

The Confederate Advantages at the Beginning of the Civil War

Contrary to popular belief, the Confederacy actually had many advantages at the beginning of the American Civil War. The chief reason that the North won the war was its massive production advantage over the South. The other main reason that they won the war was a massive manpower advantage over the South. Although these two advantages ultimately led them to win the war, these advantages were not as pronounced at the beginning of the war. Their advantages were disrupted, however, by poor leadership and organization. Early in the Civil War, the South was successful because of confidence, superior organization, leadership, and a more militarist way of life.

In the period leading up to, and during, the American Civil War, the South was more militaristic than the North. Many families in the South hunted for food, which taught the Southerners how to sneak through woods, and shoot well. Most male Southerners learned to shoot at an early age, and who by the time they were old enough to join the army, had impeccable aim. Furthermore, most of America's prestigious military academies were situated in the South. Because of that, more people from the South went to these academies. When the war started, many of those felt that their loyalty was to their birthplace, the South, and not with the United States' government. The South won most of the battles at the beginning of the Civil War, surprising the North, who had thought that they would quickly win the war. The war truly began when the Confederates attacked the Union garrison at Fort Sumter, in South Carolina. They bombarded the fort with cannon, and on April 14th, 1861, the United States forces at Fort Sumter surrendered. The first battle of the war had been won by the Confederates; the only casualty of the battle was a Confederate horse. The news of this stunning victory quickly moved throughout the South, and boosted the already high confidence of those in the South.

The Southerners were confident in their military skill, while they thought of the Northerners as city dwellers who couldn't hold their own in combat. The militaristic southern way of life helped prompt this, along with the astounding victory at Fort Sumter. Confederate ranks swelled as patriotic Southerners answered Jefferson Davis' call for 100,000 men to fight against the Union. Confident soldiers usually fight better than demoralized ones. This is evident at the battle of Bull Run.

One early southern victory was the battle of Bull Run, or First Manassas, as the Confederates called it. The battle began when Union General Irvin McDowell moved south toward Richmond, and was stopped by Confederate General Pierre Beauregard. McDowell came up with a good plan: a small group of men would distract the Confederates, making them think that they were the main attack force; while the main attack force outflanked the Confederates. At first, it seemed like this strategy had worked, the Confederates took the bait, and moved to block the decoy force. But they soon discovered that they were being outflanked. The Confederates used railroads to quickly transport their troops to where they were needed; the first time this was ever done in history. The battle ended in a Confederate victory, with the Union retreating to Washington D.C. having about one thousand more casualties than the Confederacy. This was a tremendous morale boost to the South, and was quite demoralizing to the North. Again, the South grew even more confident in its fighting ability.

The army was divided into three main parts, in two of these, the Union had an advantage, but in the third, and perhaps most important, the South held the advantage. The first and largest part of the army was the infantry. It consisted of foot soldiers, and the United States had a production advantage here: they could produce guns, gunpowder, boots, and other equipment faster than the South could. The next part of the military was the artillery. This consisted mostly of "big guns" and cannons. Again, the North had a production advantage here as well. The last part of the army, but perhaps the most important was the cavalry. Mounted horsemen with

guns, he cavalry could do scouting missions, could raid supply lines, or could help outflank an enemy in battle. Because of their way of life, most confederates had better aim than their Union counterparts. Many Southerners also rode from town to town, rather than either walking, or taking a train; as people did in the North. This made them quite good riders, as well as making it likely that they would own good horses. The Confederate army could not afford horses, so southern cavalymen used their own. These horses were far better than those used by the North, bought cheaply by the Union army. Furthermore, the Confederate cavalymen were used to their mounts, while the Union soldiers were not. This all added up to a far superior confederate cavalry, which had a huge impact on the war. The Confederate cavalry did many scouting missions, disrupted transportation of Union supplies, and attacked communication stations. The latter two caused the North to refocus their troops from attacking the Confederates to defending supplies, and means of communication. This helped to neutralize one of the Union's advantages, and was a great help to the South.

