

# How "the Lost Cause" Was Lost

HENRY STEELE COMMAGER

- ① NEVER BECAME A NATION
- ② FAILURE OF MORALITY

*From the outset, the Confederacy was beset with internal problems: she lacked sound money, guns, factories, food, railroads, and harmonious political leadership. Still, with her excellent generals, the possibility of foreign intervention, and other advantages, the Confederacy faced better odds in her war for independence than had the American colonies. Why, then, did the Confederacy go down to defeat? Henry Steele Commager, one of America's most literate and perceptive historians, contends that the rebel states never became a nation at all, that they were unable, with their inept political leadership and a Confederate constitution that guaranteed states' rights, to create truly viable national institutions. But more than anything else, Commager states, it was a failure of morality that led to the Confederacy's ultimate collapse.*

LOOKING BACK NOW THROUGH THE MISTS OF 100 years at the prodigious story of Gettysburg and Vicksburg, we are lost in admiration for the gal-

lanty of those who led the ranks of gray in what we have come to call "the Lost Cause." And we know just when it was lost. It was lost in those fateful days of July, 1863, when Lee's bold thrust into Pennsylvania, which was to have threatened the capital and brought recognition of the Confederacy from Britain and France, was blunted and turned back, and when Vicksburg fell and the Father of Waters went again unvexed to the

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sea. It was high tide and ebb tide; it was the beginning of the end.

So, at least, most of us suppose. As we contemplate the fall of the Confederacy, we conclude that it was indeed inevitable and that the Confederacy was but a dream:

Woe! woe! is us, how strange and sad,  
That all our glorious visions fled,  
Have left us nothing real but our dead,  
In the land where we were dreaming.

To most of us it is inconceivable that the Civil War should have had any outcome but that registered at Appomattox. It is inconceivable that the territory which now constitutes the United States should have been fragmented — like that of Latin America — into 20 states. It is inconceivable that the Confederacy should have made good its bid for independent nationhood.

But the doctrine of inevitability confronts us with two insuperable difficulties. If it was clear from the beginning that the South must lose, how can we explain the fact that men like Jefferson Davis, Judah P. Benjamin, R. B. Rhett, Howell Cobb and scores of others, men who were upright, virtuous, intelligent and humane, were prepared to lead their people to certain destruction? If defeat was inevitable, they must have discerned this, too, and their conduct takes on the character of criminal imbecility. And second, how can we explain the widespread assumption in Europe — and even in parts of the North — that the South would make good her bid for independence? How does it happen that so many otherwise sensible and judicious men were misled?

It is not too much to say that the South held — or appeared to hold — at least two trump cards in 1861. The first was what we would now call grand strategy or ultimate war aims. For the fact is that the Confederacy did not need to win

in order to win; it was enough if she held the field long enough to weary the North with the war. But the North, in order to win, had to conquer the South, had to invade and hold an area as great as Western Europe minus Italy and Scandinavia — an achievement as yet without parallel in modern history. The Confederacy could afford to lose all the battles and all the campaigns if only she could persuade the North that the price of victory was too high. The South asked merely to be left alone, and she proposed to make the war so costly that the North would in the end prefer to leave her alone. After all, the American colonies, and the United Netherlands, had won their independence against even heavier odds than those which faced the Confederacy.

And this suggests the second trump card: foreign intervention. The leaders of the Confederacy had read well the history of the American Revolution, or had heard it from their fathers and their grandfathers — for the Virginians of 1860 were psychologically closer to the generation of Washington than were the Yankees of Massachusetts to the generation of Sam Adams. They knew that the intervention of France and then of other European nations had turned the tide in favor of the Americans, and they assumed that history would repeat itself. They counted with confidence on the intervention of Britain and France — intervention at a practical level on behalf of cotton, intervention at a higher level on behalf of freedom and self-determination.

