

# The American Civil War

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The history of the United States is short. It is dominated by two related events, both of them wars. The first was the Revolutionary War of the late 18th century, the second was the Civil War of the middle of the next. References are made to them over and over again, which means that an outside observer cannot help to acquire a lot of disjointed knowledge simply by osmosis. Of the Civil War I know of course of the secession and the slavery issue, and of Lincoln of course, if ever an American icon, since childhood. I later learned about the Gettysburg address and became aware of the names of Lee and Grant<sup>1</sup>. I have also due to a tenuous Swedish connection been aware of the Merrimack and the Monitor, one of them, I forgot which one, having been designed by the Swedish inventor John Ericsson (a fact so arcane that it is not even mentioned in the book). And perhaps most significantly in my late teens I came across photographs of the Civil War. That was a revelation, because up to that point I had believed that photography was a very recent invention, more or less contemporary with the moving image, and dating to the turn of the century some sixty years earlier. To see actual photographs from the 1860's, at the time a hundred years old gave me an unexpected window on the past, and thus the possibility of an hitherto unsuspected intimacy with the same. The photographic image, at least naively, is thought of as objective and direct, not filtered through an artistic temperament. And of course to some extent this is true, the photographic image is objective, it renders details which have not been transmitted by human choice, and can thus provide documentary evidence suitable for forensic purposes. Later on I would also see photos taken during the Crimean War, another decade deeper into the past. So not being an American I have nevertheless lived with the image, although never having had the benefit of an American history education at school, I have not been treated to a straightforward narrative of the events to put them in place. Thus I open the book confident that this deplorable gap in my general historical education once and for all will be plugged. Without it, how can I ever hope to be able to savour any specialized book on the subject, which has generated so much print in the ensuing 150 years?

Now to give a narrative account of the war is not so easy. Depending on the count the exact number of battles varies of course, but Keegan suggests something like 10'000 different engagements<sup>2</sup>. Not all of them can be given equal treatment, but to choose the important ones is a matter of taste and judgement. Furthermore so many things were going

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<sup>1</sup> once being told that both attended West Point together, Lee graduated first in his class, while Grant was last. This turns out to be a neat exaggeration, true though that Lee did very well, and Grant was far from being an model student, still his ranking was more in the middle than at the extreme bottom.

<sup>2</sup> The counting is of course made problematic in the same way as the counting of lakes, islands and asteroids is. Where is the distinction between a battle and an engagement, or an engagement and a skirmish? Should an isolated skirmish count but not one part of a larger context, such as a battle?

on at the same time, and at such different locations, that a straightforward chronologically faithful account is impossible. Also accounts of wars run the risk of being tedious, just as accounts of say the weather in the past. Ebbing and flooding, waxing and waning, back and forth, a Brownian dance, one damned thing after another. In the end it all blurs together and looks very much the same, and you ask so what? Did it in the end amount to anything at all? Life continues and the effects of the past even out and eventually dissipate. This is an understandable attitude to take when it concerns the wars and conquests of distant empires, be it geographically or time-wise, especially when the accounts are terse and repetitive. But the American Civil War is different, it took place not so long ago<sup>3</sup> and its consequences are still very much with us. And of course as Keegan is at pain to emphasize, the Revolutionary War and the Civil War are very much connected, the one completing what the other one had begun, and in tandem forging the American Identity. The Second World War may be added as a pendant. The last Good War establishing the United States also as a global player, spreading its ideals worldwide. Then there was Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan, wars more in the spirit of the Mexican War and the Colonial Wars of the turn of the century, leaving blemishes hard to wash away, and casting the image of the States as a power for Good into serious doubt.

Keegan starts out with an excellent background account. The cards were stacked in the favor of the North from the very start, and the eventual outcome was a foregone conclusion, it was only a matter of time and blood. The North was more populous, it was wealthier and industrialized, already with important metropolitan centers. The North also had the moral advantage, the South with their secession was for all intents and purposes rebels, and as such they were unable to enlist much needed international recognition and concomitant support. The issue of slavery also added a strong moral advantage, especially retroactively. The South was agricultural, had few important cities and little industry. Half of the population - the Blacks, did not count, thus severely restricting their pool of potential recruits. So why did it take so long?

