Was the American Civil War the First Modern War?

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The civil war in America was the first of the great modern wars... The second was the World War of 1914–1918’, wrote Colonel – later Major-General – J. F. C. Fuller in 1929.1 And ever since it has been something of a cliché that the American Civil War was essentially unlike any earlier wars, or the half-dozen large-scale wars fought between 1866 and 1913, and to all intents and purposes was a forerunner of the First World War.2 This notion of the essential novelty of the Civil War was extended to embrace the concept of ‘total war’ in an article by John B. Walters in Southern History in 1948, and a little later T. Harry Williams began his book Lincoln and his Generals with the statement ‘The Civil War was the first of the modern total wars’.3


3 Cf. Mark E. Neely ‘Was the Civil War a Total War?’, Civil War History, 1 (2004), 434–58, citing John B. Walters, ‘General William T. Sherman and Total War’, Southern History, xiv (1948), 447–80, and T. Harry Williams, Lincoln and his Generals (New York, 1952), p. 3. Neely is, however, incorrect in attributing the concept of total war to the Italian air-war theorist General Douhet: he cites, on p. 439, the American translation of Douhet’s Il dominio dell’aria, originally published in Italian in 1921 (‘The prevailing forms of social organization have given war a character of national totality – that is, the entire population and all the resources of a nation are sucked into the maw of war’), but the original text is less suggestive than this translation: ‘Le attuali forme sociale hanno portato alle guerre di carattere nazionale, ossia alle guerre che coinvolgono nella mischia popoli interi’, literally ‘Current social forms have led to wars of a national character, that is to wars which involve whole peoples in the fray.’ In reality the term seems to have been coined by General Erich Ludendorff, whose Der totale Krieg, published in Berlin in 1935, is also mentioned by Neely (p. 439).

Neely’s article originally appeared in Civil War History, xxxvii (1991), 5–28, and was reprinted in Stig Förster and Jörg Nagler (eds.), On the Road to Total War: The American Civil War and the German Wars of Unification (1997), pp. 27–51. In the latter version the references to Douhet and Ludendorff are on pp. 3–4.
Fuller instanced torpedoes, landmines, submarine mines, submarines, telegraphs, lamp and flag signalling, wire entanglements and ironclad warships in support of his claim that the Civil War was the first of the great modern wars, and in 1932 added rockets, grenades and booby traps to the list. In fact none of these devices, apart from the electric telegraph, had a major role in the conflict. Grenades, for example, which had already had a brief vogue in the seventeenth century, only became effective and widely used after the adoption of explosives more powerful than gunpowder some years after the Civil War ended. Rockets had been used successfully and submarines unsuccessfully, in the 1800s. The French and British navies already had ironclad warships when the Civil War began, though the first decisive action involving ironclads was not till July 1866: the ships in this battle, belonging to the Austrian and Italian navies, had been inspired by the French \textit{La Gloire} and the British \textit{Warrior} rather than by the protagonists of the much less decisive Battle of Hampton Roads in March 1862, the \textit{USS Monitor} and the \textit{CSS Virginia} (aka \textit{Merrimack}).

The use of railways was a particular feature of the Civil War: but as far back as September 1845 Sir John Burgoyne, the British Ordnance Board's Inspector General of Fortifications, had pointed out that 'a single locomotive would draw a body of 400 soldiers with its officers, \textit{without} heavy baggage at a velocity of 24 miles per hour, or 300 men \textit{with} camp equipage... few Railways would not be able to provide Locomotives for ten such trains to be sent off in quick succession', and a few months later the first-ever large-scale movement of troops by railway took place during the Prussian army manoeuvres in Silesia. In 1859 the French moved 115,000 troops, 25,000 transport horses, guns, munitions and the horses of six regiments of cavalry to within marching distance of the war zone in northern Italy by railway, and the Austrians brought up reinforcements from Vienna by the same means.

\footnote{8 Weber, \textit{Our Railway System viewed in Reference to Invasion}, introduction.}
The electric telegraph was also of key importance in the Civil War: during the course of the fighting the Union army erected 15,000 miles of line.\(^9\) William R. Plum, the author of *The Military Telegraph during the Civil War in the United States*, was however incorrect in stating that ‘The success achieved by the telegraphers with the Union army more than any other one thing, caused every nation in Europe to embody it in one form or another, as they deemed best, as a part of their regular army.’\(^10\) In fact the Prussian army had established two field telegraph companies in 1859.\(^11\) Earlier, in the Crimea, the British and the French HQs had been linked by telegraph, and the British HQ was in contact, by submarine cable, with London.\(^12\) But the first complex campaign to be at least partly coordinated by telegraphs was in India, during the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857–8: despite disruption and the dispersal of operators, there were still 2,500 miles of telegraphs operating in January 1858.\(^13\)

