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The Lost Cause: An Examination of the Defeat of the Confederate States of America

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The Lost Cause: An Examination of the Defeat of the Confederate States of America

By

Thomas Vigneri

A thesis submitted to the Department of History of the State University of New York College at Brockport in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of History.

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Abstract

This study examines the Lost Cause of the Confederacy and the reasons for the defeat of the Confederate States of America. The Confederate States of America was created with propaganda, lofty ideals and unbridled optimism. With the outcome of the American Civil War known, this study seeks to answer the question, was the South’s defeat predetermined, or was it a victim of its own leadership? On the surface the Confederacy seemed unprepared for war with the North in 1861. The Confederate leadership suffered from unreasonable and delusional expectations without any realistic plan for success. The South was partially a victim of its own propaganda and the propaganda was also misused and ill timed. The cause of the Confederacy was in many ways a comedy of errors. The dreams of success and independence held by the Confederacy were unlikely to be realized given the lack of manpower, infrastructure, economic diversity, industry, political strength, political alliances, and unity. In addition to the tangible deficits of the South, the Confederacy was also engaged in a struggle to create a nation while simultaneously waging war against an established nation. Each of these tasks was daunting by itself, but to tackle all together was an incredibly difficult undertaking. Such an undertaking would only be possible if the entire Confederate nation was united in ideology and purpose, however, it was not.
Introduction

This essay will examine the central causes for the defeat of the Confederate army and the Confederate failure to win foreign recognition. Several issues will be examined in this study including southern deficits in manpower, industry, infrastructure, economic diversity, political strength, political alliances and national unity. At issue is the question, did these deficits doom the Confederacy to failure from the start or did the political and propaganda miscues undermine the chances for Confederate victory? The fact is that the Confederacy could not sustain a prolonged war and prevail. The deficits of the Confederacy were too great to overcome without foreign assistance and battlefield victories to shore up the moral of the South while weakening the will of the North and as history shows, it was not to be.

Chapter one examines the South’s deficits in manpower and infrastructure. The South failed to take into account the population disparity between the North and the South as well as the South’s reluctance to utilize the one source of manpower that they did have: slaves. In the first modern war, the South failed to recognize the holes in its infrastructure and the consequences that would have for the Confederate war effort. The lack of a uniform and connected rail system and limited number of warships made it impossible to match the ability of the North to wage a modern war. What little infrastructure did exist in the South was all geared towards the transportation of cotton to the coastal regions for shipment overseas. The patchwork of mismatched rail lines and
large gaps in the lines did not make moving troops along the Confederate border with the
North quick or simple. The result of these deficits was a logistical nightmare for the
southern leadership and an impaired ability to fight a sustained war.

Chapter two examines the economic shortcomings of the Confederacy. The lack of economic diversity and industry, were extremely detrimental to the South as the war dragged on. The agricultural nature of the South meant that the population was small and spread out. The fixation of the South on cotton rather than staple food crops led to food shortages in areas of the South that were not easily accessible by rail. The lack of industry in the southern states also made it difficult to fight a prolonged war. While the industrial North was easily able to repair and replace the materials needed to fight a modern war, the South was struggling to create the industry it needed to support its own war effort. The South started the war at a distinct disadvantage in industry that manufactured the machines, arms and munitions that were needed to fight a modern war.

Chapter three explores the political deficiencies of the Confederacy. They lacked a strong central government to run and fund a prolonged war. They lacked political alliances. None were secured before engaging in war with the statistically superior North. The Confederate propaganda machine failed to obtain the desired results. The South possessed a flawed battle plan and failed to unify. When the South should have been creating a sense of nationalism under the banner of the Confederacy, the majority of southerners were more loyal to their state than they were to their new nation.
Chapter I

The American Civil War was the first war that saw railroads used as the primary mode of transportation of troops and supplies. In this area the North was at a distinct advantage. While the South had nearly nine-thousand miles of railroad track within its borders, the North had a staggering twenty-two thousand miles of track within its borders. In addition to the sheer amount of track the North had it also had the benefit of being both uniform in size and more strategically placed than was the South.¹ The South because of its strong belief in state’s rights was more individualistic and less uniform in the building of its rail lines. The lines were varied in gauge and incomplete. By having three different gauges of rails, the South was unable to use what rail lines it had effectively. Since a locomotive that ran on 5’0” could not run on a track gauge of 4’81/2” or the 5’6” gauge used in other parts of the South, the rail lines that existed in the South were ineffective for the transportation of troops to the battlefields.²

In addition to the obvious difficulty of non-standard rail gauges, the fact that the rails were designed for commerce rather than military purposes meant that the rails were oriented towards the shipping of cotton rather than movement of

¹University of Virginia: Hagley Library, Technology and the Civil War: A Digital Resource.
² University of Virginia: Hagley Library, Technology and the Civil War: A Digital Resource.
men and supplies. The result was that there were numerous gaps in the Confederate rail system that made troop and supply movements more difficult and time consuming than they were in the North. Only two rail lines ran East to West in the Confederacy linking Richmond and the Mississippi River at the start of the war. This fact made troop movements westward more complicated and time consuming as it involved changing rail lines and required an indirect route to the western battlefields for the Confederate forces based in the East.

In September of 1862, when General Longstreet was ordered to take his troops to Chickamauga Creek, Georgia from Northern Virginia the lack of rail structure became apparent. Longstreet and his 12,000 men were forced to take a 900 mile excursion changing rail lines at least eight and possibly ten times in order to reach the essentially 550 mile destination. The deficits in Southern transportation were already taking a toll on the Confederate army and limiting its effectiveness. From the start of the war, the North was much more equipped to make rapid troop deployments than the South was. In a modern war, the benefits of rapid troop movement were incalculable.