The problem was that although there was no shortage of manpower on either side, and there would be no such throughout the war, except possibly to the South at the very end, there was a shortage of experience and competence. The war of 1812 was too distant to set any useful precedent, and also too different from the kind of war that presented itself now. The only previous experience being the Mexican war in which both Grant and Lee, and many other of the higher ranked officers had served. In particular there were no officer corps, the West Point output only having supplied a trickle. There were in short almost no professionalism. The soldiers were volunteers who had had no previous training or drill. No wonder European observers dismissed the whole as a spectacle of armed mobs. The arming was different, modern rifles could either be imported or manufactured locally, the same going for ammunition. There was also a rather well established network of railway lines, especially in the North, the Southern network involved many different gauges and was far more haphazard in its conception, railway lines not seldom trailing out into nothing. Also the South being predominantly agrarian with few big cities, there had been little incentive to make it a well-connected network. There really was not that much to connect after all. The big problem for the two opponents was how to go about things?

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<sup>3</sup> Some former slaves survived into the 1960's.

How to suppress the rebels? They controlled a very large territory<sup>4</sup> most of it uninhabited and unmapped, also providing difficult terrain for invading forces. The purpose of war is peace. In fact peace is such an overriding goal that anything is justified to attain it, including war<sup>5</sup>. Thus peace being seen as the ultimate goal, one does not look forward to an extended war for the excitement such provides, but one wants instead a quick decisive war. This was also what the perpetrators of the First World War had in mind. A campaign of a few months at the most. The supreme ideal image of such kind of war was provided by Napoleon, who was romanticized (as well as demonized) throughout the 19th century. Napoleon showed how single decisive battles in which the opponents were routed would not only decide matters on the ground but also have far reaching political consequences. The Austrian empire was dealt with at Austerlitz, and the Prussians put in place at Jena. Bismarck followed this tradition by having single battles settle matters, although of course Bismarck was no Napoleon, he loathed war, and clearly saw them in the manner of Clausewitz. He had skillfully maneuvered diplomatically the background, as to make the military engagements carry as much clout as possible. In comparison, the military excursions spilled little blood<sup>6</sup>. But the decisive strike would elude the combatants. The natural target for the South being Washington, while the corresponding one for the North was Richmond. Washington remained beyond reach to the South, although at some point they were close enough, and the fall of Richmond at the end was a rather irrelevant. The South was spread out, it did not depend on single cities. Even if Richmond had fallen at the outset, apart from a moral triumph, it would in no way have compromised the ability of the South to wage war.

Lincoln, who against his will and intentions, were to become the war president, had no experience of war, but learned quickly on the job. Keegan displays great admiration for Lincoln, not only for his social and administrative skills, but even more for his intelligence and his strategic thinking, among other things clearly understanding that Richmond was not the main target, the army of Lee was the one to be contained. Lincoln is above all remembered for his uncompromising stand on the issue of slavery. Keegan, usefully reminds the modern reader, that nowadays Lincoln would be branded as a racist. He clearly saw the Blacks as inferior to the Whites, but nevertheless he was adamant that they should enjoy the same political rights as the White man. This does not diminish in my eyes the statue of Lincoln, on the contrary it enhances it. By transcending his own petty personal opinions for more general principles, he exhibited the legal mind at its best.

As noted above a straightforward account of the military action would be tedious and confusing. One may, however, in a few sentences sketch the grand scheme. The strategy of the Union was to contain and isolate the Confederates, first by blockading its ports and

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<sup>4</sup> As to the size of the territory Keegan is liable to hyperbole, which I fear may not be entirely intentional. The eastern third of the United States, the large West was still largely unexplored, is big by continental European standards, but not with Russian and Eurasian ones.

<sup>5</sup> Given the predominance of peace as the real or ostensible purpose of war, one may well ironically try to do away with peace in order to avoid war.

<sup>6</sup> The Prussian triumph at Sedan, so excited the Prussian military that they pressed for territorial advantages, which Bismarck clearly saw was untenable and counterproductive, but he was no dictator and could not always get his way.

secondly by bisecting its territory by taking control of the Mississippi and its tributaries. Wishfully the idea was that by blockading the South, its economy would be strangled and it would voluntarily give up its armed resistance. This did not work, the South was initially able to evade the blockade, and only at the end when most of its major ports had been seized, did the blockade work.