As it happened, the generals on both sides in the Civil War were far more technologically proficient, far more at home with the problems of logistics, than generals in any earlier war. The usual qualification for senior rank in both armies was to have been a graduate of the military academy at West Point (which had the unusual result that one of the Confederate generals, Leonidas Polk, was a consecrated bishop, having left the army to become ordained despite graduating eighth in his class). At a time when many British officers had no formal military education, West Point had an impressively wide-ranging curriculum. It was, also, until 1835, the only institution in the United States that provided a training in civil engineering, and at the time of the Civil War it was still the front runner in this area.\(^14\) General George B. McClellan was vice-president and chief engineer at the Illinois Central Railroad on the eve of the war, and General Ambrose Burnside the treasurer; General John Pope had been in charge of surveying the Pacific Railroad; and so on. One is probably correct in supposing that familiarity with the technical side of military management common to West Point graduates had a pervasive influence on the conduct of the war.

\(^10\) Ibid.
At the same time the key theatre of operations from first to last was the tract of countryside between the Confederate capital at Richmond and the Unionist capital at Washington, a hundred miles away – slightly less than the distance between London and Birmingham – and even west and south of the Alleghenies, where operations involved greater distances, there was nothing comparable to Karl XII of Sweden’s 600-mile march to catastrophe at Poltava in the winter of 1708–9 or Napoleon’s 400-mile dash from Boulogne to Ulm in October 1805. Sherman’s epic march through Georgia, from Atlanta to Savannah, was only about 200 miles. It was, incidentally, the last major campaign ever to be sustained by the primitive procedure of requisitioning from the surrounding countryside. This had been normal in medieval times, but Wellington’s army in the Peninsula had depended on food imported from the United States even at the height of the War of 1812. Nor did the size of Civil War armies involve any new problems of scale: 166,000 men fought at Gettysburg in 1863 as compared to 298,000 at Wagram in 1809 and 445,000 at Sadowa in 1866.

The technological skill of the Civil War generals was not noticeably matched by deftness in tactics. The British military theorist G. F. R. Henderson later drew attention to the supposed brilliance of Thomas ‘Stonewall’ Jackson’s flanking movements, and his work appears to have had a significant influence on Japanese tactics in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–5. On the other hand, Josef Radetzky had triumphed over the Piedmontese army with similar tactics at Novara in 1849, and if flanking movements had not been such a marked feature of earlier wars it was because the deployment of cavalry screens and of regimental commanders and soldiers sufficiently well trained to be able to change front at short notice had meant that flanking movements rarely offered much prospect of success. The key ingredient in Stonewall Johnson’s manoeuvres was that he could count on the incompetence of the commanders he was attacking: this had also been the case with Radetzky. G. F. R. Henderson’s interest in Stonewall Jackson’s skills in manoeuvre may even have been a symptom of a kind of anglophone provincialism: within half a dozen years of Lee’s capitulation at Appomattox the French and Germans had had their own, equally dramatic and traumatic, war to reflect on.

The Prussian chief of staff, Helmuth von Moltke, is supposed to have dismissed the Civil War as a matter of ‘two armed mobs chasing each other around the country, from which nothing could be learnt’. 

16 See Franz Josef Adolph Schneidawind, Der Feldzug der k.k. österreichischen Armee unter Anführung des Feldmarschalls Grafen Radetzky in Italien in den Jahren 1848 und 1849 (Innsbruck, 1853).
Since this remark has no source other than the statement of a nineteenth-century commentator that: ‘It is not true that Moltke ever referred to those campaigns as “the struggle between two armed mobs”’, it seems more likely that Moltke never said any such thing.\(^{18}\) There is, however, an authentic record of the conclusion of the British officers who were sent to visit the Unionist formations in the spring of 1864, after almost three years of gruelling combat operations. They reported that the Unionist army ‘must on the whole be considered greatly inferior to European armies’. They considered that ‘the artillery were tolerably well drilled, the infantry badly drilled, and the cavalry not drilled at all’.\(^{19}\) Cavalry, which in the armies of Marlborough and Karl XII at the beginning of the eighteenth century had been the decisive arm, had thereafter declined in importance with the increase of infantry firepower, and its comparatively marginal role in Civil War battles was in keeping with an international trend. At Antietam, ‘America’s bloodiest day’, Unionist cavalry suffered only twenty-eight casualties, and at Vicksburg only eight.\(^{20}\) The use of revolvers fired from horseback, which was a practice favoured by Confederate raiders operating in the Unionist rear, was later touted as a revolution in cavalry tactics, but was soon found to present more danger to one’s own troopers than the enemy’s when attempted with more than a handful of men.\(^{21}\)

