read the census and lay down the few arms they had?

For one thing the census figures of 1860 do not show how rapidly those economic disparities diminished and how quickly the Confederate government effected a transition from an agrarian to an industrial economy, nationalized productive power for war materiel, and in some ways outdid the North in organizing for

total war. Provisions were rarely plentiful, and footgear was indeed in short supply, but that was owing more to failures in transportation than in production. What negative effects the South's economic liabilities had were largely indirect, contributing to the decline of public morale. The authors conclude that "no Confederate army lost a major engagement because of the lack of arms, munitions, or other essential supplies," that "economic shortcomings did not play a major role in Confederate defeat," and that "the deficiency lay elsewhere."

Then what of military shortcomings as the explanation? The proportion of space given military narrative in most histories of the war surely suggests the assumption (tacit at least) that the answer is to be found on the battlefields. And through-

out the war popular perception of the fortunes of either cause and its prospects derived mainly from combat figures and from reports on forces that retreated. The authors of the present work declare that the large space they give to military operations is much more than "the importance of military factors

in Confederate defeat seems to merit" and is required only to correct the mistakes of overemphasis on military causes by other historians.

The historians the authors criticize are in agreement only on the decisiveness of military causes—not on which military causes were decisive. Much of the controversy on that score hinges on the teachings of two European military theorists of the Napoleonic era, Karl von Clausewitz and Antoine Henri Jomini, and on the way their doctrines were applied or not applied by Confederate and Union generals. So often do the names of the two European writers come up in this discussion that one sometimes gets the impression that Clausewitz and Jomini were second in importance in the Civil War only to Grant and Lee. The authors agree on the relevance of doctrines advocated by the two theorists but do not concede the influence often attributed to them (or to the ignorance of them) on the outcome of the war.

Another major target (one of several) is an ethnic interpretation that attributes the South's defeat to an addiction to an ancient Celtic tradition of heedless, headlong, frontal attack. Attacking instead of defending, the Celts in gray suffered unsustainable casualties. On this interpretation, "Southerners lost the Civil War because they were too Celtic and their opponents were too English."¹ The present critics of this ethnic theory have no trouble showing that statistics support neither the thesis that the two sides differed in their offensive-mindedness nor the difference in casualties attributed to this cause. By the end of the war the Confederacy

By the end of the war the Confederacy had indeed lost one third of its available men. But it still had a potential armed force considerably larger than the number of men under arms at any one time. It was not a matter of numbers but of morale. The Confederacy kept the nominal strength of its army at 400,000 men almost to the end, but its actual numbers were being depleted by absentees and deserters.

General Lee once said of his army,

"There never were such men in an army before. They will go anywhere and do anything"—so long as they were properly led and their morale lasted. And it outlasted astonishing odds. The high-water mark may have been that moment when Pickett awaited Longstreet's signal to attack the Union forces at Gettysburg and, in Faulkner's words, it was "still not yet two o'clock on that July afternoon in 1863." If so it took a mighty long time for the flood to recede, twenty-one months in fact. But when Lee went to meet Grant at Appomattox there were still formidable Confederate forces under arms and the stuff of war was available. What was lacking was the will to continue the fight.

Too many theories of why the South lost exist to be adequately treated even in a book the size of this one. The authors square away at some, brush over others lightly, and neglect some almost entirely. A short chapter is deemed enough to handle the claims for the Union's naval blockade. The Union Navy had grown from about ninety warships in 1861 to more than seven hundred by April 1865. Impressed by this growth and the number of blockade runners destroyed or captured, several historians have held the blockade to be decisive in the strangulation of the Confederacy. These claims notwithstanding,

¹Grady McWhiney and Perry D. Jamieson, *Attack and Die: Civil War Military Tactics and the Southern Heritage* (University of Alabama Press, 1982).

our present critics find that "considerable evidence indicates that the blockade did not represent a major factor." It proved to be so full of holes that 84 percent of those who attempted to run the blockade to Wilmington, North Carolina got through, and a larger percentage to the Gulf ports in the last year of the war. It is clear that the Confederates got whatever they needed through the blockade and a lot they could have done without.

