

In tactical and strategic terms, what problems faced the generals of the American Civil War, which those of the Napoleonic era did not confront?

About fifty years separate the Napoleonic era and the American Civil war, but both conflicts may be seen as pivotal moments in the history of war and the history of the continents where they occurred, that is, Europe and America. However, they were radically different conflicts, be it in terms of strategy or of tactics, although North and South, when they entered the war, were still largely influenced by a military paradigm shaped by Napoleonic ideas and the writing of theorists such as Jomini or Clausewitz¹. The Civil War generals on both side were facing problems that their Napoleonic counterparts would not have faced: politically, economically, in the quantity and quality of their armies, technologically (military or otherwise) and geographically. Both sides had to adjust their strategic and tactical thinking after discovering, at a terrible price, the changed reality of war and the battlefield. This essay will start from the strategic level and proceed to the tactical one, contrasting the problematic of the American Civil War with the situation during the Napoleonic Wars.

The political situation faced by generals of the Civil War was radically different from the one in which their Napoleonic colleagues operated. Both sides, North as South, were democracies, whose president was a civilian, unlike the First Empire, which was essentially a military dictatorship whose leader, Napoleon Bonaparte, cumulated the

¹ Fuller, *Grant & Lee*, ch.I. or Fuller, *The Conduct of War*, ch.IV.

functions of head of State and general-in-chief². This extreme centralisation of power resulted in unity of command and consistency in the planning and conduct of war³. By contrast, generals in the Civil War had to obey their Commander-in-Chief, which on both sides would have been enlightened amateurs, although Jefferson Davis had the advantage of a West Point education and an actual experience of war⁴. As Fuller argues, however, this advantage was largely blunted by the subservience of Davis' general-in-chief, Lee⁵. Because of their democratic nature, North and South had to take into account political pressure, which was virtually inexistent in a dictatorship. This pressure often forced the generals into combat prematurely, as was the case for instance for the Union in the Battle of First Bull Run (or First Manassas)⁶. It also forced them to maintain troops around the capitals, Washington and Richmond, the political hearts and legislative centres. Political accountability and intrigue also resulted, at least in the first phase of the war, in a high rotation of generals at the head of armies, which did not help strategic consistency, and also encouraged individualism, or even disobedience, an unthinkable situation in Imperial armies. Finally, democracy had the disadvantage of allowing freedom of speech and free press, unlike the Empire⁷; in the North especially, the Peace Party, the 'Copperheads' were a potent political force⁸, which almost prevented Lincoln's re-election in 1864⁹. It is significant that both sides had to suspend civil liberties and restrain freedom of the press at some point during the war.

² See Forrest, A. 'The Nation in Arms I: The French Wars', ch.4, *The Oxford History of Modern War*.

³ Fuller, *The Conduct of War*, pp.44-48.

⁴ McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, ch.10, 'Amateurs Go to War'.

⁵ Fuller, *Grant & Lee*, ch.III, 'The Personality of Lee'.

⁶ *The American Civil War*, pp.38-40.

⁷ Forrest, A. 'The Nation in Arms I', ch.4, *The Oxford History of Modern War*.

⁸ McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, ch.20, 'Fire in the Rear'.

⁹ Ibid. ch.25, 'After Four Years of Failure'.

Napoleon's grand strategy was essentially a defensive one: protect the Empire by destroying his enemies' armies. His main opponent was England, the financial powerhouse behind the successive coalitions that he had to face¹⁰. The whole nation was united behind its leader, with a determination and a motivation steeled by the constant threat from its neighbours since 1792 and years of propaganda and indoctrination. War was expected to be total, with absolute results: opposing armies had to be destroyed and their nations conquered. In the American Civil War, there was no such simplicity. The North's main goal was to restore the Union, the South's to defend its independence or at least guarantee the respect of its traditions, including slavery. It was expected to be a limited war, with quick and decisive victories bringing the opponent to the negotiation table¹¹, which explains why both sides initially tried to move directly against the opponent's capital. It was a civil war, between people sharing the same language, culture and history, not a war between traditionally hostile nations.

The quality and quantity of the armies were also completely different. The armies of Napoleon were huge compared to his adversaries; between 1800 and 1814, 2 million Frenchmen were called up, or 7% of the French population¹². Because European nations had regularly been at war during the eighteenth century, they all had large professional armies. France, the most populous country (30 million people) at the time, would have had the largest even before 1789, around 200,000 regular troops, which the revolutionaries promptly increased to 700,000 by 1794¹³. Just before the Civil War, the

¹⁰ Fuller, *The Conduct of War*, ch.III, 'Napoleonic Warfare'.

¹¹ Fuller, *The Conduct of War*, ch.VI, 'The American Civil War 1861-1865'.

¹² *The Oxford History of Modern War*, p.65.

¹³ Ibid.