Both sides had rifled artillery, in some cases of very large calibre, but most of the field artillery consisted of smooth-bore muzzle-loaders that were essentially similar to those used in the Napoleonic Wars. It is sometimes suggested that firepower on the battlefield had a new importance in the Civil War, resulting in unprecedentedly high casualty rates and an increasing resort to entrenchment. Actually battlefield casualty rates, even at Chickamauga and Gettysburg, did not equal those at Borodino or Waterloo, and both sides together lost fewer men in nearly four years of war than Napoleon’s Grande Armée lost in Spain and Russia in 1812 alone. As far as the use of field fortifications was concerned, this depended on circumstances just as much as it had in earlier wars. The French had made (unsuccessful) use of field fortifications at Malplaquet in 1709, at the Nivelle in 1813 and at Toulouse in 1814, and the battle of Borodino had centred on the Russian redoubts. If field


\(^{19}\) Paddy Griffith, Battle Tactics of the Civil War (Ramsbury, 1987) [hereafter Griffith, Battle Tactics of the Civil War], p. 179.

fortifications had not been used more frequently in European wars it was because of the European armies’ ability to manoeuvre. Though Wellington based his defence line at Waterloo on the buildings at Hougoumont and La Haye Sainte he made a deliberate decision not to entrench his whole front, because ‘that would show them where we meant to fight’: after all, Napoleon did not have to fight a battle at Waterloo, he could have gone for Blücher – or for Brussels. In Germany, incidentally, it was thought that the Americans in the Civil War made less effective use of field fortifications than the French in 1870.

Perhaps the most celebrated instance of the importance of battlefield firepower in the Civil War was the repulse of Pickett’s charge at Gettysburg. The assaulting Confederate troops lost up to 45 per cent of their number to well-placed Unionist guns firing round shot and shells to within 400 yards of the Unionist line and thereafter canister, with infantry firing from behind walls taking effect at closer range. The only comparative novelty in this was that the distance without cover between the Confederate start line on Seminary Ridge and the Unionist line on Cemetery Ridge was three-quarters of a mile, a distance no European general in recent times had thought practicable for an infantry charge, downhill and uphill, under concentrated fire from enemy batteries. (The first battle to be won as a result of artillery stopping advancing infantry had been the battle of Marignano back in 1516.)

After the battle of Gettysburg it was alleged that of 24,000 loaded infantry arms abandoned on the battlefield, a quarter had been loaded with three or more balls in the heat of action, and another quarter had been loaded twice. One weapon was found to contain twenty-three charges, another twenty-two balls. This illustrates how badly drilled Civil War infantry could be. Nearly all infantry weapons used in the Civil War had adjustable sights, theoretically effective up to about 900 yards. At Balaklava in 1854 the Highlanders broke up a Russian charge with two volleys, one at 600 yards (not visibly effective) and one at just over

23 Carl Bleibtreu, Vor 50 Jahren: Das Volksheer im Amerikanischen Bürgerkrieg (Basel, 1912), p. 212. According to F. N. Maude, ‘the idea of the spade was at least as old as the introduction of effective firearms’ (‘Field Fortifications and Intrenched Camps’, p. 126). The Romans of course had been using field fortifications as far back as the second century BC, if not earlier. It was their standard procedure when on campaign to dig trenches with earth ramparts topped with palisades around their encampments every time they halted for the night: see Lawrence Keppie, The Making of the Roman Army: From Republic to Empire (1998), pp. 36–8.
25 Griffith, Battle Tactics of the Civil War, p. 86.
250 yards. At Gravelotte, in 1870, French infantry, with a superior round but with rifle sights of similar effectiveness, broke up a Prussian deployment at a distance of 1,200 yards or more. In the Civil War fire fights were at about 68 yards in one battle in the earlier part of the war, rising to 141 yards in 1864–5, although at Chancellorsville, in the most memorable friendly fire incident of the war, the Confederate general ‘Stonewall’ Jackson was shot by his own men at a distance of certainly not more than eighty paces – perhaps as little as twenty paces. Despite the technical superiority of their weapons, the Civil War infantry on both sides basically fought at almost the same range as European armies two generations earlier.

