**Was the American Civil War the first Modern War?**

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Gervase Phillips points out the limitations in a common interpretation.

'The Monitor and Merrimac: The First Fight Between Ironclads', a chromolithograph of the Battle of Hampton Roads, produced by Louis Prang & Co., BostonIt has been something of a commonplace to describe the American Civil War as the first modern war. Following the First World War, military theorists such as J.F.C. Fuller began to argue that the manner in which the Confederacy had been crushed foreshadowed the methods of 20th-century warfare. The Second World War seemed to confirm that interpretation; in 1948 John Bennett Walters identified Union General William Sherman as the architect of modern war, his campaigns characterised by ‘wanton destruction’ and ‘outrages’ against civilians. For nearly half a century this analysis was an orthodoxy.

More recently, however, historians such as Mark E. Neely Jr. have suggested that Civil War generals waged war ‘the same way most Victorian gentlemen did’, with considerable restraint. Similarly, military historians, such as Paddy Griffith, have emphasised continuity rather than change in the tactical conduct of the war. On balance, we now have a more nuanced understanding of the conflict’s place in history: an essentially conventional 19th-century war, yet one which harboured some dark portents for the future.

There are two main elements to the debate over the modernity of the Civil War: technological and conceptual. New technologies, such as the rifle and the railroad, allegedly transformed both the tactics of the battlefield, by increasing the firepower in the hands of the ordinary infantryman, and the strategic conduct of the war, by revolutionising supply and the movement of soldiers. The conceptual shift involved the apparent adoption of a new philosophy of conflict: ‘Total War’. This is as an unrestrained form of conflict in which distinctions between combatants and non-combatants are eroded and the enemy’s economic resources are targeted as readily as the military ones. In the pursuit of the enemy’s ‘unconditional surrender’, a state engaged in ‘Total War’ will mobilise its own population to the highest possible degree, raising mass armies and taking direct control of the economy.

The ‘New Age’ of the Rifle

The rifle has been credited with ushering in a new era in battlefield tactics, for in both range and accuracy it had a significantly improved performance over the old smooth-bore muskets of the Napoleonic Wars. Spiral grooves in the barrel of a rifle imparted a spin to a bullet as the weapon was fired, ensuring that it flew straighter and further than a musket ball. A rifle could shoot accurately at 500 to 600 metres, unlike the 100 to 150 metres of the Brown Bess musket carried by infantrymen at Waterloo in 1815.

The technique had in fact been known for centuries and rifles had been carried by elite ‘sharp shooters’ for many years. Yet the rifle had been unsuitable for regular infantry who needed to fire fast. Firearms were still loaded down the muzzle, one shot at a time. In a smooth-bore, a ball could be rammed home quickly but in a rifle the need for the bullet to fit the barrel tightly made re-loading a lengthy process. In 1848, however, Claude Minié had developed a small bullet that fitted easily down the muzzle of a rifle, which expanded to fit the barrel when fired. This could be fired two or three times a minute, just as fast as a smooth-bore. Hence infantrymen now carried an ‘arm of precision’ that had the potential to change the face of battle entirely with its accurate, long-range fire.

Many historians of the Civil War have argued that is just what happened. James McPherson, for instance, has written of the ‘new age of the rifle’ which witnessed dreadful battlefield casualties (20,000 in one day at the battle of Antietam, 17th September 1862), with troops defending earthworks establishing a fearful ascendancy over those who crossed open ground to attack. Napoleonic style ‘close order’ tactics, where soldiers fought shoulder to shoulder in line of battle or attacked in dense columns, gave way to more dispersed ‘open order’ formations. Men advanced in rushes, taking advantage of cover as they moved and relying on rifle fire, rather than the bayonet, to clear the way forward. Artillery, which had dominated Napoleonic battlefields, was now out-ranged by infantry fire, so gun crews had to seek refuge behind field fortifications. Horsemen rarely charged because, according to Edward Hagerman, the rifle ‘drove cavalry from the open field of battle’. By the final stages of the conflict, around Petersburg over the winter of 1864-1865, the rival armies were ‘dug-in’ to entrenchments where soldiers sheltered from enemy fire. McPherson has linked these final attritional battles to the horrors of the Western Front: ‘the rifle and the trench ruled Civil War battlefields as thoroughly as the machine-gun and trench ruled those of World War I’.