The course of the war involved initial setbacks by the North on the border between Virginia and Maryland, while they had slow but steady success in the West where Grant was in action. Lee tried to bring the war onto Union soil by breaking into Pennsylvania but was stopped at Gettysburg, probably the most well-known of all the battles, and certainly the only one I could name before reading the book. One day after Gettysburg Vicksburg fell to Grant. Vicksburg was an almost impenetrable fortress on the Mississippi, and the last stronghold to be seized from the Confederates on the Western theatre. This was Grant's finest hour, and as a result he was appointed by Lincoln as the supreme commander of the Union forces. This involved engaging the Northern Virginia army led by Lee operating in the region indicated by its designation. While he did so he allowed Sherman to enter the southern States in a forceful mopping up operation, engaging the remaining forces in the South, neutralizing them and seizing the one city after the other and living off the ground, with the express intent of administering as much pain as possible to the civilian population. Of all the military innovations of the Civil War, this was the one who was most easily exportable and had the greatest influence on future warfare. The final destruction by Grant of Lee's army in April 1865 led to the surrender by the latter and the subsequent cessation of the rebellion. It being a rebellion a formal peace treaty was not an option, instead what followed was to work out a Reconstruction, not of the South but of the Union as a whole. This was not to be granted Lincoln, who fell victim to an assassin's bullet just a few days after the end of the war, but carried on lukewarmly by Jackson, who had sympathies for the South.

Now why were there so many battles? In fact the South lacking strategic points, doing damage to their armed forces was the only option for the North. It was in fact quickly realized that the war was to be one of attrition, that decisive action would forever be elusive. In a war of attrition the North obviously held the upper hand and would inevitably prevail. Now the bulk of the book consists in descriptions and explanations of a handful of major battles, replete with the standard graphs, showing terrain, positions of various forces and arrows. Such graphs, I believe, serve as staple in the teaching of military strategy and tactics, they also tend to make a battle into a chess game, where the quickness and imagination of the commander play an even more important role than the valor of his soldiers. So many things have to work well in order to conduct a successful military campaign. Such a one does not only involve the drama of actual battle, but also the logistics of transportation and the supply of food and munitions, and a good general needs to add to fighting spirit an as important skill of mundane administration. The comparison with chess is somewhat misleading, as there are so many unknown factors to be taken into possible account, that a military commander has nothing like the same kind of control. More importantly though, in any kind of game you need to take bold risks. It is one thing if the only thing you can lose is the game and be assured of countless other chances, quite another thing if loss may mean a real catastrophe as opposed to a

virtual. This is probably why someone like McClellan was not able to deliver. From a military point of view he was brilliant, probably second to none, and he knew it; yet when it came to push he froze, timid in face of the real risks war always involved. He tended to overestimate the strength of the enemy, constantly asking for reinforcement. Thus extreme self-confidence coupled to a lack of nerve. The combination is not so unusual. A good commander must have a reckless streak. Some of the more legendary ones of the Civil War knew of no fear at all, one particular example being 'Stonewall' Jackson. Is this normal? Certainly not? Is it laudable? Depends on the context, and in the context of war successfully waged it is certainly an asset and something to be admired. Yet it is hard not to think of it not so much as a psychological defect as a form of pathology. Is the successful commander a psychopath after all? Could very well be. War is after all an activity that makes killing not only legal but commendable, especially in a war of attrition. People are good at compartmentalization, spectacularly illustrated by war. Those who refuse to compartmentalize belong to the fringes of society and are dismissed as pacifists. True pacifism is a disturbing and honorable stand. Disturbing very much because of being honorable. Still how to distinguish between true pacifism and plain cowardice and shirking? Yet in the extreme conditions of war it seems natural that certain personality types will flourish. Grant himself loathed the military life, was a most reluctant if intermittently brilliant student at West Point<sup>7</sup> participated with disgust in the war with Mexico, but floundered in Civilian life working as a lowly clerk in his fathers tanning business.

Keegan does not spend too much time on the finer point of battles. As a result there is both too much detail and too little. Too much detail for the cursory reader, too little to really explain what was going on. He reviews the various generals, giving highest marks to Grant and Sherman, and gives special mention to the brilliant tactician 'Stonewall' Jackson. Lee passes also with colors, and a few more. The Europeans, who initially scoffed at the American mobs, would have proved no match to seasoned commanders four years later. One wonders who really learned from such experience. The private soldiers? But there was a large turnover of those, although as Keegan points out due to the frequency of battles and the long terms of conscription, many of the foot soldiers had time to get their exposure, although with such high attrition rates, often up to a third of the men involved, only a minority would survive to learn the tales. The officers? But they too died en masse. Maybe the highest echelons of command were those who benefitted the most.

