

Confederate Strategy In The Civil War

The southern commander at Manassas was Pierre G. T. Beauregard, the dapper, voluble hero of Fort Sumter, Napoleonic in manner and aspiration. Heading the rebel forces in the Shenandoah Valley was Joseph E. Johnston, a small, impeccably attired, ambitious but cautious man with a piercing gaze and an outsized sense of dignity. In their contrasting offensive-and defensive-mindedness, Beauregard and Johnston represented the polarities of southern strategic thinking. The basic war aim of the Confederacy, like that of the United States in the Revolution, was to defend a new nation from conquest. Confederates looked for inspiration to the heroes of 1776, who had triumphed over greater odds than southerners faced in 1861. The South could "win" the war by not losing; the North could win only by winning. The large territory of the Confederacy--750,000 square miles, as large as Russia west of Moscow, twice the size of the thirteen original United States--would make Lincoln's task as difficult as Napoleon's in 1812 or George III's in 1776. The military analyst of the *Times* of London offered the following comments early in the war:

". . . It is one thing to drive the rebels from the south bank of the Potomac, or even to occupy Richmond, but another to reduce and hold in permanent subjection a tract of country nearly as large as Russia in Europe. . . No war of independence ever terminated unsuccessfully except where the disparity of force was far greater than it is in this case. . . Just as England during the revolution had to give up conquering the colonies so the North will have to give up conquering the South. . . ."

Jefferson Davis agreed; early in the war he seems to have envisaged a strategy like that of George Washington in the Revolution. Washington traded space for time; he retreated when necessary in the face of a stronger enemy; he counterattacked against isolated British outposts or detachments when such an attack promised success; above all, he tried to avoid full-scale battles that would have risked annihilation of his army and defeat of his cause. This has been called a strategy of attrition--a strategy of winning by not losing, of wearing out a better equipped foe and compelling him to give up by prolonging the war and making it too costly.

But two main factors prevented Davis from carrying out such a strategy except in a limited, sporadic fashion. Both factors stemmed from political as well as military realities. The first was a demand by governors, congressmen, and the public for troops to defend every portion of the Confederacy from penetration by "Lincoln's abolition hordes." Thus in 1861, small armies were

dispersed around the Confederate perimeter along the Arkansas-Missouri border, at several points on the Gulf and Atlantic coasts, along the Tennessee-Kentucky border, and in the Shenandoah Valley and western Virginia as well as at Manassas. Historians have criticized this "cordon defense" for dispersing manpower so thinly that Union forces were certain to break through somewhere, as they did at several points in 1862.

The second factor inhibiting a Washingtonian strategy of attrition was the temperament of the southern people. Believing that they could whip any number of Yankees, many southerners scorned the notion of "sitting down and waiting" for the Federals to attack. "The idea of waiting for blows, instead of inflicting them, is altogether unsuited to the genius of our people," declared the *Richmond Examiner*. "The aggressive policy is the truly defensive one. A column pushed forward into Ohio or Pennsylvania is worth more to us, as a defensive measure, than a whole tier of seacoast batteries from Norfolk to the Rio Grande. The southern press clamored for an advance against Washington in the same tone that northern newspapers cried On to Richmond. Beauregard devised bold plans for an offensive against McDowell. But the question became moot when Beauregard learned of McDowell's offensive against him.

The Confederates eventually synthesized these various stands of strategic theory and political reality into what Davis called an "offensive-defensive" strategy. This consisted of defending the Confederate homeland by using interior lines of communication (a Jominian but also common-sense concept) to concentrate dispersed forces against an invading army and, if opportunity offered, to go over to the offensive, even to the extent of invading the North. No one ever defined this strategy in a systematic, comprehensive fashion. Rather, it emerged from a series of major campaigns in the Virginia-Maryland and Tennessee-Kentucky theaters during 1862 and culminated at Gettysburg in 1863. It almost emerged, in embryonic form, from the first battle of Manassas (Bull Run) in July 1861, a small battle by later Civil War standards but one that would have important psychological consequences in both the North and the South.

Source: "Battle Cry of Freedom" by James M. McPherson

Complete each of the responses on a separate sheet of paper. Be detailed and write in complete sentences and complete thoughts.

1. What were the contrasting strategies aired by Generals Beauregard and Johnson. What motivated them to think they way they did?
2. What was the Confederate States of America's overall aim for the war?
3. What does it mean: "the South could win the war by not losing, but the North could only win by winning." Why was the South look to the revolutionary war as an example for their strategy?
4. Ultimately why was Jefferson Davis's strategy unable to come to fruition? Explain both factors and their success or lack of success?
5. Explain Jefferson Davis's "offensive-defensive" strategy. How did this strategy emerge?