Yet some caution in accepting this analysis is necessary. The rifle had already been used by European soldiers, with mixed results. In the Crimean War, 1853-1856, the weapon had been credited with giving British infantry a marked advantage over their Russian opponents, who were still armed with smooth-bores. However, during the conflict in Italy in 1859, French infantry had favoured ‘shock action’, charging en masse with the bayonet, and had swept rifle-armed Austrian infantry from the field again and again. The performance of the rifle in combat often fell short of its theoretical capabilities. In 1859, a British officer had concluded that the ‘dust, turmoil, smoke and excitement of the battlefield will detract from the accurate aim of men and irregularities of the ground will much interfere with extreme ranges.’

It may be the case, therefore, that the introduction of the rifle did not substantially alter existing tactics. The military historian Paddy Griffith has suggested that the majority of Civil War firefights were conducted at a range of about 140 metres, not so very different from the age of the smooth-bore musket. Griffith concluded that, tactically, this was the ‘last Napoleonic’ rather than the ‘first modern’ war. It was a controversial suggestion, for many examples of accurate long-ranging firing on Civil War battlefields can be found. At Olustee, Florida, on February 20th 1864, Federal infantry checked a Confederate advance with fire at 600 metres. Yet a recent study by Brent Nosworthy has served to support rather than refute Griffith’s analysis by noting the preponderance of engagements at which volleys were swapped at close range. At 2nd Bull Run, for example, the rival infantries had advanced to within just 20 metres of each other before opening fire.

In fact, the distinctive tactical characteristics of the war – the open formations, the use of entrenchments and the lack of cavalry charges – can all largely be explained without reference to new weapons technologies. The armies that fought the Civil War were hastily raised from a well-educated civilian population that prized individual liberty and personal autonomy. American soldiers were unlikely to take kindly to the rigid, coercive discipline that underpinned the ‘close order’ tactics of European conscripts. A.F. Becke, a British artillery officer, noted that the war ‘waged by volunteer soldiers of superior intelligence’ was thus ‘characterised by great freedom in formation and in movement’. The individualistic American soldier preferred the rifle to the bayonet and many engagements became bogged down into protracted exchanges of fire at close range, leading to horrendous casualties. Eventually, one side or the other would either withdraw or determine to close with the enemy in the traditional style. Colonel Francis Lippitt, of the California Volunteers, described how, at the battle of Mill Springs, January 19th, 1862, ‘the combatants had been exchanging musketry fire for several hours without any decisive result’, until the 9th Ohio regiment finally advanced with the bayonet: ‘this charge broke the enemy’s flank. His whole line gave way in confusion.’

The Western Front Foreshadowed?

Similarly, the frequent recourse to entrenchments was as much due to the established doctrine of American soldiers, as to innovative weapons technologies. Field fortifications had long been a part of the American way of war. In 1815 militia under Andrew Jackson had defended a well-sited earthwork at New Orleans, and won a resounding victory over British troops. At West Point, America’s military academy, Dennis Hart Mahan, Professor of Engineering and the Art of War, had taught generations of officers the value of the spade. It was a lesson reinforced by the character of Civil War armies, composed largely of ‘citizen-soldiers’, wartime volunteers rather than well-drilled regular soldiers. Such troops, it was believed, fought best from secure entrenchments. Northern General Henry Halleck wrote that ‘new and undisciplined forces are often confounded at the evolutions and tactical combinations of a regular army, and lose all confidence in their leader and themselves. But, when placed behind a breastwork, they even overrate their security.’ In short, commanders believed that their men would fight best from behind field fortifications not because of the threat of the modern rifle, but because they were amateur soldiers. The trenches of the Civil War were thus more reminiscent of New Orleans than prophetic of the Somme.

The lack of manoeuvre that characterised many Civil War engagements can, likewise, be explained by the particular circumstances of American warfare. Horses were crucial to the mobility of all 19th-century armies. Cavalry needed fast and hardy horses to undertake lengthy reconnaissance missions and to charge on the battlefield. Artillery needed strong horses as gun-teams to pull cannon. The entire army depended on horses and mules to haul the wagons that kept them fed and supplied with ammunition. Whilst the railroad’s ability to transport troops over long distance very quickly did have a significant strategic impact, steam-power did not displace horse-power in the war zone itself. Yet the excessive demands of war left both armies chronically short of horses. This, in turn, affected military tactics. Heros von Borcke, a Prussian adventurer who served with the Confederates, bemoaned the poor quality of the men’s horses: ‘one was obliged by this fact to have greater bodies of cavalrymen used as dismounted sharpshooters’.