The effective transportation of the Southern Army was also complicated by the independence of the individual Southern railroad companies. The

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3 University of Virginia: Hagley Library, Technology and the Civil War.

high value placed on state’s rights made it impossible to consolidate the railroad resources of the Confederacy for effective use by the military. While the North had created the United States Military Railroad in 1862 to solve their railroad logistical problems, the Confederate government failed to take even moderate control of the railroads within their borders until February 28, 1865. The reluctance of the Confederate government to exert control over the Southern railroads put the military at a significant disadvantage to their Northern counterparts.

Given that the majority of the Civil War was fought on Southern soil, the inability to control and expand the Southern rail system proved to be a fatal flaw in the Confederate war machine. The Northern industrial power meant that there was no shortage of machinery or raw materials to create and maintain the Northern rail lines. In the South however, this was not the case. At the start of the war, the North had twice the amount of rails per square mile that the South had and was responsible for the production of 93 percent of the nation’s iron. The combination of control and support for the railroads in the North was something that the South never came close to achieving during the war.

In the South, the railroads that did exist were extremely primitive and poorly maintained. As Southern rail lines were damaged by warfare or sabotage they

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could not be easily repaired since the rails either came from the North or overseas. The South tried to create an iron industry to fulfill its needs but never came close to being able to produce enough iron to replace the rails that were being damaged much less add new rails to increase the reach of Southern railroads. Likewise replacement parts for the railcars came from the same locations and were equally inaccessible during the war.\(^7\)

The South also suffered from a serious deficit in skilled labor to run the railroads. While the North made certain that their rail system was manned by professionals who knew how to run, manage and maintain their vast rail system, the South made no such assurance until the Spring of 1864. At this time the Confederate government finally passed an act that exempted some skilled railroad workers from military service in an effort to try to prop up the failing Southern rail system.\(^8\) Labor and manpower shortages were the two greatest challenges that the South faced during the Civil War.

Similar difficulties were faced by the Confederacy in building and maintaining its Navy. Since only two of the ten Navy yards in the United States in 1860 were within the Southern borders, the Confederacy was at a distinct

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\(^8\) Turner, p. 510-533.
disadvantage on the waters. In the same way that the South suffered from deficits in machinery and iron, for the railroads, the shipbuilding industry was also hamstrung. The South had plenty of wood and sawmills for manufacturing wooden ships but, as the Ironclad warships became the military standard, the South was unprepared and unable to match the manufacturing capabilities of the North.  

While the South did have some small iron foundries within its borders, none of them were capable of producing the two inch iron plated required for building ironclad vessels at the onset of the war. Even more damning was the fact that the South did not have any facilities that were suitable for producing the machinery needed for the new ironclad warships. Similarly, the South had no ordinance producing facilities within its borders. At the outbreak of war, nearly all naval ordinance was produced in Washington and there is no indication that the South produced any naval guns or cannons.  

Even if the South had been able to build a shipbuilding industry capable of meeting its needs, the lack of raw materials would still have made their effectiveness minimal. Given the lack of effective transportation in the South, obtaining and shipping materials and machinery necessary for the production of ships  

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10 Still, 287-288.

11 Still, 288.
was a daunting task. Even the limited amount of resources and materials that the Confederacy did manage to acquire were often unable to reach their destinations because of the fragmented rail lines and the inability of the South to protect, rebuild and maintain the rails.\textsuperscript{12}

In spite of the setbacks and adversities, the South did manage to construct some “twenty shipyards, five ordinance factories, two naval machinery shops and one powder works.”\textsuperscript{13} The creation of such an extensive naval manufacturing project during war was an impressive accomplishment. Unfortunately for the South, the lack of materials for powder manufacture made the production of naval guns and cannons an exercise in futility. The limited availability of rolled iron for armor plating also meant that numerous Confederate ironclad warships would remain unfinished. Time and raw materials would negate the amazing industrial accomplishments of the Confederacy. The constant retreating in the face of Northern advancements would mean that unfinished warships would need to be either moved to areas of security or, as was more common, those ships would be destroyed so they would not fall into the hands of the enemy.\textsuperscript{14}

The greatest naval accomplishment by the Confederacy was the capture of the Navy Yard at Norfolk. There the Confederate ironclad, the Virginia was

\textsuperscript{12} Still, 291-292.
\textsuperscript{13} Still, 304.
\textsuperscript{14} Still, 303-304.
born after converting the frigate, Merrimack into an ironclad ramming vessel. The seizing of the Norfolk Ship Yard gave the Confederacy some one-thousand pieces of heavy ordinance which was the primary source of heavy ordinance for the entire Confederacy. This ordinance was quickly shipped throughout the South to arm its warships. The CSS Virginia would prove to be the most valuable ship in the Confederate Navy as the famous battle between the CSS Virginia and the USS Monitor would prove. Though each side would claim victory in the stalemate of the first battle between two ironclad warships, for the Confederacy this was certainly a triumph for an agricultural nation to have produced such a ship and to have engaged in the first such battle.

The Civil War was an example of modern warfare because naval ships were used to support ground forces rather than merely for ship to ship combat. So important was the gunfire of the Union ships against Confederate ground forces that General Lee opted to pull back from the coastal regions in Georgia and Carolina in order to avoid the devastating fire from Union vessels. Naval fire made such an impression on Lee that beginning in early 1862, all of Lee’s offensive operations would take place out of the range of the Union’s naval guns.