It is one thing to read about those engagements and quite another to be part of them. You read the abstractions and are excited by them. Charge and counter-charge, and your adrenalin starts to pump. And indeed from an abstract point of view, as pointed out, it is a game, more complicated than chess, but with many of its features. On the ground there is agony. Even if you survived an impact, chances that you would survive in the long run were slim. Wounded soldiers were often left for days on the battle-ground, and when taken to field hospitals they encountered medically incompetent doctors, who may be advanced enough to administer anesthetics, welcome relief in view of the standard procedure of amputation, but not advanced enough to know about basic hygiene. To be nursed in a

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<sup>7</sup> Keegan points to his strength as a mathematician, which probably was connected to some engineering skills as well.

home setting was often far less dangerous than to be subjected to rampant infections in a cramped medical facility.

In face of such dire odds, how could man be made to stand in close formation being fired at close range. This surely goes against all instincts? Only men drilled to the point of automation could stand such an ordeal? Surely there were people who shirked notwithstanding the strong social pressure not to do so. In fact studies seem to indicate that it is not the global ideological stand that makes people sacrifice their lives, but the social pressures of their peers. Ernst Jünger in his memoirs - *Stahlgewitter*, of the First World War, suggests that the perspective of a soldier does not go beyond that of his regiment, and in fact he fights out of loyalty to those closest to him. Then clearly there are other effective means of inhibiting panic, alcohol being an obvious choice, and also one which was generously available in the field. Incidentally Grant had a drinking problem when his wife was not around, but it could have had other causes. But more significantly, as the war wore on, the digging of entrenchments become more and more common. This was nothing that was imposed from the above, but something that naturally started at the grass-root level. In fact no implements were handed out at first to facilitate the process, but soldiers used their ingenuity and used whatever was available. This was a development which would arise over and over again in the next fifty years, the trenches of the First World War being the supreme example. The Civil War caused many casualties exactly because it was basically about armies of infantry clashing. Cavalry played a very peripheral role, to a large extent because of the unsuitability of the terrain, mostly woodlands or mountains, seldom open level fields allowing the mounted regiments to build up and maintain momentum. Similarly artillery was of secondary importance. It was hard to move the heavy pieces, and commanders were reluctant to put them at exposed positions, where they could do most damage to the enemy, for fear of capture.

When the War finally ended the North was rather unaffected. In fact the war had stimulated its economy due to the various demands that was made, and could be met. For the South it was very different, its society was in shambles, and the war caused a real discontinuity between the antebellum days and the postbellum. The charmed life of Southern Plantations with white pillared buildings and large workforces of happy slaves, so idolized retrospectively was gone. But the war did not really end the servitude of the Black. To give those millions of people proper employment was a challenge the society was not able to rise too. Legal freedom did not necessarily translate into real freedom, but many of them became attached to the land as actual serfs of their previous owners, to which they were tied by debt. As we know the situation of the Blacks in the South continued to be a politically disfranchised one for another hundred years before the Civil Right movement (in many ways the foundation for the subsequent anti-war movement) finally started to put a slow end to it.

Why is there no Socialism in the States. The Labor Unions were strong enough but the taste for a Socialist economy does not seem to have gotten hold of the imagination of the masses, much to the puzzlement of Marx, who had followed the Civil War with great interest, and even made some rather prescient comments on it. According to Keegan, Socialism is not congruent by the American temperament, one which got its final touches by the experience of the War. He also notes that the decades that followed and which are

often referred to as the gilded years, were formed by people who actually had had combat experience, which had deeply influenced them. Those large armies, with their turn-overs, eventually encompassed millions of people who served at one time or another. The total death toll is put around 200'000, making the Civil War the most costly war in human terms that the States has ever undertaken. It certainly must have constituted a major trauma. Keegan has a soft spot for military honor, not surprising in one who has devoted himself to its history, and he has a tendency to romanticize the effects of such shattering experiences. It is true that the present world leadership has been drawn from pampered generations, who have never known real hardship, while only a few decades ago it was manned by people who had been marked by war. How much difference does it really make? Was the Civil War the formative experience that forged real character? Does really anything that almost kill you but does not, make you stronger and nobler? Could it not also work the other way? But those are speculations taking us too far afield.

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