Among the debated causes of defeat receiving less attention here than is usually given are the relative genius of available Confederate military talent, the short supply of competent senior commanders, and Richmond's neglect of the western theater of war. Among political aspects of the struggle the importance, pro and con, normally attached to the tragic figure of President Davis is rather underplayed. In view of the stress placed by the authors on the failure of the Confederates to take to the hills and resort to guerrilla warfare, the presence of four million

slaves and their significance for such an undertaking seem rather lightly mentioned, though the slavery issue receives attention elsewhere.

From beginning to end the book places prime emphasis and gives most space to "intangible sources" of military strength and causes of weakness. Among the latter are some believed to have been exaggerated in the past, and of these none has received more attention than the dogma of states' rights. The importance long given this explanation is rightly attributed to an early study by Frank L. Owsley,² which held that state governments, particularly those of North Carolina and Georgia, clung so dogmatically to states' rights that they frustrated the central government in its efforts to conscript enough men and gather enough supplies to fight the war.

Under criticism. States' rights fanatics did not prevent the Confederacy from creating a powerful central government strong enough to impose economic control and mobilize military forces.³ The two states most blamed for states' rights obstructionism, North Carolina and Georgia, furnished their quota of troops to the Confederate Army. The studies cited in this book show that the states' rights discord "not only was not a decisive factor in Confederate defeat, but that it was, instead, an advantage in the war," since it was responsible for a valuable reserve of state troops to reinforce Confederate armies and replace them for coastal defense duties.

The inclination of the authors is to lump discord over states' rights with other evidence of defeatism such as Southern Unionism, peace movements, draft resistance, disloyalty, and troop desertions as "symptoms" rather than as basic causes. It is possible to make a case for this position. But where symptoms reach such menacing proportions as the desertion of 40 percent of the Confederate armies east of the Mississippi, as happened in the fall and winter of 1864-1865, one reflects that the patient

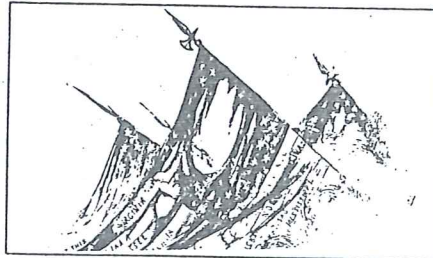
²Frank L. Owsley, *State Rights in the Confederacy* (University of Chicago Press, 1925).

³Paul D. Escott, *After Secession: Jefferson Davis and the Failure of Confederate Nationalism* (Louisiana State University Press, 1978); Emory M. Thomas, *The Confederacy as a Revolutionary Experience* (Prentice-Hall, 1971); Raimondo Luraghi, *The Rise and Fall of the Plantation South* (Franklin Watts, 1978).

sometimes expires of symptoms while the doctor is searching for the cause.

Call them symptoms or something else, the prevalent defeatism, desertions, loss of will, and decline of morale were surely interrelated, and what they had in common might deserve to be called the basic cause of failure. The present authors prefer to give this the name of deficient nationalism. They do not mean nationalism as a style of government, or the ability to develop a strong central government, but rather "a feeling of oneness, that almost mystical sense of nationhood." Missing was a consensus on why they fought, what they stood for, and why they were a distinctive people and should win independence.

Real Southern nationalists there were, but they were a small percentage of the population. From the ranks of real nationalists had to be excluded the slaves, the discontented whites of Appalachia, and the Unionists. Southern Unionists felt forced to choose between abolitionism and secession, both "instigated by the Devil," said one of them. Revolution was anathema to them all, and yet that was what they were engaged in. Some Unionists thought the old Union offered the best protection of slavery and the firmest bulwark of stability. What most commonly inspired secession was the mutual fear of



a society without slavery and white supremacy, but that was not the stuff of mystical oneness with which a people withstands the agonies of civil war and

the incompleteness of secession and the limits of distinctiveness are suggested by what was retained of the old nation by the new. Seceders took along with them their common history, of course, and with it the common heroes, whose images adorned Confederate postage stamps, currency, and icons as much as those of the Union. Confederates appropriated the federal constitution almost verbatim, along with the body of old laws, and their flags all retained stars and bars and the original colors, even though in new designs. Their great seal bore the equestrian image of the Father of his Country. Their nationality was in large

part borrowed and shared, and unless nationalism is defined by head count the North had little more claim to it or to freedom from its own exclusive sectional interests than did the South. As David Potter put the paradox, North and South were "separated by a common nationalism," each with its own image of the Union unshared by the other. And James M. McPherson suggests that perhaps it was the North "that departed from the main stream of historical development."⁴