Quite aside from these two major strategic considerations, the South held other advantages. She commanded interior lines and therefore the ability to shift her smaller forces rapidly from one front to another. She fought on the defensive, and that position (so it was thought) more than made up for her numerical inferiority, since offensive operations, with their implacable demands of transportation, supply and occupation, required a greater superiority than she felt the



Some 360,000 Northerners and 258,000 Southerners perished in the Civil War. Here is a photograph of a dead Confederate

soldier; he was killed in one of the last assaults against Petersburg in 1865. (Library of Congress)

Union forces could muster. <sup>3</sup> She had a long and deeply indented coastline, one which presented almost insuperable obstacles to a successful blockade — and, after all, the Union Navy was not above contempt. <sup>2</sup> She had, in her 3,000,000 Negro slaves, a large and, on the whole, loyal labor force which might relieve Southern whites of many civilian duties and permit them to fight in the ranks. <sup>1</sup> She had, at the beginning, the best generals and a long military tradition. And she boasted — mistakenly as it proved — a broader and deeper unity than the heterogeneous North. With all these advantages, why did the South

lose? Since 1865, students and historians have speculated about this question but no one has answered it. Curiously enough, the leaders of the Lost Cause had little to say about the reasons for defeat. The greatest of them, R. E. Lee, preserved a dignified silence after Appomattox. President Davis wrote two ponderous volumes but they say nothing about the underlying causes of defeat except to blame his political enemies. Vice President Stephens also produced two unreadable volumes on the Confederacy and the war but failed conspicuously to speculate on the question (in his case, speculation might have

proved too embarrassing). Judah P. Benjamin, the most philosophical mind in the Confederate Government, might have given us a really penetrating analysis of the problem, but he chose to forget his American past in a more glamorous English present.

Nor do the lesser figures help us much. The literature is voluminous but mostly elegiac and almost all of it is unreflective. Perhaps the Southerner of that generation was, as Henry Adams wrote of his classmate Rooney Lee, by nature unreflective: "Strictly," said Adams, "the Southerner had no mind; he had temperament. He was not a scholar, he had no intellectual training, he could not analyze an idea, and he could not even conceive of admitting two."

Or, more probably, reflection on the responsibility for so great a catastrophe was simply too uncomfortable. And as for the Northerners, by and large they were content with victory, or with easy assumptions about their superiority in arms and in men, or the righteousness of their cause, or the wickedness of the South, or the preference of Providence for the Union.

Why did the South lose? Was it because the Confederacy was hopelessly outnumbered? Until 1864, it was able to put almost as many soldiers into battle as the Union — in fact, the South had a numerical superiority at First Bull Run, Pea Ridge, Gaines's Mill, Seven Days, Corinth, Chickamauga, Peach Tree Creek and Atlanta. Was it for reasons of finance? Lack of money had not prevented the Americans from making good their bid for independence. (And besides, a financial explanation merely begs another question: *Why did the Confederacy lack money?*) Was it due to poor transportation? The South had a much smaller railroad mileage than the North, but she enjoyed interior lines and the advantage of a system of inland waterways. Southern transportation facilities were not, in fact, inadequate

in themselves — or at least not irremediably inadequate. The real question is, why did the South fail to use what she had or to develop what she needed?

Was defeat attributable to the failure of the Confederacy to win the border states — Maryland, Kentucky, Missouri? These were, after all, slave states and Southern in culture and social structure. There was every reason to suppose that they would throw in their lot with the South.

"Come! For thy shield is bright and strong, Come! for thy dalliance does these wrong, Maryland, my Maryland."

But she did not come, nor did the other border states — though Kentucky and Missouri were represented in the Confederate Congress! Why not? Was it lack of military skill or political prescience, or simply bad luck? Why did this calculation — like so many others — go wrong?

Or was the underlying fault, perhaps, in Jefferson Davis — so brittle, so temperamental, so arrogant? He took the conduct of the war into his own hands; he interfered with the military; he had favorites (like the wretched Braxton Bragg) and enemies (like the brilliant Joseph Johnston). He alienated state Governors and Congressmen and he never won the affections of the Southern people. Yet on balance Davis emerges as a reasonably good President — probably as good as any the Confederacy could have selected at that time. He was tireless, high-minded, courageous, intelligent, indomitable and more often right on major issues than his critics. The real question is why there were so few alternatives to Jefferson Davis.

Or was the South beaten by the blockade? This is perhaps the favorite of all explanations, for

ever since Mahan, seapower has been the glamorous key to history. But at the beginning of the war, the North had only an excuse for a navy; not until 1863 was the blockade effective. Why did not the Confederacy bring in whatever she needed before that time? Why did she not utilize her swift privateers to the best advantage? And, why for that matter, were Britain and France willing to respect what was, for a long time, a mere paper blockade? If Cotton was King, why did Europeans refuse to recognize its sovereignty? If Cotton was not King, why did Southerners so delude themselves?