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16 Still, 299-300.
The value of the Navy was the main reason that the Confederacy, despite the lack of resources, attempted to construct some twenty-six ironclads to aid in its defense and break the Union blockade. Even with the setbacks and shortages, at least thirteen of these did see action during the war. In the end however, the lack of resources, the strength of the Union Navy, the stranglehold of the blockade, and the shortage of manpower would allow the North to dominate the rivers and coastal areas in the South. While the North was able to replace any of it’s losses of men and material, the South could ill afford the long and costly war of attrition that the Civil War became.\(^\text{18}\)

In 1860 the North had two and one-half times the population of the South, including the three and one-half million slaves held in the South. If the slaves were taken out of the equation that advantage on the part of the North becomes closer to four to one.\(^\text{19}\) The South’s extreme deficits in manpower and industry would be magnified by the nature of the world’s first modern war. In a war that saw between 600,000 and 700,000 deaths, the South was unable to withstand the war of attrition.\(^\text{20}\)

The Union was able to amass an army that was between 2,500,000 and 2,750,000 strong while the South could only muster between 750,000 and 1,250,000.

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20 McPherson, 854.
Due to poor records the real strength of the Confederate army is uncertain but even with the higher estimate, the South was outnumbered by more than two to one. In a war of attrition, numbers are the deciding factor and the inability of the South to replace their troop losses would doom the Confederacy. The proof of this fact is in the numbers. While the Union lost an estimated 360,000 men to disease and battlefield casualties and the South lost an estimated 260,000 men, the Union was far less impacted by the losses due to their larger army and higher overall population.

Mortality was greater among Confederate wounded, because of inferior medical service. While the exact number of civilian casualties related to the Civil War are unknown the addition of even a conservative estimate of those casualties would drive the total death rate for the Civil War to equal all other United States wars combined through Vietnam.

In the same way the South could not replace their locomotives and infrastructure as the North could, they could not replace their dead soldiers either. These deficits in manpower and industry would spell doom for the Confederate States of America. As the war dragged on into a war of attrition, the South had too many deficiencies to survive. Perhaps the first issue to weaken the South was the lack of a powerful central government to unify their fledgling nation in order to orchestrate a

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21 McPherson, 773-853.

22 McPherson, 775-854.

23 McPherson, 854.
modern war.

Cotton was so important to the South that the embattled nation “raised two armies, one for war that was made up of the majority of white southerners between the ages of seventeen and fifty and a second army, almost as large to grow cotton made up of mostly slaves.”\(^{24}\) The manpower of the second army could have been better used to assist the war effort by growing food or performing tasks that had to be performed by the military. The use of slaves by the military or the government was always opposed by the southern planters who saw their wealth as their slaves and their land. “The patriotic planters would willingly send their flesh and blood to the army but not their slaves.” This conflict would continue throughout the war. “In 1864 when Robert E. Lee declared the immediate necessity for the service of 5,000 negroes for thirty days, the planters objected vigorously, essentially handicapping the Confederacy’s ability to wage war.”\(^{25}\) The southern planters put their own economic needs above those of their new nation. The southern planters found it more palatable to part with their family members than their slave property in their struggle for sovereignty for the South.

The reluctance of the southern planters to allow their slaves to be used by the army for the war effort led the Confederacy to introduce conscription and


\(^{25}\) Lebergott, p. 62-63.
impressions of slaves in order to try to meet its needs. The impressments and conscriptions were never sufficient to meet the needs of the Confederate military, and were often met by resistance from the planters who would work to politically block such attempts. The devotion of the South to growing cotton during the war not only drained resources from the war effort but also served to keep cotton prices from rising in the South as the Confederacy had hoped they would. Had the Confederacy cut cotton production and withheld cotton as the leadership had envisioned, France and Great Britain may have been more apt to provide aid to the South. This strategy would have taken time however, as the huge 1860 crop had left Great Britain flush with cotton at the start of the war. For the Confederate strategy to work, there had to be a unity of purpose that only a strong central government could muster.


27 Trexler, p. 213-214.

28 Lebergott, p. 64-65.

Chapter II

The first issue that must be examined in a study of the economic preparedness of the Confederacy for war with the North is the over-reliance on “King Cotton.” The South held the dominant position in the world cotton market in the antebellum years. This dominance led to the belief by Confederate leaders to believe that the monopoly of cotton would translate into political might. The idea that cotton was king was a theme that was echoed throughout the South and fueled expectations of victory and independence.30

The South allowed commercial thoughts and agendas to enter the political and military arenas. The belief that a cotton embargo would force Europe to come to the aid of the Confederacy was rooted in the “King Cotton” mentality. The rationale for this belief was that the monopoly of the cotton market put the South at the top of the world economy and thus the world economy would suffer if the South held back cotton shipments to Europe for even one year.31 Southerners believed that Great Britain was so dependent on the South’s cotton that it “would be brought to its


The blind belief in that philosophy doomed the Confederacy from the start.

Unfortunately for the South, South Carolina continued to ship cotton to Great Britain even after it seceded from the Union. The Confederacy, despite its reliance on withholding cotton from Europe, never passed any legislation to ensure that cotton would be universally embargoed. Since the South was essentially a one product economy, there was no incentive for individual cotton growers to hold back their product. The lack of economic diversity was a quandary that plagued the Confederacy throughout the war.

