

## The Confederacy: Doomed by its Foundation

The Civil War is undoubtedly one of the most significant events in American History. In a great threat to the American Experiment, eleven southern states succeeded from the Union and formed their own government, the Confederacy. For the next four years, the United States was plagued by an unprecedentedly violent war which killed more Americans than all previous wars combined. During the Civil War, both sides professed absolute confidence in their eventual victory. Changing times, however, have also altered perception of the Confederacy's chances. Directly following Lee's surrender, many southern leaders adopted the "Lost Cause" ideology. This line of thought argued that the Confederacy was doomed to defeat by the larger and better supplied Union. This conviction allowed southerners to idealize their leaders. The Confederate commanders did not make costly mistakes, or lose due to human error, they were simply fighting an unwinnable war. Many historians concur. Historian Shelby Foote claimed "I think the North fought [the Civil War] with one hand behind its back. If there had been more southern victories, and a lot more, the North simply would have brought the other arm out from behind its back. I don't think the South ever had a chance to win that war."<sup>1</sup> Similarly, William C. Davis wrote disparagingly of the idea that changing the outcomes of certain battles could have saved the Confederacy.<sup>2</sup> Roger L. Ransom, however, questions this view. He contends that northern victory was far from inevitable, calling the idea "there was an endless supply of manpower and materials ... there would always have been battalions of fresh Union troops just around the bend" counterfactual.<sup>3</sup> What all of these arguments fail to consider, however, is that the

---

<sup>1</sup> Shelby Foote, "Men at War: An Interview with Shelby Foote," interview by Geoffrey Ward, *The Civil War: An Illustrated History*, transcript, PBS, 1990.

<sup>2</sup> William C. Davis, *The Cause Lost: Myths and Realities of the Confederacy* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1996), 139.

<sup>3</sup> Roger L. Ransom, *The Confederate States of America: What Might Have Been* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton, 2005), 76.

Confederacy was doomed not solely by its numeric and economic inferiority. The Confederacy's cause was destroyed by the very values it was fighting to protect. Indeed, the founding documents and policies of the Confederacy are antithetical to sustaining the war effort necessary to defeat the Union.

Generally, the Confederate Constitution is extremely similar to that of the United States. In fact, many delegates lobbied to name the succeeding states "The Republic of Washington." Others wanted to call themselves simply the United States of America; they fancied the northerners as the actual traitors.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately for the southerners, the few changes they did make to America's founding document were indicative of an ideology that would prove their undoing. The first change came in the Preamble. The U.S. Constitution begins with "We the People of the United States, in order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common Defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America."<sup>5</sup> The Confederate Constitution changed the first clause. Instead of "We the People," they wrote "We, the people of the Confederate States, each State acting in its sovereign and independent character."<sup>6</sup> This is significant for two reasons. First, more symbolically, altering this sentence to explicitly establish that the people were acting through representatives moved the document further away from the ideals of Democracy, and made evident an attitude of aristocratic superiority notably absent from the original

---

<sup>4</sup> Bruce Catton, *The Coming Fury*, vol. 1, 3 vols., American Civil War Trilogy (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1961), 207.

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Constitution, Preamble.

<sup>6</sup> Confederate States Constitution, Preamble.

Constitution.<sup>7</sup> Second, this alteration clearly articulated the Confederate dedication to State Sovereignty.

The importance of States' rights in the Confederacy ran counter to a successful war effort. President Jefferson Davis was rendered incapable of imposing martial law and suspending habeas corpus. Lincoln, in contrast, was able to effectively utilize both of these measures.<sup>8</sup> The governors of North Carolina and Georgia went so far as to resist joining their forces with those of other Confederate States. They also hoarded excess supplies for the use of their state alone.<sup>9</sup> These men and supplies could have been better used elsewhere, especially in a war finding the Confederacy vastly outnumbered and out supplied.