The War of Invention

Even if the distinctive tactics of the conflict can be explained by factors other than the impact of modern inventions, it remains the case that the Civil War was a testing ground for new weapons, both on land and sea. Both the French and British had already developed armoured warships by this time, but the mighty American iron-clads, Virginia and Monitor, fought the first ever battle between such vessels, at Hampton Roads, March 9th 1862. The naval war also saw the*C.S.S.Hunley* become the first submarine to sink an enemy ship, the *U.S.S. Housatonic*, on February 17th 1864. On land, the first machine guns made their battlefield debut. However, once again, the impact of these innovations should not be exaggerated. Neither the under-powered Virginia nor the unseaworthy Monitor (which finally sank in a storm) was capable of fighting far from the coast, and they were thus unlikely to revolutionise naval conflict. The Hunley too sank at sea. Similarly, the early machine guns were unreliable and clumsy weapons. Dr Josephus Requa’s design consisted of 25 gun barrels mounted flat on a platform. Only one, installed in a static position in a Confederate fort guarding Charleston, was used during the war.

Compared to the list of technical firsts associated with the Crimean War of 1853-56 (such as use of the telegraph to communicate orders, explosive mines, rifled artillery and a light railway to supply troops in the field), the American Civil War seems an altogether less innovative contest. Indeed, in at least one respect there was a considerable will to resist modern innovation evident in the United States. Breech-loading rifles, which could fire at a rate of 12 rounds a minute and could be safely re-loaded in cover, were only issued to a small proportion of soldiers, mostly Northern cavalrymen. The fear was that such a high potential rate of fire would encourage wasteful, inaccurate firing. This view was shared by many senior officers, including Robert E. Lee, widely regarded as the South’s most talented commander. Overall, one is drawn to the conclusion that, from a technological perspective, the Civil War was a fairly conventional 19th-century conflict, with no great claim to the title ‘first modern war’.

The Pursuit of Victory: ‘Total War’ Unleashed?

Yet even a tactically conventional struggle may have been conducted according to the new philosophy of ‘Total War’. Although the phrase itself was not coined until the 20th century, historians have suggested that the Civil War had developed into such a conflict by late 1862. James McPherson has identified the stages in the escalation of the war. President Abraham Lincoln conceived of the struggle as a mere domestic insurrection, actively supported by only a minority of Southerners, which could be met with a limited show of force. The failure to crush the rebels in 1861 disabused Lincoln of that notion and Federal strategy was extended to the occupation of Confederate territory. This was to be achieved without threatening slavery or any other Southern institutions. Continued Confederate military success saw this strategy replaced in 1862 with a focus on the destruction of rebel armies. Soon afterwards, Federal strategy was committed to extending that destruction to the economic resources that underpinned the Confederate war effort. The South’s defeat meant, for McPherson, utter subjugation, the demand for ‘unconditional surrender’ being an integral component of a policy of ‘Total War’.

Whilst Union strategy did largely develop upon these lines, historians such as Mark Grimsley and Mark Neely have cautioned against seeing this as evidence of a new ‘totality’ to the war. The targeting of economic resources was, in fact, a well-established feature of warfare. From the destructive medieval *chevauchée* (raid) of the Hundred Years War through to the modern naval blockade, combatants had always sought to deny their enemies the means of sustaining their military in the field. The burning of crops by Philip Sheridan’s Cavalry Corps in Virginia in 1864 may have been an ugly measure but it was hardly a novelty in the annals of conflict.

It has also been argued that Lincoln’s demand for ‘unconditional surrender’ implies a new ruthlessness in the prosecution of the war. Yet, as Neely has pointed out, Lincoln did not actually demand the ‘unconditional surrender’ of the South. Although he insisted on the return of the Confederate States to the Union, he was willing to negotiate on every other issue raised by the war. If Confederate Vice-President Alexander Stephens is to be believed, Lincoln was even prepared to negotiate over the issue of emancipation. At the Hampton Roads Conference, February 3rd 1865, Lincoln apparently spoke of ‘the evils of immediate emancipation’ and suggested that the South, if it returned to the Union, might delay a constitutional amendment abolishing slavery for as long as five years. Lincoln was fully prepared for the peace to be based on compromise so long as the Union was restored.

