Unit 3: Lecture - Why the Confederacy Lost

The following essay entitled “American Victory, American Defeat” by James M. McPherson is taken from Why the Confederacy Lost, edited by Gabor S. Boritt.  I have slightly excerpted the material.

Efforts to explain the causes of Confederate defeat in the Civil War have generated a great deal of controversy over the past century and a quarter.  In fact, dozens of different interpretations have come forth.  This suggests that a definitive answer is not possible.  That will not stop us from trying to come up with one, though – nor should it.

Most interpretations fall into one of two categories: internal or external.  Internal explanations focus mainly or entirely on the Confederacy, and usually phrase the question as “Why the South Lost.”  External interpretations look at both the Union and Confederacy, and often phrase it as “Why the North Won.”  No matter which approach they take, most studies assume, at least implicitly, that Union victory was inevitable.  My analysis of these interpretations should make clear that I think an external approach more sensible but that I do not regard the outcome to have been inevitable.

One of the most durable and perhaps most popular explanations for Northern victory in the war as a whole was advanced by Robert E. Lee himself in his farewell address to his soldiers at Appomattox: “The Army of Northern Virginia has been compelled to yield to overwhelming numbers and resources.”  This interpretation enabled southerners to preserve their pride in the courage and skill of Confederate soldiers, to reconcile defeat with their sense of honor, even to maintain faith in the righteousness of their cause while admitting that it had been lost.  The Confederacy, in other words, lost the war not because it fought badly, or because its soldiers lacked courage, or because its cause was wrong, but simply because the enemy had more men and guns.  As one proud Virginian expressed it: “They never whipped us, Sir, unless they were four to one.  If we had had anything like a fair chance, or less disparity of numbers, we should have won our cause and established our independence.”  (David Herbert Donald, ed., Why the North Won the Civil War. Ix.)

Many Yankees echoed this overwhelming-numbers-and-resources argument.  While northerners believed they had won because they fought for a better cause, many of them were also ready to agree with Napoleon’s maxim that God is on the side of the biggest battalions.

Most recently, Shelby Foote reiterated this thesis in his own inimitable fashion.  “The North fought that war with one hand behind its back,” he told Ken Burns on camera in the PBS documentary “The Civil War.”  If necessary, added Foote, “the North simply would have brought that other arm out from behind its back.  I don’t think the South ever had a chance to win that war.”  Here was inevitability in its starkest form.

Some southerners, however, began to question this overwhelming-numbers-and-resources thesis soon after the war, and by the twentieth century most of them rejected it.  For while this explanation did credit to Confederate skill and courage in holding out for so long against such great odds, it seemed to do little credit to their intelligence.  After all, southerners in 1861 were well aware of their disadvantages in numbers and resources.  Yet they went to war confident of victory.  Were they simple-minded?  Irrational?  Inexcusably arrogant?

As they reflected on this matter, numerous southerners and historians came to the conclusion that overwhelming-numbers-and-resources were not the cause of northern victory after all.  History offered many examples of a society winning a war against greater odds than the Confederacy faced.  For Americans the outstanding example, of course, was the war of independence against mighty Britain.  Other precedents also came easily to southern minds in 1861: the Netherlands against Spain in the sixteenth century; Greece against the Ottoman Empire in the 1820’s.  In our own post-Vietnam generation we are familiar with the truth that victory does not necessarily ride with the biggest battalions.

In the Civil War the Confederacy wages a strategically defensive war to protect its territory from conquest and preserve its armies from annihilation.  To “win” that kind of war, Confederate armies did not have to invade and conquer the North; they needed only to hold out long enough to force the North to the conclusion that the price of conquering the South and annihilating its armies was too high, as Britain had concluded in 1781 and as the United States concluded with respect to Vietnam in 1972.  Most southerners thought in 1861 that their resources were more than sufficient to win on these terms.

It can be said that the overwhelming-numbers-and resources argument has lost considerable favor among historians.