For the South, there was no Plan B. So much emphasis was placed on the power of “King Cotton” that little or no consideration was given to what they would do if withholding cotton failed to bring aid from Europe. The South hinged its entire fate on the power of cotton. In 1858 Senator James Henry Hammond of South Carolina replied to Senator William H. Seward of New York:

"Without the firing of a gun, without drawing a sword, should they [Northerners] make war upon us [Southerners], we could bring the whole world to our feet. What would happen if no cotton was furnished

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32 Lebergott, p. 60.

33 Lebergott, p. 61.
for three years? . . England would topple headlong and carry the whole
civilized world with her. No, you dare not make war on cotton! No
power on earth dares make war upon it. Cotton is King."³⁴

The reliance on "King Cotton," obscured the reality that, the southern planters
were deeply in debt to northern merchants and banks. Thus, while rallying behind the
main cash crop of the Confederate States, the South was actually struggling to survive
from the start of hostilities. While the South appeared to be prosperous on the surface,
the reality was that the Confederate States held only "30 percent of the national
wealth (in the form of real and personal property), they had only 12 percent of the
circulating currency and 21 percent of the banking assets."³⁵ In essence, the prosperity
of the South was vastly overstated and dependent on the banking institutions of the
North for their survival. Cotton and slaves were only valuable if the South could turn
them into money and money was a commodity that the South had little of. The wealth
of the South was not liquid as was the industrial North. Southern wealth was tied to
the land and the future sale of cotton. Northern banks were the machine that buoyed
the South by extending credit and assigning value to the non-liquid assets of the
southern planters.

The South also struggled with developing a national tax system and
means of funding the government and the war. The fact that most of the South’s

³⁴ The University of North Carolina Collection, The Papers of James Henry Hammond.

³⁵ McPherson, James, Battle Cry of Freedom, 437.
assets were non-liquid made raising money from the sale of Confederate bonds insufficient for meeting the financial needs of the Confederacy. Most of the assets of the South were in the form of land and slaves and thus, were not useful to the Confederate government as a means of raising funds.\textsuperscript{36}

The Confederate government realized quickly that while the southern people might lack cash, they did possess cotton. The realization that cotton could replace cash in the short term, led the Confederate government to adapt the machinery for levying taxes to use the promises of planters to pledge portions of their cotton crop sales to the government in exchange for Confederate bonds. The problem was that, the Confederate government had no preexisting tax collection system that could be adapted to the cotton system, one had to be created. A second problem that became apparent was that, some planters failed to follow through on their pledges and instead sold their cotton on the open market or illegally to northern consumers.\textsuperscript{37} The end result was that the Confederacy was never able to meet the financial needs and goals of the Confederate government. The lack of economic diversity that existed in the prewar South did not help the Confederate government buttress its economic health.

Considering the lack of industry in the South at the time of the Civil War, the failure to ensure a steady flow of goods from Europe to wage their war of independence was a very serious mistake on the part of the South. Since the only military materials that the South had at their disposal at the onset of war were those

\textsuperscript{36} McPherson, James, \textit{Battle Cry of Freedom}, 437.

\textsuperscript{37} McPherson, James, \textit{Battle Cry of Freedom}, 438.
seized in the arsenals they took over, their stores of munitions and arms was limited from the start. None of the arsenals south of Virginia even had the machinery necessary to produce arms and ordinance thus, the South began a war without the means to replace or produce the materials needed to wage war. 38

The lack of industry in the South meant that the Confederacy had to create a military industrial complex from scratch, while simultaneously waging war. While the South performed incredible feats in creating many arsenals to manufacture arms and ordinance within Southern borders, the lack of preexisting industry, underdeveloped natural resources, and the inefficient and disconnected infrastructure of the South made this work slow and difficult. 39 The railroads in the South proved to be the greatest problem for Confederate progress and transportation. The South also suffered from serious economic deficiencies. The lack of liquid assets and banking institutions put the South at a tremendous disadvantage to the diversified and industrialized North. The reliance on the power of “king cotton,” and the failure of the southern leaders to ensure the economic stability of their fledgling nation doomed the Confederacy from the start.


Chapter III

The main obstacle to a united Confederacy was, the Confederacy itself. With the ideal of states rights and democracy as its binding force, the South hamstrung itself from the beginning. From the very beginning, the Confederate government created a Constitution that was similar to the American Constitution, however, the Confederate Constitution sought to bolster the conservatism that had weakened in the Union and it emphasized states rights over a strong central government.40 The Confederate leadership failed to ensure alliances with France and Great Britain despite their goal of gaining foreign recognition of their sovereign status. The Confederate government made numerous comparisons between their struggle for independence and the American Revolution however, they did not make the crucial alliances with foreign powers that the founding fathers did. The Confederacy was at a disadvantage in military strategy compared with their northern foe. While the North was relatively unified in their purpose and strategy, the South was a divided nation with more weight given to the needs of the individual states than to the needs of the Confederacy as a whole.

The clearest indicator of the value of state’s rights in the Confederate Constitution was in the fact that the issue of slavery, which had such a profound effect on the decision to secede from the Union in the first place, is not established by the Confederate Constitution. The issue of slavery is left up to the individual states within

40 Hattaway and Beringer, 26-27 and The University of Tennessee, Constitution of the Confederate States of America.
the Confederacy. The guarantee of protection for slave property is however, found in three places within the Confederate Constitution. In article 1, section 8, the Confederate Constitution stated that "No... law denying or impairing the right of property in negro slaves shall be passed." In article 4, section 2, the Confederate Constitution guarantees that "the citizens of each state... shall have the right to transit and sojourn in any state of this Confederacy, with their slaves...; and the right of property in said slaves shall not be thereby impaired." Finally, in article 4, section 3, "in all such territory, the institution of negro slavery, as it now exists in the Confederate States, shall be recognized and protected by Congress and the territorial government." This, ensured that any new territory added to the Confederate States of America would be open to the institution of slavery.