In a time of great piety, religion was a vital source of morale on both sides. It played a peculiarly important role in the South for eventually it had to substitute for military triumph as a stimulus of will and a builder of morale. The message of the clergy was that God wore gray and

⁴David M. Potter, *The South and the Sectional Conflict* (Louisiana State University Press, 1968); James M. McPherson, "Antebellum Southern Exceptionalism: A New Look at an Old Question" *Civil War History* 29 (September 1983), pp. 230-244.

would favor the Confederate cause unless his people proved unworthy. As defeats piled up, however, inescapable logic caused Confederates to question their worthiness, their institutions, their goals, and eventually the war itself. With this turn of events religion did more to undermine than to sustain morale and plunged believers into demoralization.

In exploring the psychological plight and mind-twisting confusion of the Confederates, the authors of *Why the South Lost* make use of the theory of "cognitive dissonance"—the psychological discomfort resulting from irreconcilable information, beliefs, plans, or goals on which important decisions are based. The greater the emotional commitment and investment in the decision the greater the dissonance and the more painful and intolerable the original decision becomes. When the decision at issue justifies slavery, rebellion, war, and eventually a drastic change in war aims, it creates profound dissonance. Under pressure of such cognitive dissonance Southerners resorted to what we would now see as Orwellian true-speak and double-think. They equated bondage for slaves with freedom for themselves, rebellion from the Union with loyalty to the Constitution, and war became for some the only way to peace.

Important to this interpretation is the assumption of feelings of guilt over a war for the defense of slavery. These writers

do not take an extreme position on the prevalence of guilt, but believe that the number of slaveholders who were troubled by pangs of conscience was large enough to have a far-reaching effect on the war effort. It might go far toward explaining why Confederates lost a war they had excellent prospects of winning and unconsciously came to regard a Union victory and slave emancipation as acceptable or even desirable.

military reverses indicated God's disfavor with their cause, so that the religion that once supported morale now sapped confidence and inspired fatalism about defeat. Even Jefferson Davis admitted that "our sins have merited and received grievous chastisement." The authors point out that "In true circular fashion, this logic could only lead back to the further confession that the South did not deserve God's favor, and, if it did not, sin and guilt were the reasons." A nationalism founded on an institution that inspired guilt in many citizens was not calculated to sustain the war effort past the mounting losses of late 1864.

Then to compound the confusion and make cognitive dissonance national policy, the Confederate government reversed fundamental war aims. Slavery, originally declared by Vice-President Alexander Stephens to be the "cornerstone" of the new nation, was later replaced by independence as the true aim of the war; and slaves were recruited as front-line soldiers and promised emancipation. When Lincoln did that, Confederates were outraged: now they were forced to think the unthinkable themselves—and do it. No longer could they fight for both slavery and independence, but one or the other, and the latter became the official choice. More logical consequences followed: (1) if slaves were fit to fight, were they not fit for freedom? and (2) if a basic war goal were surrendered, why continue the war? Especially if it was a

⁵The authors acknowledge indebtedness for ideas on deficient nationalism to Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Imperiled Union: Essays on the Background of the Civil War* (Oxford University Press, 1980).

war God had frowned upon, a war fought for a cause their president had abandoned, and proving to be one their own consciences sometimes questioned?

Still they fought on. There was more logic to be resolved, another war aim worth more bloodshed. For to confess emancipation to be right, slavery wrong, and the war unjustified would to some be to dishonor the graves of thousands and

admit they had been sacrificed in vain and for an unworthy cause. "Think of all those young lives sacrificed!" wrote Mary Chesnut. "The best and bravest of one generation swept away!" She had doubted the worthiness of their cause from the start and now thought "their lives had been given up in vain." Unable to endure such an indictment of the past, others continued the fight rather than dishonor the dead they had sacrificed. They fought, they said, for defense of the South's honor.