United States had a standing army numbering only 17,000¹⁴, for a population of 31 million¹⁵! North and South had to mobilise an army from scratch, whereas in the Napoleonic era all European nations would have had well-trained and sizeable standing armies. Those armies, after the resumption of hostilities following the Peace of Amiens in 1803 would have been at war since 1792; they therefore included large numbers of veterans amongst the rank and file. Napoleon, moreover, developed an elite corps of officers largely based on meritocracy; his victories were based on effective manoeuvring by a well-trained, highly disciplined and motivated army¹⁶. In the American Civil War, the North inherited most of the soldiers, and the South most of the officers of the former army of the United States: the problem of the Union, initially, was therefore its limited number of competent officers, whereas the Confederation lacked disciplined soldiers¹⁷.

The Industrial Revolution and especially the railroad and the steamboat had tremendous impacts on the way war would be waged, especially considering the geography of the theatre. Napoleonic wars were essentially limited to Western Europe – Napoleon’s incursion into the immensity of Russia would lead to his demise. By comparison, the American Civil War was fought on a much larger area. For Napoleon, famously, an army marched on its stomach: supplies were vital, and he would solve that problem by having his army live off the country and by keeping it in on the move, or by maintaining a close supply centre in the rear¹⁸. Fifty years later, railroad tracks and rivers

¹⁴ Fuller, *The Conduct of War*, p.103.

¹⁵ *The American Civil War*, p.32.

¹⁶ Blaufard, *The French Army*, ch.6 ‘Napoleon’s improbable synthesis: monarchy and meritocracy in the reconstruction of the officer corps, 1799-1815’.

¹⁷ Fuller, *Grant & Lee*, pp.51-56.

¹⁸ Fuller, *The Conduct of War*, ch. III, ‘Napoleonic Warfare’.

would become major axes of supplies and troop deployment. Controlling major points on the Mississippi, such as Memphis, Vicksburg, or Memphis, or railroad connections such as Nashville, Chattanooga, Atlanta or Petersburg became more important than trying to outmanoeuvre the opponent's army in the open¹⁹. In a conflict where both sides were initially reluctant to live off the country – the South because it was fighting on its own territory, the North because it did not plan a war of attrition – maintaining communication and supply lines was vital.

Last but not least, tactics would have to be radically changed to adjust to the most important innovation on the battlefield: the rifle. Rifled weapons and guns gave an overwhelming advantage to the defensive side. According to Colonel Lyman: “Put a man in a hole, and a good battery on a hill behind him, and he will beat off three times his number, even if he is not a very good soldier²⁰.” In Napoleonic times, smoothbore fusils had limited range and precision, about 100 yards. They would be used mostly in volley fire, during an assault, and in the following bayonet charge as shock weapons²¹. The artillery was used in the offensive, to open a breach in the enemy lines, which could then be exploited by a cavalry charge and the infantry²². Rifles, with a range of about 1000 yards, made such tactics obsolete, especially when combined with trenches and fortifications, although neither the Union nor the Confederation generals fully understood their full power²³. Frontal assaults against entrenched positions, as done by the Union at

¹⁹ See map I in Fuller, *Grant & Lee*, p.325.

²⁰ Quoted in Fuller, *Grant & Lee*, pp.45-46.

²¹ *The Oxford History of Modern War*, pp.68-69.

²² Fuller, *The Conduct of War*, ch.III.

²³ Fuller, *Grant & Lee*, pp.267-272.

Fredericksburg²⁴, or Pickett's charge at Gettysburg²⁵, proved suicidal. Cavalry charges were ruled out, and the role of cavalry evolved: it was used in raids against the enemy's lines of supply and communication instead, or as mounted infantry. Gradually, as the war progressed, both sides learned to combine entrenchments and manoeuvres: the rifle and the spade replaced the fusil and the bayonet²⁶. This, more than the other innovations such as ironclads, submarines, torpedoes, or observation balloons, was the critical tactical difference between this conflict and the Napoleonic wars.

At strategic as well as at tactical level, it seems obvious that the American Civil War had little in common with the Napoleonic Wars. Unfortunately, Union and Confederate generals did not have that hindsight, and their strategies and tactics were firmly based on the lessons gleaned from the study of Napoleon's battles. They paid their mistake with an unprecedented level of casualties, and only late in the war did they adjust their strategies and tactics: the North by switching to total war and destruction of enemy infrastructure (Sherman's 'March to the Sea'), the South by focusing on a defensive strategy, both sides by using trench warfare. Even worse is the fact that those bloody lessons were completely ignored by the European powers, or dismissed as the consequence of incompetent, amateurish armies. They would pay an even higher price for their absurd reliance on the obsolete bayonet charge.

²⁴ *The American Civil War*, p.69.

²⁵ *Ibid.* p.171.

²⁶ Fuller, *The Conduct of War*, ch. VI.

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