In a broader sense, State independence was merely a manifestation of a larger problem: the Confederacy was anti-centralization and anti-federal power. Fighting a war without a strong central government is in effect going to battle with both hands tied behind your back. A strong central government was imperative during the Civil War. This became apparent during the draft. The issue of creating and maintaining an army is an excellent example of the southern antigovernment sentiment severely curtailing the war effort. The Union struggled with similar problems. Both began to mobilize by requesting volunteers. By the end of 1862, however, it became clear that an all volunteer army would not emerge victorious from the Civil War. Both governments turned to forced conscription, and both struggled mightily with the repercussions of this decision. Unhappy New Yorkers participated in violent protests deemed draft riots. Nonetheless, the Union was able to greatly increase voluntary service, so the draft was

---

<sup>7</sup> Catton, *The Coming Fury*, 207.

<sup>8</sup> "Notice of Suspension of Habeas Corpus in Boston," Winfield Scott to Justin Dimick, October 19, 1861, , accessed February 16, 2019, <https://www.gilderlehrman.org/content/notice-suspension-habeas-corpus-boston-justin-dimick>.

<sup>9</sup> Allan Brinkley, *American History: Connecting with the Past*, 15th ed. (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill Education, 2015), 379-80.

successful. The Confederate government faced far more resistance. They passed the Conscription Act, necessitating white men from eighteen to thirty-five to serve three years in the military.<sup>10</sup> Tremendous opposition to this level of government interference led the Confederacy to allow men to buy their way out of service and exempt one man from each plantation containing at least twenty slaves.<sup>11</sup> This intensified the already apparent class tensions in the South.<sup>12</sup>

Additionally, the Confederate Constitution barred Congress from “appropriat[ing] money for any internal improvement intended to facilitate commerce.”<sup>13</sup> This draconian policy vastly limited the Confederacy’s ability to develop infrastructure.<sup>14</sup> In contrast to the rapidly expanding railroads in the North, southern railroads were few and far between.<sup>15</sup> This presented serious challenges in supplying and transporting troops and goods. Such issues were exacerbated when Union forces captured the Mississippi River in July of 1863. The Union could then transport supplies and men throughout the Western Theater. The men in gray had to march.

The South fought the Civil War to protect and maintain their way of life and preserve their economic system. Secessionists believed that their agrarian, slave based society was a positive good worth dying for.<sup>16</sup> This agricultural, aristocratic society did not lend itself to an industrial war. In 1860, the South contained only 14.7 percent of the nation’s factories. Those

---

<sup>10</sup> Conscription Act, Confederate Congress (1862).

<sup>11</sup> Twenty-Slave Law, Confederate Congress (1863).

<sup>12</sup> Aaron Sheehan-Dean, "Causes of Confederate Defeat in the Civil War," Armistead, Lewis A. (1817–1863), , accessed February 13, 2019, [https://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/Causes\\_of\\_Confederate\\_Defeat\\_in\\_the\\_Civil\\_War#start\\_entry](https://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/Causes_of_Confederate_Defeat_in_the_Civil_War#start_entry).

<sup>13</sup> Confederate States Constitution, Article I, Section 8.

<sup>14</sup> While this sentence in Section Eight of the Confederate Constitution is not the reason the South lacked infrastructure at the Civil War’s start, it is indicative of the anti-federal government attitude that did.

<sup>15</sup> Charles O. Paullin and John K. Wright, "RAILROADS, 1850, AND OVERLAND MAIL, 1850-1859," map, in *Atlas of the Historical Geography of the United States*, 139 (Washington D.C.: Carnegie Institute of Washington and the American Geographical Society of New York, 1932).