The reason that the issue of slavery and State’s rights was so central to the Constitution of the Confederate States of America lay largely in the fact that the South was predominantly rural and agricultural land under the control of a relatively small number of elite agricultural magnates. The South was at a distinct disadvantage to the North in every facet of national valuation. The South had few rail lines, few sizable cities, poor roads and little industrial development as compared to the North. No matter how the numbers are aligned, the South appeared much weaker than the

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41 Hattaway and Beringer, 26-27 and The University of Tennessee, Constitution of the Confederate States of America.
North.\textsuperscript{42} The numbers however, did not guarantee the outcome of the war. As the American Revolution proved, a numerically inferior force, can win, if the desire is strong enough and the strategy is sound enough to overcome the disadvantage. In order for this outcome to be had however, the weaker side must have, “strong leadership, and firm determination among its people, there must be superior strategic decisions efficiently and effectively executed and most importantly, the people’s will to continue the struggle must be maintained.”\textsuperscript{43} The key to this strategy is unity. The Confederacy however, was far from united. Early in the war President Davis was keenly aware of a division between the upper and lower southern states and he worked feverishly to mend any dissention and maintain a united South.\textsuperscript{44} The emphasis on State’s rights over national loyalty would make the efforts of President Davis woefully inadequate. The individualistic and regional tendencies of the southern establishment were too deeply ingrained in the southern ethos to be undone in time to assist the war effort.

From a military standpoint, the cordon strategy of defense utilized by the Confederate military was a poor choice for a nation divided by insufficient infrastructure, rails and roads. The cordon strategy required the Confederate armies to fight a defensive war along its entire border with the North. The concept of fighting a defensive war is risky to say the least and is more so when the border that is to be

\textsuperscript{42} Hattaway and Beringer, 34-35.
\textsuperscript{43} Hattaway and Beringer, 35.
\textsuperscript{44} Rice University Collection, \textit{The Papers of Jefferson Davis, vol. 1-12}. 
defended is both expansive and disconnected. As previously noted, the South was a hodgepodge of incompatible rail lines and the transportation of troops from the east to the west was a difficult and time consuming process. While the North could freely and rapidly shuttle its troops along the border with the South, the Confederate military faced a logistical nightmare to position its troops to block the northern advances. 

Perhaps because many of the southern secessionists believed that the North would not oppose the separation, there was little thought given to the need for a centralized government with the power, money, and authority to wage a full-scale war. This miscalculation by the Confederacy was a major problem once war had begun. Lacking a united front to wage such a prolonged war, the Confederacy instead relied on overly optimistic assessments of their military strength and value to the world economy. To further exacerbate the shortcomings of the South, they also underestimated the might and resolve of the North.

By believing that the North “lacked the courage and motivation to fight a prolonged war, the South also failed to comprehend the need for foreign aid and

45 Hattaway and Berringer, 34-35.

recognition of sovereignty." 47 Historian Henry Blumenthal cites three viewpoints that adversely affected the Confederacy from the start. The first, is the "King Cotton" diplomacy previously mentioned. The second, was the overly optimistic view that Europe would eagerly and swiftly recognize the South due to a shared dislike of Yankee political and commercial policies. The third viewpoint was that the Confederacy could and would succeed on its own and thus would not need to become dependent on foreign powers. 48 The commonality among these views was that victory would lead to recognition and a sovereign South would be born. Though overly optimistic and simplistic, these three views were enthusiastically embraced by the majority of southern leaders in the antebellum and early years of the war.

The Confederate leadership were so certain of the correctness of their beliefs that any vague indication of support from foreign nations was taken as gospel and used to justify their optimism and belief in southern victory. 49 Recognition seemed to be the ultimate prize that the Confederacy desired and the courting of French and British merchants in the years preceding secession fed the belief that recognition would be forthcoming. 50 The commonalities between the southern plantation owners and the British aristocracy seemed to indicate that a co-operative


economic alliance could be formed that would lead to a political alliance between Britain and the South. The Southern leadership believed that Britain’s need for cotton to fuel its booming textile industry, would equate to support for the South in order to stave off financial ruin. The South believed that the British fleet would actively oppose the northern blockade of the South to ensure that the flow of cotton to Britain would continue unimpeded.51

President Davis tried many different methods to achieve recognition of his fledgling nation, but most revolved around cotton. He often portrayed the South as a peaceful nation merely seeking its independence from a tyrannical northern aggressor. He attempted to get the world to see the Confederacy as a moderate and civilized administration in search of recognition as a peaceful and sovereign nation.52 Unfortunately for Davis, he portrayed the South as too powerful and too independent to warrant the immediate aid from the foreign powers that could have assisted his government in achieving independence. “As late as November 7, 1864, Davis told the Confederate Congress that all he desired was recognition, believing that despite the precarious position the South was in, it would bolster the morale of the Confederate people and embolden those northerners who favored peace.”53

52 Blumenthal, Henry, “Confederate Diplomacy,” p. 156.
With peace not forthcoming, the Confederacy focused their attention on breaking the Union blockade. As President Davis stated in his second inaugural address to the Congress of the Confederate States on November 18, 1861:

The Confederacy was feeling the effects of the strangulating Anaconda strategy of the North in 1864. The South desperately needed to get supplies from abroad and the Union blockade was making that difficult. Davis only exacerbated the situation in his repeated calls for foreign nations to ignore what he referred to as the "ineffective blockade." Feeling that such views must be taken by the neutral nations of the Earth, I have caused the evidence to be collected which proves completely the utter inefficiency of the proclaimed blockade of our coast and shall direct it to be laid before such Governments as shall afford us the means of being heard -- But although we should be benefitted by the enforcement of this law so solemnly declared by the great Powers of Europe, we are not dependent on that enforcement for the successful prosecution of the war. As long as hostilities continue the Confederate States will exhibit a steadily increasing capacity to furnish their troops with food, clothing and arms.54

54 Rice University, Jefferson Davis' Second Inaugural Address to Congress of the Confederate States, Richmond November 18th 1861.
As Blumenthal puts it, “The Davis administration with an apparent genius for accomplishing the opposite of what it intended, described the blockade extraordinarily inappropriately. An ineffective blockade justified less intervention than an effective one.” This failure was a part of the great comedy of errors that came to mark the Davis administration and the folly of the Lost Cause.

The Confederacy next tried to capitalize on the blockade by creating artificial cotton scarcity to prod Europe into action. They burned cotton crops and tried to make the blockade seem more effective. Once again the South fell to the fallacy that “cotton was king” and the sooner that Europe felt deprived of it, the sooner they would come to the aid of the South. These attempts to pressure Europe all failed, perhaps it was just too little, too late.

The next step was to warn Europe that a Northern victory would lead to Northern aggression against Canada and Mexico. This constituted a not so subtle threat that Yankee aggression would not end with the demise of the South, which backfired, as it only served to make Britain and France more wary of provoking the United States and hurting their own trade interests. It may also have made the European powers believe that, if the North was so aggressive, that they may compensate for the loss of the South by moving northward. In either case it was in

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56 Blumenthal, p. 157.
Europe’s best interest to remain neutral and certainly not be seen as giving aid to the South.\textsuperscript{57}

Unfortunately for the South, they realized far too late that they required much more foreign assistance than they had originally believed. It was only as the war dragged on and the Union blockade took its toll on the Southern economy and its ability to sustain itself, that the Confederacy saw the need for a diplomatic solution.\textsuperscript{58} Another unforeseen result of the blockade was the increasing efforts of Britain and France to cultivate cotton under their control in India and Algeria as well as the increasing use of wool and linen. Cotton was no longer king and the South never had the power they believed they had.\textsuperscript{59}

By early 1863 it seemed that the minority of Confederates including Vice-President Stephens were correct in their belief that it was an illusion to count on Europe’s co-operation to gain recognition. That Confederate minority believed that a predatory Europe would welcome a war between the North and South that would ravage and deplete the two nations to their benefit. The military might of the North and South as well as their modern weaponry and ironclad warships was extremely threatening to the European powers. The threat they posed to European colonies kept

\textsuperscript{57} Blumenthal, Henry, “Confederate Diplomacy,” p. 158.

\textsuperscript{58} Blumenthal, Henry, “Confederate Diplomacy,” p. 158.

\textsuperscript{59} Blumenthal, Henry, “Confederate Diplomacy,” p. 159.
Europe from antagonizing the United States. The only way for the South to gain recognition was through victory and offensive operations in the North.\textsuperscript{60}

The problem with the Confederate plans for victory to gain recognition was that Jefferson Davis felt that any escalation of hostilities in the North by the South would be returned several fold by the North. The rationale of the militant Southerners was that their army was "invincible" and thus victory was the only result they could fathom. Ironically it was likely the "boastful" references by the Southerners to their military might and invincibility that kept Britain and France from coming to the aid of the Confederacy early in the war.\textsuperscript{61} Once again the Confederate government had achieved the opposite of what it intended by using a flawed diplomatic strategy. Why would Britain or France feel compelled to come to the aid of the South, if the South could stand on their own? Why would they take the risks or losses associated with warfare if it was not necessary? Furthermore, "it is well documented that many in the British and French governments believed the Southern boasts and felt the North would not be able to conquer the South."\textsuperscript{62} The South was a victim of their own propaganda and failed to accomplish their goals. A weaker South would have attracted more foreign assistance and intervention than a strong South.

In spite of the frequent comparisons of the South's struggle for independence

\textsuperscript{60} Blumenthal, Henry, "Confederate Diplomacy," p. 160-161.

\textsuperscript{61} Blumenthal, Henry, "Confederate Diplomacy," p. 162.

\textsuperscript{62} Blumenthal, Henry, "Confederate Diplomacy," p. 162.
and the American Revolution, the Confederacy failed to court foreign assistance from the beginning. Only as the tide turned against the South did the Confederacy actively seek foreign aid and by then it was too late. As the conclusion of Jefferson Davis’ second inaugural address to Congress shows, the Southern government became victims of their own rhetoric.

"While the war which is waged to take from us the right of self-government can never attain that end, it remains to be seen how far it may work a revolution in the industrial system of the world, which may carry suffering to other lands contemporaneously with as well as to our own. In the meantime we shall continue this struggle in humble dependence upon Providence from whose searching scrutiny we cannot conceal the secrets of our hearts, and to whose rule we confidently submit our destinies. For the rest we shall depend upon ourselves - Liberty is always won where there exists the unconquerable will to be free, and we have reason to know the strength that is given by a conscious sense, not only of the magnitude, but of the righteousness of our cause."  