When we have considered, and dismissed, these surface reasons for the failure of the Confederacy, we come to more fundamental causes. Three of these, all interrelated, command our attention.

*Three primary causes for Southern Failure*

1 The first was the failure of Southern nationalism. Almost all the ingredients of nationalism were there — indeed, the Confederacy in 1860 had more of the ingredients of nationalism than the Colonies in 1775 — but somehow the Confederacy never really became a nation. For all its passionate devotion to Dixie Land, it seemed to lack a sense of nationalism and the will to nationalism. Given the circumstances of its birth, this is not surprising. The Southern states had broken away from the old Union because the Federal Government — so they alleged — threatened their rights, and they defiantly founded their new nation on states' rights and state sovereignty. The new nation was therefore based on a repudiation of nationalism.

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Even its political institutions reflected this, perhaps unconsciously. Military leadership in the South was splendid, but political leadership was weak and vacillating. The Confederacy had its Lee and its Jackson to match — perhaps to outmatch — Grant and Sherman, but where was its

Lincoln? Where for that matter were its Seward, its Stanton, its Stevens, its Sumner, its Trumbull; its diplomats like Charles Francis Adams; its war Governors like Andrew of Massachusetts or Morton of Indiana? There were local factions but no political parties, and therefore no safety valve for political discontent. There were strong state supreme courts, but notwithstanding the provision of the Confederate constitution, Congress never created a Confederate Supreme Court.

State sovereignty is not necessarily fatal to nationalism or to union in time of peace and order, when no grave problems confront a government and no stern crises challenge the people. Had the North permitted the "wayward sisters to depart in peace," the Confederacy might have survived long enough to develop the essential institutions, political habits and administrative practices. But to build a nation on state sovereignty in time of war is to build upon a foundation of quicksand.

2 The second fundamental cause of failure was, in fact, this very issue of states' rights, which steadily eroded the strength of the Confederacy. State Representatives at Richmond devoted their energies to thwarting Jefferson Davis. Vice President Stephens retired to his Georgia home to wage relentless war on the President. State supreme courts nullified Confederate laws, and there was, as we have seen, no Confederate Supreme Court to which to appeal. States put their own interests ahead of the interests of the embryo nation. Even in the first year of the war, the states jealously held on to their arms and supplies. Had they surrendered them to the Confederacy at the beginning of the war, it could have put 600,000 men into the field instead of 400,000, and that might have made all the difference.

*Prob. w/ States Rights*

State Governors like Brown of Georgia and Vance of North Carolina exempted thousands of their citizens from conscription and their judges

protected deserters and refugees from capture and restoration to the ranks of the Confederate armies. The Governor of Mississippi exempted over 4,500 militia officers and others in his state from the operation of the conscription laws, and the Governor of Alabama almost the same number.

All through the war, state Governors withheld desperately needed supplies. Thus Brown of Georgia not only kept his Georgia troops well supplied with uniforms and blankets but had a surplus in his warehouses sufficient to have outfitted the whole of Lee's army — and kept it there! At a time when "Lee's Miserables" were going barefoot and freezing in the terrible trenches of Petersburg, Governor Vance of North Carolina had 5,000 complete uniforms and an equal quantity of shoes and blankets in his warehouses — and kept them there!

States' rights, instead of being the rock on which the nation was built, was the reef on which the nation foundered. There is a moral here, even for our own time.

3

The third fundamental cause of Southern defeat was slavery itself — that "peculiar institution," as the South euphemistically called it. It was slavery that the war was ultimately about; it was slavery that ultimately doomed the South to defeat. For it was slavery that decisively prevented the one move which might have saved the South, even after Vicksburg and Gettysburg — European intervention. As late as 1863, British aristocrats — a Cecil, a Halifax, a Gregory, a Lindsay, a Vansittart — organized the Southern Independence Association which dedicated itself to intervention. It was in the summer of 1863 that the British navy yards were building the famous Laird rams that almost got away — almost, but not quite!

Had Britain intervened to break the blockade

— and France would have followed her lead, and Mexico, of course — there is every likelihood that the Confederacy would have won her independence. With Britain ready to provide the Confederacy with money, arms, munitions, food and drugs, and ready to buy her cotton and other produce, the Confederacy could have fought on indefinitely, just as the Americans did once they had supplies and money from France after 1777. And had the Union Government responded to such intervention by a declaration of war — as it almost certainly would have done — it would probably have signed its own death warrant.