Although confident, militaristic Southerners filled the ranks of the Confederate army, its greatest advantage lay in its leadership. One of these generals fought in the battle of Bull Run: Thomas J. Jackson. At West Point, he struggled to keep his grades up, but graduated in 1846. He went on to fight bravely in the Mexican War. Around this time, he became a pious Christian, and slightly eccentric. He never again, smoked, drank, or played card. He left the army in 1851 to become a teacher at VMI (the Virginia Military Institute). He later left VMI to join the Confederate army. At the battle of Bull Run, he managed to stop a Union attack to effectively that he was given the nickname "Stonewall" by Bernard Bee. He became one of the Confederacy's most effective generals, and his leadership proved to be a great advantage over the North. An even greater presence in the Confederate army was General Robert E. Lee. Lee had graduated from West Point in 1829, and received three awards in the Mexican War. Lee was later in charge of West point for a few years. He opposed secession, but his loyalty lay with his home state of Virginia. President Abraham Lincoln asked him to command the Union army, but he turned it because he was a Virginian first.

On the other side of the war, was General George B. McClellan. McClellan graduated from West Point at the top of his class in 1846, the same year as "Stonewall" Jackson. He received three awards in the Mexican War. He was put in charge of the Ohio militia at the beginning of the Civil War. In 1861 he was put in charge of all American armies. Although McClellan was a great general, he suffered from what President Lincoln called the "slows." His overcautious tactics managed to delay the United States from marching south quickly. It gave the opportunity for Lee, and other generals to push north, and even engage the Union on its own territory. Considering the large advantages that the South had at the beginning of the civil war, it is interesting as to what would have happened if the South had pushed these advantages just a little farther. If they had, the outcome of the war could have been different. If it had been, the United States would have been much smaller, and would not have been a world leader. The outcome of World War Two could have been different, or, if it had not, the outcome of the cold war certainly would have been. If the confederates had pushed their early advantages just a small bit more, the world would be very different today.

Union Advantages

When war broke out, the South seemed to have great advantages. The Confederacy could fight defensively behind interior lines. The North had to invade the vast territory of the Confederacy, conquer it, and drag it bodily back into the Union. In fact, the South did not have to win the war in order to win its independence. If it merely fought the invaders to a draw and stood firm, Confederate independence would be won. Fighting on their own soil for self-determination and preservation of their way of life, Southerners at first enjoyed an advantage in morale as well.

Militarily, the South from the opening volleys of the war had the most talented officers. Most conspicuous among a dozen or so first-rate commanders was gray-haired General Robert E. Lee, whose knightly bearing and chivalric sense of honor embodied the Southern ideal. Lincoln had unofficially offered him command of the Northern armies, but when Virginia seceded, Lee felt honor-bound to go with his native state. Lee's chief lieutenant for much of the war was black-bearded Thomas J. ("Stonewall") Jackson, a gifted tactical theorist and a master of speed and deception.

Besides their brilliant leaders, ordinary Southerners were also bred to fight. Accustomed to managing horses and bearing arms from boyhood, they made excellent cavalymen and foot soldiers. Their high-pitched "rebel yell" ("yeeeahhh") was designed to strike terror into the hearts of fuzz-chinned Yankee recruits. "There is nothing



Friendly Enemies The man on the right is George Armstrong Custer. The youngest general in the Union army, this brilliant young officer survived the Civil War only to lose his life and that of every soldier under his command to Sioux warriors at the Battle of the Little Bighorn in 1876—"Custer's Last Stand." The man on the left is a Southern soldier and prisoner of war. He and Custer had been classmates at West Point.

like it on this side of the infernal region," one Northern soldier declared. "The peculiar corkscrew sensation that it sends down your backbone can never be told. You have to feel it."

As one immense farm, the South seemed to be handicapped by the scarcity of factories. Yet by seizing federal weapons, running Union blockades, and developing their own ironworks, Southerners managed to obtain sufficient weaponry. "Yankee ingenuity" was not confined to Yankees.