Another interpretation might be termed the “internal alienation” argument.  In recent years a great deal of scholarship has focused on two large groups in the Confederacy that were or became alienated from the war effort: nonslaveholding whites, and slaves.  The nonslaveholders constituted two-thirds of the Confederacy’s white population.  Many of them, especially in mountainous and upcountry regions of small farms and few slaves, opposed secession in 1861.  They formed significant enclaves of unionism in western Virginia where they created a new Union state, in east Tennessee, where they carried out guerrilla operations against the Confederacy and contributed many soldiers to the Union army; and elsewhere in the upland South.  Other yeoman farmers who supported the Confederacy at the outset, and fought for it, became alienated over time because of disastrous inflation, shortages of food and salt, high taxes, and a growing conviction that they were risking their lives and property in a war to defend slavery.  Clauses in the conscription law that allowed those who could afford it to buy a substitute and exempted from the draft one white man on every plantation with twenty or more slaves lent force to the bitter cry that it was a rich man’s war but a poor man’s fight.  Many soldiers’ families suffered severe hardship and malnutrition as food shortages and inflation worsened.  Bread riots occurred in parts of the South during 1863 – most notably in Richmond itself.  Numerous soldiers deserted from the army to return home and support their families.  Several historians have argued that this seriously weakened the Confederate war effort and brought eventual defeat.

The alienation of many southern whites was matched by the alienation of a large portion of that two-fifths of the southern population that was black and slave.  Slaves were essential to the Confederate war effort.  They provided a majority of the labor force.  They made it possible for the South to mobilize three-quarters of its white men of military age into the armed forces – compared with about half in the North.  Thus slavery was at one level a source of strength to the Confederacy.  But at another level it was a source of weakness.  Most slaves who reflected on their stake in the war believed that a northern victory would bring freedom.  Tens of thousands voted with their feet for the union by escaping to Yankee lines, where the North converted their labor power and eventually their military manpower into a Union asset.  This leakage of labor from the Confederacy and the unrest of slaves who remained behind retarded southern economic efficiency and output.  It also drained manpower from the Confederate army by keeping some white men at home to control the increasingly restless slave population.

The alienation of these two large blocs of the southern people seems therefore a plausible explanation for Confederate defeat.  But some caveats are in order.  The alienated elements of the American population during the Revolution were probably larger than in the south during the Civil War.  Many slaves ran away to the British, while the Loyalist whites undoubtedly weakened the American cause more than the disaffected nonslaveholders weakened the Confederate cause.

Perhaps the most important weakness of the internal alienation thesis is that same fallacy of reversibility mentioned earlier.  Large blocs of northern people were bitterly, aggressively alienated from the Lincoln administration’s war policies.  Their opposition weakened and at times threatened to paralyze the Union war effort.  Perhaps one-third of the border-state whites actively supported the Confederacy while many of the remainder were at best lukewarm unionists, especially after emancipation became a Republican war aim.  Guerrilla warfare behind Union lines in these pro-Confederate regions occurred on a far larger scale than in the unionist areas behind Confederate lines.

If the Confederacy had its bread riots, the Union had its draft riots, which were much more violent and threatening.  If many soldiers deserted from Confederate armies, a similarly large percentage deserted from Union armies until the autumn of 1864, when the Confederate rate increased because of a perception that the war was lost and further sacrifice was useless.  Note here that this rising southern desertion rate was primarily a result of defeat, not a cause.  Thus internal alienation provides no more of a sufficient explanation for Confederate defeat than internal conflict, because the similar and probably greater alienation within the North neutralized this factor.

Another internal explanation for Confederate defeat has been around for a long time and has recently resurfaced in a number of studies.  This one can be described as the “lack of will” thesis.  It holds that the Confederacy could have won if the southern people had possessed the determination, the will to make the sacrifices and the total effort necessary to achieve victory.  Three principal themes have emerged in this lack-of-will thesis.