What prevented intervention from abroad? Not the failure of the South on the battlefield, for that failure was not decisive until after the mid-summer of 1863. And it was not sympathy for the Government of the Union, for there was very little of that in the ruling circles of Britain or France. No, more than anything else, it was slavery. The upper classes might be sympathetic to the Confederacy, but the powerful middle and working classes were passionately on the side of the North. It was not merely that the North represented democracy — although that was a consideration; it was, far more, that the South represented slavery. Public opinion, that newly emerging and still amorphous thing, simply would not tolerate going in on the side of slavery.

But, it will be asked, why did not the South see what we now see? Why did not Southerners see the necessity of a strong national government in time of war and create one? Why did they not see the pernicious consequences of states' rights in time of crisis and restrict them? Why did they not see the blight of slavery and move against it, move to win public opinion abroad by some dramatic gesture of gradual emancipation?

Here we come to something very fundamental, indeed — to the psychology, the philosophy associated — perhaps inevitably associated — with slavery.

Slavery was the foundation of the South, and slavery carried with it the enslavement of the mind of a people. For 30 years the South had felt herself misunderstood, condemned and beleaguered. For 30 years she had rallied her resources to defend the "peculiar institution," and she had finally convinced herself that slavery was not a necessary evil but a positive good, not a curse but a blessing. She realized, however, that she was almost alone in this opinion and, feeling herself increasingly isolated, she withdrew into her own intellectual and moral fortress.

Whoever criticized slavery in the South was an enemy of society, a traitor to the Southern way of life. Preachers who questioned slavery from their pulpits were deprived of their churches; teachers who criticized slavery were driven out of their colleges and universities; editors who dared raise their voices against slavery saw their presses destroyed. If the United States mails carried abolition or antislavery literature, the mails were rifled, the pernicious literature burned. Libraries were purged of offensive books — even Hinton Helper's "The Impending Crisis of the South" was publicly burned. The whole South, in short, closed ranks to defend and exalt the "peculiar institution."

Now when you prevent the free discussion of the greatest of public issues, you prevent the discussion of almost all issues. When you drive out critics, you leave behind the noncritics. When you silence dissent, you assure only approval. When you intimidate criticism, you discourage the habit of critical inquiry. When you stop agitation, you guarantee complacency. We have learned in our own time the price that a society pays when it intimidates the liberal mind, when it silences criticism.

The habit of independent inquiry and criticism all but disappeared in the South of the eighteen-fifties and sixties. There was no real discussion of slavery, and because there was no discussion there was no probing of alternatives. There was no real debate over secession — at least, not on the principles at stake. As Southern political thought had gone slowly bankrupt after Calhoun, so Southern political discussion went bankrupt — in the Confederate Congress and in the newspapers of the Confederacy. There were a few bold spirits who questioned secession; there were some who doubted the ability of the South to win a war against the North; there were some who saw that slavery would become the Achilles' heel of the Confederacy. But there was no discussion of real issues, as in the North, and no statesman to lead the people out of the labyrinth in which they found themselves and on to a high plateau from which they could see their life and their society in perspective.

There is, perhaps, a certain poetic justice in all this. The Confederacy, which was founded on state sovereignty, was destroyed by state sovereignty. The Confederacy, which was founded on slavery, was destroyed by the state of mind which slavery imposed upon its other victims — the white people of the South. The failure of the Confederacy was ultimately a monument not to a failure of resolution or courage or will, but of intelligence and morality.

#### QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1 Many historians, weighing the material and numerical advantages of the North, have concluded that Confederate defeat was inevitable. According to Commager, what advantages did the Confederacy have at the start of the Civil War that could have offset Northern economic might and superior numbers?

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2 How much did poor political leadership contribute to the defeat of the Confederacy?

3 How was it that the Confederacy was defeated, according to Commager, by the very causes for which it fought?

4 At the outset of the Civil War, Europeans generally believed that the Confederacy would win its independence. How, then, can you ex-

plain Europe's refusal to intervene militarily on the Confederate side?

5 What does Commager mean when he argues that the Confederacy was "destroyed by the state of mind which slavery imposed upon . . . the white people of the South"? Is Commager implying that the South lost the Civil War because it defended an immoral institution?