63 Rice University Collection, Jefferson Davis' Speech at Richmond, Spotswood Hotel, June 1, 1861  
64 Rice University, Jefferson Davis' Second Inaugural Address to Congress of the
The political miscalculations and overly optimistic beliefs held by the South ensured that foreign aid would not materialize. The failure of the Confederacy to use their cotton crops to their advantage by leveraging their stores for goods from Europe meant that Europe had no vested interest in helping protect the cotton stores of the South.⁶³

Jefferson Davis acknowledges that the foreign intervention that the Confederate leadership was hoping for was in all likelihood not to be, in his communication to the Confederate Congress on May 2, 1864 in which he states:

In considering the state of the country, the reflection is naturally suggested, that this is the third Congress of the Confederate States of America. The provisional Government was formed, its Congress held four sessions, lived its appointed term, and passed away. The permanent Government was then organised, its different Departments established, a Congress elected which also held four sessions, served its full

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constitutional term, and expired. You, the second Congress under the permanent Government, are now assembled at the time and place appointed by law for commencing your session. All these events have passed into history, notwithstanding the threat of our prompt subjugation made three years ago by a people that presume to assert a title to govern States whose separate and independent sovereignty was recognised by treaty with France and Great Britain in the last century, and remained unquestioned for nearly three generations. \(^{66}\)

Davis further states in his address that the war was forced upon the South by northern aggression.

Yet these very governments, in disregard of duty and treaty obligations which bind them to recognise as independent, Virginia and other Confederate States, persist in countenancing by moral influence, if not in aiding by unfair and partial action, the claim set up by the Executive of a foreign government, to exercise

\(^{66}\) Rice University Collection, *The Papers of Jefferson Davis*, vol. 1-12.
despotic sway over the States thus recognised, and
treat the invasion of them by their former limited and
special agent, as though it were the attempt of a
Sovereign to suppress a rebellion against lawful
authority. Ungenerous advantage has been taken of our
present condition, and our rights have been violated,
our vessels of war detained in ports to which they had
been invited by proclamations of neutrality, and in one
instance our flag also insulted where the sacred right of
asylum was supposed to be secure; while one of these
governments has contented itself with simply
deprecating by deferential representations the conduct
of our enemy in the constantly recurring instances of
his contemptuous disregard of neutral rights and
flagrant violations of public law.\textsuperscript{67}

Davis goes on to illustrate his misunderstanding of the situation that his fledgling
government was in in his statement to the Confederate Congress on May 2, 1864:

It may be that foreign governments, like our enemies,

have mistaken our desire for peace unreservedly

expressed, for evidence of exhaustion, and have thence

\textsuperscript{67} Rice University Collection, \textit{The Papers of Jefferson Davis, vol. 1-12}. 
inferred the probability of success in the effort to
subjugate or exterminate the millions of human beings
who in these States prefer any fate to submission to
their savage assailants. I see no prospect of an early
change in the course heretofore pursued by these
governments; but when this delusion shall have been
dispelled, and when our independence, by the valor
and fortitude of our people, shall have been won
against all the hostile influences combined against us,
and can no longer be ignored by open foes or professed
neutrals, this war will have left with its proud
memories, a record of many wrongs which it may not
misbecome us to forgive, some for which we may not
properly forbear from demanding redress. In the
meantime it is enough for us to know that every
avenue of negotiation is closed against us: that our
enemy is making renewed and strenuous efforts for our
destruction, and that the sole resource for us as a
people secure in the justice of our cause, and holding
our liberties to be more precious than all other earthly
possessions, is to combine and apply every available
element of power for their defence and preservation.\textsuperscript{68}

Despite the statements made by Davis in his address, the South failed to unify the elements that they did possess for the good of the Confederacy and its war effort. Time after time, the good of the individual state or individual planter took precedent over the needs of the Confederacy. Individualism and individual economic prosperity hurt the Confederacy throughout the war.

The North had a powerful President with the authority to fight a war and bring the Union together for a common goal of bringing the South back into the United States of America. The South by contrast was a deeply divided nation with a weak central government and operated more like a loose affiliation of states than a united nation. This division in the South was rooted in its commitment to state's rights and commercial interests. While the Confederacy spoke of united commitment to the cause of rebellion, their actions were quite different.

Beginning with the failure of the Confederacy to take control and capitalize on it's biggest asset, namely slaves, the South allowed the plantation owners to exert more power than the government.\textsuperscript{69} The failure of the Confederate government to take control of the cotton stores and trade also put the planters

\textsuperscript{68} Rice University Collection, \textit{The Papers of Jefferson Davis}, vol. 1-12.

\textsuperscript{69} Trexler, Harrison A., "The Opposition of Planters," p. 213-214.
financial concerns above that of the South as a whole. The seeds of destruction were planted right in the Constitution of the Confederacy.

The Confederate Constitution vested all of the power to raise funds, collect taxes, control trade, to raise and maintain armies, to mint and establish the value of money, to declare war, to make laws and to decide how money will be spent in Congress. Worse, all of these powers were based on a two-thirds majority vote in the Confederate Congress. Without a two-thirds majority, no actions could be taken. The President of the Confederacy was limited even in times of war from exercising any authority as commander-in-chief of the armed forces without the two-thirds majority vote in the Congress.  

The need for a two-thirds majority vote in the Confederate Congress would make it difficult for President Davis to make swift and critical decisions regarding the fast paced modern war the South was engaged in. Congress by nature was a divided entity driven by the concerns of each member’s individual state. Unlike the North, where Congress served as a check on the power of the President, in the South, Congress was the power. The problem was, that the power of Congress in the South was not unified with a common purpose. Each state sought to ensure the survival and prosperity of itself, often at the expense of the Confederacy as a whole. South Carolina continuing to ship cotton after it seceded in order to ensure its own

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71 The University of Tennessee, Constitution of the Confederate States of America.
prosperity despite the Confederate government's belief in the power of King Cotton and the need to starve Great Britain and France so that they would come to the aid of the South to ensure that cotton would flow again.\(^2\) Regional pride, regional interests, and regional armies made it difficult if not impossible for the Confederacy to fight a unified war.