First is an argument that the Confederacy lacked a strong sense of nationalism.  However, Confederates regarded themselves as the true heirs of American nationalism, custodians of the ideals for which their forefathers of 1776 had fought.  It was the Yankees who had repudiated these ideals.  When the Black Republicans took over the government, southerners departed to form a new government that would conserve the genuine heritage of the old America.  Confederate nationalism was American nationalism purified of malign Yankee domination.  That is why confederate money and stamps portrayed great Americans; that is why the Confederate Constitution retained most provisions of the United States Constitution.  The South, said Jefferson Davis in his first to the Confederate Congress after Fort Sumter, was fighting for the same “just course” of self-government that their revolutionary fathers had fought for.

In some ways, confederate nationalism was if anything stronger than its Union counterpart.  In their letters and diaries, southerners expressed a fiercer patriotism, a more passionate dedication to “the Cause,” a greater determination to “die in the last ditch” than northerners did.  A Union officer who was captured in the battle of Atlanta on July 22, 1864, and spent the rest of the war in southern prisons, wrote in his diary on October 4 that from what he had seen in the South “the End of the War… is some time hence as the Idea of the Rebs giving up until they are completely subdued is all Moonshine they submit to privations that would not be believed unless seen.” (David M. Smith, ed., “The Civil War Diary of Colonel John Henry Smith,” Iowa Journal of History, 47, April 1949, 164.)  Without question, the southern people persisted through far greater hardships and suffering than northern people experienced.  Northerners almost threw in the towel in the summer of 1864 because of casualty rates that southerners had endured for more than two years.  In the light of this, it seems difficult to accept the thesis of lack of will stemming from weak nationalism as a cause of Confederate defeat.

A second theme in the lack-of-will interpretation is what might be termed the “guilt thesis” – the suggestion that many southern whites felt moral qualms about slavery which undermined their will to win a war fought to preserve slavery.  The South, wrote historian Kenneth M. Stampp, suffered from a “weakness of morale” caused by “widespread doubts and apprehensions about the validity of the Confederate cause.”  Defeat rewarded these guilt-ridden southerners with “a way to rid themselves of the moral burden of slavery,” so a good many of them “perhaps unconsciously, welcomed…defeat.” (Causes of the Civil War.)

In any case, most Confederates did not think of themselves as fighting for slavery but for independence.  If slavery weakened southern morale to the point of causing defeat, should it not have weakened American morale in the Revolution of 1776 even more?  After all, Americans of that generation felt considerably more guilt about slavery than did southerners of 1861.

There is a significant difference between lack of will and loss of will.  A people at war whose armies are destroyed or captured, whose railroads are wrecked, factories and cities burned, ports seized, countryside occupied, and crops laid waste quite naturally lose their will to continue the fight because they have lost the means to do so.

This is the right way to put it.  It places the cause-effect relationship in the correct order – military defeat caused loss of will, not vice versa.

Let’s go back to the overwhelming-numbers-and-resources interpretation, which at least had the merit of recognizing the large external aspect of Confederate defeat.  But the deficiencies of that interpretation remain.  Another category of analysis with an external dimension, though, might seem to resolve the dilemma of explanation.  This one focuses on leadership.  Numerous historians both northern and southern – and British as well, for they have paid a lot of attention to the American Civil War – have argued that the North developed superior leadership which became the main factor in ultimate Union victory.  It deals mainly with three levels of leadership.

First, generalship.  A fairly broad consensus exists that the Confederacy benefited from better generalship in the first half of the war, particularly in the eastern theater and at the tactical level.  But by 1864 a group of generals including Grant, Sherman, and Sheridan had emerged to top commands in the North with a firm grasp of the need for coordinated offensives in all theaters, a concept of the total-war strategy necessary to win this conflict, the skill to carry out the strategy, and the relentless, even ruthless determination to keep pressing it despite a high cost in casualties until the South surrendered unconditionally.  In this interpretation the Confederacy had brilliant tactical leaders like Lee, Jackson, Forrest, and others who also showed strategic talent in limited theaters.  But the South had no generals who rose to the level of overall strategic genius demonstrated by Grant and Sherman.  Lee’s strategic vision was limited to the Virginia theater, where his influence concentrated Confederate resources at the expense of the western theaters, where the Confederacy suffered from poor generalship and where it really lost the war.