<sup>16</sup> Alexander Hamilton Stephens, "Cornerstone Address" (speech, The Athenaeum, Savannah, Georgia, March 21, 1861).

factories produced only 8.2 percent of manufacturing value in the United States.<sup>17</sup> Not only were southern factories less numerous, those that did exist were less significant. Further, almost half of the South's manufacturing power was concentrated in Virginia - mere miles from Union forces.<sup>18</sup> The lack of manufacturing hurt the South's ability to produce the weapons necessary to fight. The Confederate economy was based on cash crops, and more specifically cotton.<sup>19</sup>

The southern agrarian economy was also unfit for combat. Any economy based in such a great degree on a single product or practice is dependent on selling its goods. The American South was no different. They sold cotton to the northern textile mills, and they sold cotton to Western European nations. At the war's start, the South obviously stopped trading with the North. As the northern blockade became increasingly effective, trade with Europe declined. During the first year of the war, cotton exports were down ninety-nine percent.<sup>20</sup> The southern economy ground to a halt. Halted economies cause discontent, and the citizens of the Confederacy quickly felt the financial strain of war.<sup>21</sup> In stark contrast, the northern economy hummed along. Northern factories produced massive amounts of guns and other ordnance for their soldiers. Unlike Virginian factories, those in the northeast could continue work without fear of attack.

The fact that southern society was so inextricably tied to slave labor was also detrimental. After many men went to the battlefield, few were left to farm, and more importantly, few were left to control the slaves. This opened the door for runaway slaves escaping to Union territory -

---

<sup>17</sup> Mark Thornton and Robert B. Ekelund, *Tariffs, Blockades, and Inflation: The Economics of the Civil War* (Wilmington, DE: SR Books, 2004), 30-1.

<sup>18</sup> James Munro. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era*(Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1988), 280.

<sup>19</sup> Thornton and Ekelund Jr., *Tariffs*, 30-1.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 31

<sup>21</sup> Paul B. Barringer, *Natural Bent: The Memoirs of Dr. Paul B. Barringer* (Chapel Hill, NC: University Of North C, 2011), 48-53.

an issue made even more problematic when the Union began incorporating slaves into their forces.<sup>22</sup>

The Confederacy's economic problems did not end with structure. Funding the war was also tremendously difficult. As aforementioned, the founders of the Confederacy were adamantly against a powerful central government. The South also had a long history of low taxes. Therefore, the Confederacy could not expect a significant raise in taxes to work without extreme resistance. There also existed a lack of liquid assets in the Confederacy, as most money was invested in either land or slaves. These factors combined to make the Confederate war effort funded less by taxes and loans than any war in American history.<sup>23</sup> Only ten percent of the Confederate war effort was funded through taxes, and only twenty-one percent with loans. The Union effort was funded with sixteen and sixty-four percent respectively. This crisis in funding led the Confederacy to two misguided policies.<sup>24</sup> First, and most destructively, it simply printed more money.<sup>25</sup> Inevitably, this led to incredible inflation, with prices rising more than 9000 percent during the course of the war.<sup>26</sup> Purchasing power in the South, therefore, plummeted, and southern citizens suffered even more financial issues. Second, the Confederacy began (out of necessity) to impress goods. This policy increased resentment towards the government and led to less production and wastefulness.<sup>27</sup> Further, impressment of vessels running the Union blockade discouraged other vessels from doing the same and increased the blockade's effectiveness.

---

<sup>22</sup> Frederick Douglass, *Men of Color*, 1863, Broadside for "Men of Color" Recruitment, Smithsonian National Museum, Washington D.C.

<sup>23</sup> John Munro. Godfrey, *Monetary Expansion in the Confederacy* (New York, NY: Arno Press, 1978), 14.

<sup>24</sup> The anti-bank sentiment of the Democratic party passed down from the days of Jackson also contributed to the Confederacy's financial disarray.

<sup>25</sup> Ralph Andreano, *The Economic Impact of the American Civil War*(Cambridge: Schenkman, 1962).

<sup>26</sup> Eugene M. Lerner, "Money, Prices, and Wages in the Confederacy, 1861-65," *Journal of Political Economy* 63, no. 1 (February 1955): , doi:10.1086/257626.

<sup>27</sup> Thornton and Ekelund Jr., *Tariffs*, 48.