Honor as war aim paradoxically removed a barrier to peace, for honor might be won without independence, indeed without slavery and without victory. And peace could resolve much intolerable dissonance: end a war that had lost its justification, jettison the burden of slavery few admitted to regret losing. Peace could stop the dissonance between Christian precepts and slave property and the nagging of guilt for those who felt it, as well as lead to reunion with the nation that their fathers founded and many of them now regretted ever leaving. For the majority the appeal of peace and surrender surpassed that of war and improbable victory. Particularly since the only warfare feasible for the Confederates toward the end was guerrilla war, and that would destroy the social order as

years or so after the surrender the peace took on aspects of what the white majority of the South regarded as a violation or betrayal of the peace terms—the initiation of Radical Reconstruction to protect the rights of the freedmen. The resisting whites responded by resorting to a kind of warfare they rejected at the end of the Civil War, that is, guerrilla warfare mixed with terrorism. They pursued these tactics so successfully that they won their aims and defeated those of the Reconstructionists. They did this after their armies had laid down their arms and their territory was completely subject to Union military occupation and the supremacy of federal law, under the new constitutional amendments written to assure and protect the costly fruits of the Union victory in the Civil War. The Southerners succeeded in their peacetime weakness where they had failed in their costly wartime struggle. "The South surrendered at Appomattox," as the carpetbagger novelist Albion W. Tourgée put it, but "the North has been surrendering ever since."

The rebels were able to bring off this tour de force by changing their goals from unacceptable war aims to peace aims that dominant opinion in the North

actually shared. They even swore that defense of slavery had never been their purpose. Perish the thought! "The people of the South," declared the Confederate general Henry R. Jackson, "flew to arms not to perpetuate but to imperil their peculiar institution—not to save, but to sacrifice property in defense of honor—nay, to sacrifice life itself rather than tamely submit to insolent wrong." Honor, not slavery; states' rights, not rebellion; white supremacy, not an outmoded peculiar institution, were their

true objectives. Variations on the same theme were played in *The Lost Cause Regained* (1868) by Edward A. Pollard of Richmond, chief wartime critic of Jefferson Davis, who now contended that since white supremacy and not slavery was its real war aim, the South "had not lost her cause, but merely developed its higher significance." His mortal wartime opponent Davis chimed in eventually to say that while the cause was "buried deeply" it was "not lost" after all.

The fact was that the racial views of the white South were widely shared in the North and met with no insuperable opposition from those Northerners who disclaimed them. States' rights were closely related to the defense and enforcement of those racial views and for other reasons as well meant almost as much to Northerners as to Southerners. To snatch honor from the jaws of defeat was no small achievement for the tattered Confederates to bring off. They had fought harder against more formidable opposition than Americans ever had, and the heroes of their performance won reluctant admiration in the North. Restored states' rights and secure white supremacy, together with refurbished honor—all three of the South's redefined causes were indeed regained. It was no idle boast that the Lost Cause was really "not lost"—not entirely anyway.

Confederates lost the war all right, for whatever reason. But they believed they had lost it with honor, and they salvaged two essential goals of the cause in the process. For these goals, states' rights and white supremacy, they gained formal acknowledgement wrung from a national crisis in the Compromise of 1877, the longest-lasting sectional compromise in

shared the victory and the North to have shared the defeat in the Civil War. Both shared confusion and frustration.

Finally a word about the place of this American war in history. In fading memories of college survey courses in world history the war does not figure notably. And as usually presented in histories of the United States the Civil War is burdened so heavily with civil religion and national piety that its symbolism obscures its true nature. With Abraham Lincoln as its chief prophet, its martyr, and its saint, the Union nationalism bred of the war furnished the North what the South lacked. It may even have provided the margin of difference that determined the outcome of the war. This illustrates the uses that nationalism makes of history, but it does not endow the Civil War with its full meaning or give the measure of its place in history.

For historical events of great magnitude and complexity Americans have been taught to look abroad for something that happened far away and long ago. For all the 600,000 lives it cost, their Civil War has grown too familiar, its images too marmoreal, its outcome too "inevitable" to command the awe and evoke the mystery and enigma expected of history on the grand scale. The questions raised and the complexities confronted in *Why the South Lost the Civil War* serve to restore some of the obscured or overlooked components. It is well to be reminded of how richly endowed those tragic years were with complexity and enigma, with ambiguity and irony, and with the headlong downhill rush of human irrationality. For these qualities if none other it is not easy to find a match in other historical events, however far away and long ago. □

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