The second level where a number of historians have identified superior northern leadership is in management of military supply and logistics.  In Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton, Quartermaster-General Montgomery Meigs, Assistant Secretary of the Navy Gustavus Fox, the administrators of military railroads Daniel McCallum and Herman Haupt, and numerous other officials the North developed by 1862 a group of top- and middle-level managers who organized the northern economy and the logistical flow of supplies and transportation to Union armies with unprecedented efficiency and abundance.  The Confederacy could not match the northern skill in organization and administration.  Nor did the South manage its economy as well as the North.  While the Union developed a balanced system of taxation, loans, and treasury notes to finance the war without unreasonable inflation, the Confederacy relied mostly on fiat money and suffered a crippling 9,000 percent inflation by war’s end.  In this interpretation, it was not the North’s greater resources but its better management of those resources that won the war.

Third, leadership at the top.  Lincoln proved to be a better commander in chief than Davis.  On this there has been virtual unanimity among historians of northern birth, and surprising agreement by many southerners.  A  couple of quotations from two historians, one northern and one southern, writing sixty years apart, will give the flavor of this interpretation.  The Yankee James Ford Rhodes wrote at the beginning of the twentieth century that “the preponderating asset of the North proved to be Lincoln.”  And in 1960 the southern-born historian David Potter put it even more strongly: “If the Union and the Confederacy had exchanged presidents with one another, the Confederacy might have won its independence.”  (Rhodes quoted by Donald, Why the North Won, x; David M. Potter, “Jefferson Davis and the Political Factors in Confederate Defeat,” ibid., 112.)

This may be carrying a good point too far.  In any event, a broad consensus exists that Lincoln was more eloquent than Davis in expressing war aims, more successful in communicating with the people, more skillful as a political leader in keeping factions working together for the war effort, better able to endure criticism and work with his critics to achieve a common goal.  Lincoln was flexible, pragmatic, with a sense of humor to smooth relationships and help him survive the stress of his job; Davis was austere, rigid, humorless, with the type of personality that readily made enemies.  Lincoln had a strong physical constitution; Davis suffered ill health and was frequently prostrated by sickness.  Lincoln picked good administrative subordinates (with some exceptions) and knew how to delegate authority to them; Davis went through five secretaries of war in four years; he spent a great deal of time and energy on petty administrative details that he should have left to subordinates.  A disputatious man, Davis sometimes seemed to prefer winning an argument to winning the war; Lincoln was happy to lose an argument if it would help win the war.  Davis's well-known feuds with two of the Confederacy’s premier generals, Beauregard and Joseph E. Johnston, undoubtedly hurt the South’s war effort.

The thesis of superior northern leadership seems more convincing than other explanations for Union victory.  And yet – and yet – it should not be uncritically accepted.  Some caution is advisable.  With respect to generalship, for example, comparisons of Grant and Lee, Sheridan and Forrest, Sherman and Johnston, and so on, are a minefield through which historians had better maneuver carefully.  And even if the North did enjoy an advantage in this respect during the last year or two of the war, the Union army had its faint-hearts and blunderers, its McClellan and Pope and Burnside and Hooker who nearly lost the war to superior Confederate leadership in the east in 1862-63, despite what was happening in the West.  On more than one occasion the outcome seemed to hang in the balance because of incompetent northern military leadership.