The most controversial aspect of the debate over the totality of the Civil War concerns the alleged targeting of non-combatants. Certainly, much of the rhetoric surrounding the treatment of civilians in the South sounds harsh. In 1863, General William T. Sherman had threatened that ‘to secure the safety of the navigation of the Mississippi River I would slay millions’. Similarly, General Ulysses S. Grant seemed to show a scant regard for the rights of Southern civilians. He once instructed General Philip Sheridan that ‘all Male Citizens under fifty can fairly be held as prisoners of war and not as citizen prisoners’. However, this suggestion applied specifically to regions affected by guerrilla activity and Sheridan did not actually carry the action out. Nor, of course, did Sherman really ‘slay millions’ to secure the Mississippi. There was a considerable gap between the fiery rhetoric of war and the reality of military activity. In comparison with later conflicts, the Civil War can be seen as limited. When the British were confronted with guerrillas in South Africa, 1899-1902, they responded by sweeping the civilian population, women and children included, off the veldt and into insanitary concentration camps, where thousands died of disease.

Yet, before abandoning the notion of the Civil War as a ‘Total War’, it should be recognised that the conflict was, on occasions, waged with a brutality that over-stepped the bounds of civilised warfare as contemporaries understood them. When, in late 1864, Sherman marched 60,000 men through Georgia to the sea they cut a swath of destruction 60 miles wide as they went. Civilians were not killed or imprisoned, but they undoubtedly suffered. Mary Sharpe Jones recorded in her diary that plundering ‘Yankee’ soldiers even took the chain from the bucket on the well. When her mother protested, the soldiers replied ‘You have no right to even wood or water.’ Worse still was their treatment of the former slaves. Jones recorded that ‘the women finding it entirely unsafe ... would run and conceal themselves in our dwelling’. Some had to be physically rescued ‘from the hands of these infamous creatures’. Sherman himself seemed unconcerned, opining that such ‘minor depredations’ be ‘charged up to the account of the rebels who had forced us into the war’. He had reached the conclusion that Southern civilian morale was a legitimate military target: ‘We are not only fighting hostile armies, but a hostile people, and we must make old and young, rich and poor, feel the hard hand of war ...’

Total War and the State

The British social historian Arthur Marwick has suggested that a defining characteristic of ‘Total War’ is its capacity to act as a powerful agent of social change. The Civil War fits this description. It transformed the United States, creating a strong ‘consolidated’ government with unprecedented powers to tax, enact the draft, regulate the economy and suppress civil liberties. The military ‘draft’ (conscription) was introduced by the Confederacy in April 1862 and by the Union in March 1863, in the face of fierce resistance and non-co-operation. Yet such dissent was ruthlessly suppressed. Lincoln’s suspension of the writ of *habeas corpus* allowed for at least 14,000 Northern citizens to be arbitrarily arrested and imprisoned without trial, on mere suspicion of disloyalty. The expanding bounds of war policy had profoundly altered the relationship between individual Americans and the State, to the detriment of the former.

Most significantly, the rival governments’ efforts at economic mobilisation represented a dramatic break with America’s laissez-faire traditions. Jeffrey Rogers Hummel has spoken of ‘the emergence of full-blown State socialism’ in the South as the Confederate government took control of nascent industries, nationalised foreign commerce and imposed burdensome controls on agriculture. By 1863, 70,000 civilians were employed by a bloated bureaucracy and Southerners bitterly remonstrated against this legion of petty officials, ‘thick as locusts in Egypt’. In the North, Lincoln took advantage of the conflict to raise tariffs ever higher. Internal taxation rose too, including the country’s first national income tax. Much of the revenue was squandered on so-called ‘internal improvements’, such as hefty subsidies for financially-inefficient railroad companies. Postwar governments never receded to the minimalist pre-war level. Those Americans who, today, are wistful for the libertarian republic born of the revolution are increasingly inclined to blame the ‘totality’ of the Civil War for creating modern ‘big government’.

As a tactically conventional conflict, fought, for the most part, in accordance with the established principles of civilised warfare, the Civil War was not ‘the first modern war’. Yet we might still consider it a ‘Total War’. The conflict did effect major changes in American society and was portentous of the brutality of future wars. Sherman and Sheridan would themselves soon take their strategy of destructive war to the Great Plains and use it to terrible effect against Native Americans. Later, the ugly precedent set by the Lincoln administration’s record of arbitrary arrest would be surpassed by Franklin Roosevelt’s incarceration of thousands of Japanese-Americans during World War II. Since the enlightenment of the late 18th century, there had been a conscious effort in the West to limit war’s more atrocious aspects. The Civil War provided depressing evidence that, in pursuit of victory, limitations on military actions would soon be overturned. The extent of mankind’s failure to ameliorate the horrors of war would only be fully realised between 1914 and 1945.

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