Edward Hagerman claimed in *The American Civil War and Origins of Modern Warfare* that ‘The rifled musket . . . made its full impact felt for the first time in the Civil War’, when in fact the Russian officers in the Crimea a decade earlier had routinely attributed the success of British infantry against overwhelming numbers of Russian troops to the British having rifles like those later used in America while the Russians themselves still had smooth-bore muskets. Equally dubious is Hagerman’s statement that ‘Also new was the way that Sherman waged total war.’ The conduct of Sherman’s march through Georgia may have been better organized and better documented than the *chevauchées* of the Hundred Years War, but it was not more devastating and demoralizing and it was accompanied with less murder and rapine. The American Civil War also saw nothing like the large-scale reprisals against civilians that occurred during the Peninsular War, such as the shooting of a hundred people chosen at random at Chinchón, twenty-three miles south-east of Madrid, in January 1809 following the murder of two or three French soldiers.

Nor were there attempts to poison the enemy’s food supply, as there were during the fighting in Catalonia later in the Peninsular conflict. There was also nothing to parallel the British bombardment of Copenhagen with mortars and rockets in September 1807, in which 2,000 civilians

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28 The National Archives, Kew, WO 33/22, memorandum by Major General Beauchamp Walker, British Military Attaché at Berlin, who accompanied the King of Prussia during the campaign.
34 See the Catalan edition of Wikipedia *sub* Luis de Lacy y Gautier.
died, or the attempt by the Austrian army to terrorize the rebel population of Venice in 1849 by means of balloons carrying anti-personnel bombs triggered by time fuses.\textsuperscript{35}

Perhaps the most striking aspect of the fighting was that it took so long. The campaign in northern Virginia was the most protracted major campaign between the Peninsular War and the First World War, but the usual characteristic of Industrial Revolution era warfare was the speed with which matters were concluded. Fifteen months after Lee’s surrender at Appomattox, the Prussians defeated the Austrians in three weeks. The Franco-Prussian War of 1870–1 dragged on for ten months, but the decisive victory at Sedan came a mere six weeks after the commencement of hostilities. Cavalry general and future chief Indian fighter Phil Sheridan spent a month and a half with the Prussian army during the invasion of France in 1870 and advised Ulysses Grant ‘there is nothing to be learned here professionally’.\textsuperscript{36} He seems not to have noticed that the Prussians had demonstrated that not very well-trained soldiers in superior numbers directed by very well-trained officers could quickly overcome an army composed of more skilful but less numerous troops. It had taken Sheridan and the other northern generals nearly three and three-quarter years to figure out how to do this.

European observers were by no means disposed to underrate the importance of the Civil War. George Cornewall Lewis, the secretary of state for war in the British cabinet, thought it ‘the greatest event which has occurred in the political world since the definitive fall of Napoleon in 1815’.\textsuperscript{37} But it was the social rather than the military aspects of the war that were seen as noteworthy, and none of these were completely novel (though some, like letter-writing by soldiers at the front and journalism, became highly developed). It was the war against the French Revolution and Napoleon that remained ‘the most extensive and expensive war that ever waged’; the Federal debt at the end of the Civil War was approximately half that of the British National Debt, most of which dated from the wars of 1793–1815, and since the prime minister of Britain throughout the Civil War was Lord Palmerston, who had turned down the offer of the chancellorship of the exchequer back in 1809, the financial parallels are unlikely to have been totally overlooked.\textsuperscript{38} It is very natural that the American Civil War should


\textsuperscript{37} The National Archives, Kew, WO 33/12 p. 827.

loom large in the consciousness of the American people and of Ameri-
can historians, but from a European perspective it was simply one more
episode in the evolution of warfare, involving no significant innovation
either in military technique or in atrocity: the rifle, railways, telegraphs
and harsh treatment of civilians would have featured in the Franco-
Prussian War of 1870 just as much as they actually did even if the Civil
War had never been fought.39

39 During his visit to Prussian headquarters Sheridan advised Bismarck, ‘The proper strategy con-
sists in the first place in inflicting as telling blows as possible upon the enemy’s army, and then in
causing the inhabitants so much suffering that they must long for peace, and force their Government
to demand it. The people must be left nothing but their eyes to weep with over the war’ (Moritz
Busch, Graf Bismarck und seine Leute während des Kriegs mit Frankreich. Nach Tagesbuchblättern
(2 vols., Leipzig, 1878), i. 144, but quoting from the English-language edition, Moritz Busch,
Bismarck: Some Secret Pages of History: being a diary kept . . . during twenty-four years’ official and
private intercourse with the Great Chancellor (3 vols., 1898), i. 171). This is an interesting gloss on
Sherman’s March through Georgia and Sheridan’s own conduct of the Indian Wars, and may seem
to link the Civil War as a supposedly ‘total war’ with Nazi occupation policies in the 1940s, but it has
only a superficial connection with Prussian policy in 1870–1.