As for Union superiority in the management of supply and logistics, this was probably true in most respects.  Northern society was more entrepreneurial and business-oriented than southern society; the Union war effort could draw on a wider field of talent to mobilize men, resources, technology, industry, and transportation.  Yet the confederacy could boast some brilliant successes in this area of leadership.  Ordnance Chief Josiah Gorgas almost literally turned plowshares into swords, building from scratch an arms and ammunition industry that kept Confederate armies better supplied than had seemed possible at the outset.  What seems most significant about Confederate logistics and supply is not the obvious deficiencies, but the ability of southern officials to do so much with so little.  Instead of losing the war, their efforts did much to keep the Confederacy fighting for so long.

Finally, what about Lincoln’s superiority to Davis as commander in chief?  This might seem indisputable.  Yet Lincoln made mistakes as a war leader.  He went through a half-dozen failures as commanders in the eastern theater before he found the right general.  Some of his other military appointments and strategic decisions could justly be criticized.  And as late as the summer of 1864, when the war seemed to be going badly for the North, when Grant’s forces had suffered horrendous casualties to achieve a stalemate at Petersburg and Sherman seemed equally stalemated before Atlanta, Lincoln came under enormous pressure to negotiate peace with the Confederacy.  To have done so would have been tantamount to admitting northern defeat.  Lincoln resisted this pressure, but at what appeared to be the cost of his re-election to the presidency.  If the election had been held in August 1864 instead of November, Lincoln would have lost.

This did not happen, but only because of events on the battlefield – principally Sherman’s capture of Atlanta, and Sheridan’s spectacular victories over Jubal Early in the Shenandoah Valley.  These turned northern opinion from deepest despair in the summer to confident determination by November.

This transformation of northern will illustrates the point made earlier that the will of either the northern or southern people was primarily a result of military victory rather than a cause of it.  Events on the battlefield might have gone the other way, on these and other occasions during the war.  If they had done so the course of the war might have been quite different.  It is this element of contingency that is missing from generalizations about the cause of the Confederate defeat, whether such generalizations focus on external or internal factors.  There was nothing inevitable about northern victory in the Civil War.  Nor was Sherman’s capture of Atlanta any more inevitable than, say, McClellan’s capture of Richmond in June 1862 had been.  There were several major turning points, points of contingency when events moved in one direction but could well have moved in another.  Two have just been mentioned: Sherman’s capture of Atlanta and McClellan’s failure to capture Richmond.  The former, coupled with Sheridan’s success in the Shenandoah Valley, proved to be the final decisive turning point toward Union victory.  Two earlier moments of contingency that turned in favor of the North were of equal importance.

The first occurred in the fall of 1862.  Confederate offensives during the summer had taken southern armies from their backs to the wall in Mississippi and Virginia almost to the Ohio River and across the Potomac River by September.   This was the most ambitious Confederate effort to win European recognition and a victorious peace on Union soil.  But, in September and October, Union armies stopped these Confederate invaders at Antietam and Perryville.  This forestalled European intervention, dissuaded northern voters from repudiating the Lincoln administration by electing a Democratic House of Representatives in the fall of 1862, and gave Lincoln the occasion to issue the Emancipation Proclamation, which enlarged the scope and purpose of the war.

The other major turning point came in the summer of 1863.  Before then, during the months between Union defeats at Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville, a time that also witnessed Union failures in the western theater, northern morale dropped to its lowest point in the war -–except perhaps during August 1864.

But then came the battle of Gettysburg and the capture of Vicksburg.  This crucial turning point produced southern cries of despair.

Predictions in July 1863 of the Confederacy’s imminent collapse turned out to be premature.  More twists and turns marked the road to the end of the war.  This only underscores the point about the importance of contingency.  To understand why the South lost, in the end, we must turn from large generalizations that imply inevitability and study instead the contingency that hung over each military campaign, each battle, each election, each decision during the war.  When we comprehend what happened in these events, how it happened, why it happened, and what its consequences were, then we will be on our way toward answering the question: Why did the Confederacy lose the war?