In 1861, eleven southern states succeeded from the United States in an effort to maintain their values and way of life. Ironically, it was just these values which doomed their cause. An agrarian economy could not sustain an industrial war. A nation at war could not keep its slaves. A weak federal government could not maintain an army. An economy without banks or liquid assets could not fund a war effort, nor could an area without infrastructure allow for the effective and necessary movement of large armies. The mere basis of the Civil War defined the outcome. In a 1789 letter to James Madison, Thomas Jefferson warned against an economic system predicated by federal power and constant national debt. Such a system, he believed, would inevitably result in a war machine like that of the British.<sup>28</sup> The Civil War proved him right. It did create the Union war machine. It created what the Confederacy so desperately needed.

---

<sup>28</sup> "No Society Can Make a Perpetual Constitution," Thomas Jefferson to James Madison, September 6, 1789, Paris.

## Bibliography

### Primary Sources:

Barringer, Paul B. *Natural Bent: The Memoirs of Dr. Paul B. Barringer*. Chapel Hill, NC: University Of North C, 2011.

Douglass, Frederick. *Men of Color*. 1863. Broadside for "Men of Color" Recruitment, Smithsonian National Museum, Washington D.C.

*Conscription Act*, Confederate Congress (1862).

"No Society Can Make a Perpetual Constitution." Thomas Jefferson to James Madison. September 6, 1789. Paris.

"Notice of Suspension of Habeas Corpus in Boston." Winfield Scott to Justin Dimick. October 19, 1861. Accessed February 16, 2019.  
<https://www.gilderlehrman.org/content/notice-suspension-habeas-corpus-boston-justin-dimick>.

Stephens, Alexander Hamilton. "Cornerstone Address." Speech, The Athenaeum, Savannah, Georgia, March 21, 1861.

*The Constitution of the Confederate States of America*

*The Constitution of the United States of America*

*Twenty-Slave Law*, Confederate Congress (1863).

### Secondary Sources:

Andreano, Ralph. *The Economic Impact of the American Civil War*. Cambridge: Schenkman, 1962

Brinkley, Allan. *American History: Connecting with the Past*. 15th ed. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill Education, 2015.

Catton, Bruce. *The Centennial History of the Civil War*. E. B. Long, Director of Research. Vol. 1. 3 vols. American Civil War Trilogy. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1961.

Davis, William C. *The Cause Lost: Myths and Realities of the Confederacy*. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1996.

Godfrey, John Munro. *Monetary Expansion in the Confederacy*. New York, NY: Arno Press,



1978.

Lerner, Eugene M. "Money, Prices, and Wages in the Confederacy, 1861-65." *Journal of Political Economy* 63, no. 1 (February 1955): 20-40. doi:10.1086/257626.

McPherson, James Munro. *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era*. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1988.

Paullin, Charles O., and John K. Wright. "RAILROADS, 1850, AND OVERLAND MAIL, 1850-1859." Map. In *Atlas of the Historical Geography of the United States*, 139. Washington D.C.: Carnegie Institute of Washington and the American Geographical Society of New York, 1932.

Ransom, Roger L. *The Confederate States of America: What Might Have Been*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton, 2005.

Sheehan-Dean, Aaron. "Causes of Confederate Defeat in the Civil War." Armistead, Lewis A. (1817–1863). Accessed February 13, 2019.  
[https://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/Causes\\_of\\_Confederate\\_Defeat\\_in\\_the\\_Civil\\_War#start\\_entry](https://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/Causes_of_Confederate_Defeat_in_the_Civil_War#start_entry).

Thornton, Mark, and Robert B. Ekelund. *Tariffs, Blockades, and Inflation: The Economics of the Civil War*. Wilmington, DE: SR Books, 2004.

Foote, Shelby. "Men at War: An Interview with Shelby Foote." Interview by Geoffrey Ward. *The Civil War: An Illustrated History*. Transcript. PBS. 1990.