Nevertheless, as the war dragged on, grave shortages of shoes, uniforms, and blankets disabled the South. Even with immense stores of food on Southern farms, civilians and soldiers often went hungry because of supply problems. "Forward, men! They have cheese in their haversacks," cried one Southern officer as he

attacked the Yankees. Much of the hunger was caused by a breakdown of the South's rickety transportation system, especially where the railroad tracks were cut or destroyed by the Yankee invaders.

The economy was the greatest Southern weakness; it was the North's greatest strength. The North was not only a huge farm but a sprawling factory as well.

Yankees boasted about three-fourths of the nation's wealth, including three-fourths of the thirty thousand miles of railroads.

The North also controlled the sea. With its vastly superior navy, it established a blockade that, though a sieve at first, soon choked off Southern supplies and eventually shattered Southern morale. Its sea power

also enabled the North to exchange huge quantities of grain for munitions and supplies from Europe, thus adding the output from the factories of Europe to its own.

The Union also enjoyed a much larger reserve of manpower. The loyal states had a population of some 22 million; the seceding states had 9 million people, including about 3.5 million slaves. Adding to the North's overwhelming supply of soldiery were ever-more immigrants from Europe, who continued to pour into the North even during the war (see the table on p. 443). Over 800,000 newcomers arrived between 1861 and 1865, most of them British, Irish, and German. Large numbers of them were induced to enlist in the Union army. Altogether about one-fifth of the Union forces were foreign-born, and in some units military commands were given in four different languages.

Whether immigrant or native, ordinary Northern boys were much less prepared than their Southern counterparts for military life. Yet the Northern "clodhoppers" and "shopkeepers" eventually adjusted themselves to soldiering and became known for their discipline and determination.

The American minister to Britain wrote,

"The great body of the aristocracy and the commercial classes are anxious to see the United States go to pieces [but] the middle and lower class sympathise with us [because they] see in the convulsion in America an era in the history of the world, out of which must come in the end a general recognition of the right of mankind to the produce of their labor and the pursuit of happiness."

Union, only to be rewarded after the war with a relentless military campaign to herd them onto reservations or into oblivion.

Unhappily, the conflict between "Billy Yank" and "Johnny Reb" was a brothers' war (see "Makers of America: Billy Yank and Johnny Reb," pp. 240-241). There were many Northern volunteers from the Southern states and many Southern volunteers from the Northern states. The "mountain whites" of the South sent north some 50,000 men, and the loyal slave states contributed some 300,000 soldiers to the Union. In many a family of the Border States, one brother rode north to fight with the Blue, another south to fight with the Gray. Senator Crittenden of Kentucky, who fathered the abortive Crittenden Compromise, fathered two sons: one became a general in the Union army, the other a general in the Confederate army. Lincoln's own Kentucky-born wife had four brothers who fought for the Confederacy.

The North was much less fortunate in its higher commanders. Lincoln was forced to use a costly trial-and-error method to sort out effective leaders from the many incompetent political officers, until he finally uncovered a general, Ulysses Simpson Grant, who was determined to slog his way to victory at whatever cost in life and limb.

In the long run, as the Northern strengths were brought to bear, they outweighed those of the South. But when the war began, the chances for Southern independence were unusually favorable—certainly better than the prospects for success of the thirteen colonies in 1776. The turn of a few events could easily have produced a different outcome.

The might-have-beens are fascinating. *If* the Border States had seceded, *if* the uncertain states of the upper Mississippi Valley had turned against the Union, *if* a wave of Northern defeatism had demanded an armistice, and *if* Britain and/or France had broken the Union's naval blockade of Southern ports, the South might well have won. All of these possibilities almost became realities, but none of them actually occurred, and lacking their impetus, the South could not hope to win.

Union v. Confederate Advantages

Union Advantage	Evidence it was important (List specific facts, people, etc)	Rank its importance
1)		
2)		
3)		
4)		
5)		
6)		
7)		
8)		
9)		
10)		
Confederate Advantage	Evidence it was important (List specific facts, people, etc)	Rank its importance
1)		
2)		
3)		
4)		
5)		
6)		
7)		
8)		