Further exacerbating the problem of division within the Confederacy was the fact that the South was struggling to create a nation while waging war. Confederate identity and nationalism were constructed out of a combination of institutions, rhetoric and symbols. But, contrary to what many historians argue, the construction or creation of Confederate nationalism was not a major problem. The speed with which white Southerners, shed their American identity and came to see themselves as Confederates, was amazing. Southern whites embraced the idea of a Confederacy with a fury and seldom looked back. Where Confederates struggled, and suffered the aches of their new national identity, was in building an institutional framework and unified structure for the nation. Thus, each challenge to the national government, whether it came in the form of political squabbling, class resentment, material needs, or desertion, was perceived as a crisis of epic proportions, as illustrated in Davis' speech at Macon, Georgia on September 23, 1864:

\[\text{It is not proper for me to speak of the number of men in}\]

\(^2\) Lebergott, Stanley, "Why the South Lost," p. 60.
the field. But this I will say, that two-thirds of our men are absent - some sick, some wounded, but most of them absent without leave. If one-half the men now absent without leave will return to duty, we can defeat the enemy. With that hope I am going to the front. I may not realize this hope, but I know there are men there who have looked death in the face too often to despond now. Let no one despond. Let no one distrust, and remember that if genius is the beau ideal, hope is the reality. 73

Despite acknowledging the problems facing the Confederacy, Davis still believes that victory is within the grasp of the South. The propaganda that the southern leaders expounded became the very hope, that they clung to in the face of adversity. As Davis states in his address, he believes that any bit of hope will somehow turn the tide of war in favor of the South. The reality was that it would take foreign intervention or a dramatic turn of events for the South to have any chance at victory.

Problems that an established nation like the Union could handle with ease, seemed far more damaging and threatening to a Confederate nation fighting for its survival. And as history would show, the Confederate nation ultimately could not withstand a combination of internal and external problems and pressures, and

73 Rice University Collection, Jefferson Davis' Speech at Macon, Georgia, September 23, 1864.
eventually collapsed in April, 1865. 74

Conclusion

In conclusion, the South was unprepared for war in 1861 but historians cannot know for certain that this doomed the Confederacy. Southern attitudes and ideology helped ensure that unpreparedness would be combined with a fatal rush to war and overconfidence. The deficits in manpower, industry, and infrastructure were all understated by the Southern government. The Confederate government had the same information available to them that historians have today and thus, knew that the North was stronger in terms of manpower, infrastructure, resources, and industry, yet the decision was made to go to war. Knowing the strengths of their enemy and the weaknesses of their own fledgling nation, why go on the offensive at Fort Sumter? Why rush into a war with a strong and established nation before the Confederate nation had been fully created? The reason for urgency can be understood in terms of the southern mindset and quasi-aristocratic culture.

The Confederacy was born of unrealistic expectations and misguided beliefs. The belief that the southern gentleman was the equivalent of British aristocracy fostered a fictive kinship that carried far more weight in the minds of the southern elites than it did in the minds of their British counterparts. The southern leadership also failed to comprehend the difference between the British merchant support and the British government’s position on the issue of support and recognition of the Confederacy. The Confederacy built its strategy on false assumptions and poor diplomacy. Looking at the cause of the Confederacy holistically however, the
outcome of the Civil War was not a foregone conclusion. There were opportunities
for success and ultimate victory that the South failed to capitalize on because of their
shortsightedness and rush to war.

From the belief that the North was unwilling to fight, to the belief that
the world revolved around cotton, the Confederate strategy was ill-conceived. The
weakness of the Southern government made it impossible to forge a unified
economic, political, diplomatic and military strategy. In order to win the war, the
South would have had to prepare before going to war, instead, they struggled to
prepare during the war. Time was not on their side.

The South was obviously aware of the materials, industry, resources,
and manpower that the North had and the South did not, yet the South still went to
war in 1861. This does not speak to the preparedness of the Confederacy. This speaks
to the Quixotic mindset of a group of militant idealists who fail to comprehend the
irrationality of their actions. Thus, it can only be concluded that the South was wholly
unprepared for war with the North, and the southern leadership failed to adapt to the
circumstances that they were faced with. For all of the comparisons that the
Confederate leadership made between their struggle for independence and the
American Revolution, they failed to utilize the same strategies that the Founding
Fathers used. The Confederate leadership did not actively pursue foreign alliances and
get assurances of recognition for their fledgling nation until it was too late.

The South was at a great disadvantage to the North in every category of
evaluation. The South had no Navy or shipbuilding facilities within their borders at the start of the war. The Confederacy had little industry with which to produce the materials and armaments required to wage war before the start of hostilities. The rail system that existed in the South on the eve of war was disconnected, incompatible, unfinished and inadequate to support a military defense of their border with the North. The Confederacy lacked the unified front required to build a strong and cohesive government that could wage a modern war and develop foreign alliances. In spite of the deficiencies that plagued the South, the leadership rushed towards war.

Had the South taken a different approach to their struggle for independence, the outcome may have been very different. In the end however, the opportunities for victory and recognition were missed or squandered by the Confederate leadership. Opportunities on the battlefield as well as in political circles were lost by the Confederate leadership and the end result was the defeat of the Confederate States of America.
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