

Why was it so difficult for the Union to defeat the Confederacy? Quora.com

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In all the discussion on this topic, not one writer has mentioned the most glaring reason why it took the Union so long to defeat the Confederacy. In the historiography of the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln is the great hero. We Americans have been so indoctrinated by the propaganda that is fed to us from our early years, that Lincoln is the greatest president (sometimes beating George Washington), it is difficult for us even to admit that Abraham Lincoln might do anything wrong.

When he entered the White House, Lincoln had next to no military experience, and even less experience in administering a large bureaucracy. It is understandable that such an unprepared person might make mistakes. Our sympathy for anyone placed in Lincoln's position should not prevent the analysis of mistakes he did make.

A dispassionate analysis requires us to look at what happened in 1861, and what response a reasonable person might make. Freed from the "Abraham Lincoln could do no wrong" image, let's put ourselves in his position, and think if we could have made better decisions. These are the issues:

1.

Throughout the presidential election campaign of 1860, numerous Southern leaders flatly stated that their state would secede if the Republican Party candidate won. Not only did Lincoln win, but Republican candidates won a large majority of seats in Congress. So it should have been no surprise to Lincoln when South Carolina declared itself out of the Union, on December 20, 1860. Within three weeks, Mississippi, Florida and Alabama also seceded. When Georgia joined them, the five states of the Deep South formed a continuous geographical space which could practically form a separate nation. Those five states sent delegates to Montgomery, Alabama, wrote a constitution, chose a president, established an army, and proclaimed the independence of the Confederate States of America on February 4, 1861. By that time, if not before, it should have been obvious to anyone that secessionists were serious about establishing their own independent nation.

Mistake #1: Lincoln kept believing that white Unionists in the South would soon take control from secessionists and lead their wayward state back into the Union. Massachusetts Governor John Andrew and other Republican leaders wrote to Lincoln, urging him to prepare for war as soon as possible, but Lincoln did nothing. By mid-January, and certainly by February 4, Lincoln should have recognized that his hope that Unionists would recapture control of the Deep South states was dead.

What Lincoln should have done: Even though he would not be inaugurated until March 4, Lincoln could have exerted his influence, either directly or through other Republican leaders, to contact President James Buchanan's Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, who was a firm

opponent of secession, and General Winfield Scott, to ask their advice. General Scott was one of the most brilliant and experienced military minds of the 19th century, and he would have likely done what he could to prepare for the coming conflict. If encouraged by Lincoln, Stanton and/or Scott might have issued an order stating that, because of the national emergency, no resignations of U.S. military officers would be accepted. Scott then could have ordered officers from the South to be transferred to the Far West, for example, to Washington Territory to build harbors and roads, and let them know personally that they would never be asked to take any action against the South. Doing this would have most likely persuaded many Southern officers not to defy a direct order, especially if given an assurance that they could sit out the war by staying away from any zone of conflict. Even without such an order, some Southern officers like George Thomas and David Farragut remained loyal to the Union. But more would no doubt have joined them if a “neutrality” option were open to them. And even if they did not, Southern officers who tried to leave could be arrested for disobeying a direct order, and held in a military prison until the crisis had passed. In either case, the number of experienced military leaders who joined the rebellion would have been fewer than the 113 U.S. officers who resigned and joined the Confederate armed forces. This would have deprived the secessionists of experienced officers who were responsible for many rebel victories.

2.

Just as the Confederate government was forming in early February, Louisiana seceded. Before this, the first five states to leave the Union were the southeastern fringe that would not have appreciably damaged the remaining states. However, when Louisiana joined the rebellion, its geographical position controlling the mouth of the Mississippi River posed a threat to the entire Midwest. Farmers living in Ohio to the Great Plains typically loaded their crops onto flatboats, and floated them down the branches of the great river to sell in the markets of New Orleans. At that time, New Orleans was not only the largest city in the South, but it was also one of the biggest urban areas in the entire nation. Many Northerners who previously felt ready to let the Southeastern states go in peace, now suddenly realized secession would hit them directly in their pocketbook. The entire character of secession changed once Louisiana joined the Confederacy, especially after the Confederate Congress stupidly declared the Mississippi River to be closed to Northern shipping. Secessionists made matters worse when they took over the United States Mint in New Orleans, stealing a huge sum of gold that was held there. Harming Northerners economically was a powerful motivator for them to resist secession.

Mistake #2: Being a native of Illinois, Lincoln should have recognized the prime value in gaining control of the mighty Mississippi River as quickly as possible. Lincoln’s vice president, Hannibal Hamlin, persuaded Lincoln to choose Gideon Welles as Secretary of the Navy. Hamlin, Welles, and General Scott all tried to convince Lincoln to give primacy to a naval war. Secretary Welles was one of Lincoln’s most effective cabinet members, but he could only do so much with the limited resources he was allotted. Out of all military expenditures during Lincoln’s presidency, 90% went to the U.S. Army, with only 10% being allotted to the U.S. Navy.

Because of strong state militias in the South (which were well financed due to Southerners’ fears of slave revolts), the Confederate army began 1861 with an advantage. But the South had to build its navy from scratch. Lincoln should have recognized this weakness, and put maximum funds into a massive shipbuilding program, as Vice President Hamlin proposed.

Even before being inaugurated, Lincoln could have encouraged Republican governors in states of the Upper Mississippi (Illinois, Iowa, Wisconsin, and Minnesota) to build their state militias as riverboat crews, manning ironclad steamships. Once war began, they would be in position to move quickly down the Mississippi River, to occupy Memphis and Vicksburg in the spring of 1861, before the Confederates had time to build strong defensive fortifications. At the same time, a fleet of U.S. Navy ocean-going ships under the command of Captain David Farragut could quickly occupy New Orleans, Baton Rouge, and Natchez (even more easily than Farragut was able to do a year later, in April 1862), before those ports would have had time to fortify.

3.

In early February, a few days after Louisiana, Texas also seceded. Several U.S. forts along the Texas frontier not only meekly surrendered to secessionist mobs, but also turned over all their stores of rifles, artillery, and ammunition. Though Lincoln would not likely have been able to prevent this, he could have made an effective attack against Texas, by forming an alliance with the Comanche Empire.

For generations, Comanche war parties attacked settlements in northern Mexico. By 1840, the fierce warriors had stolen so many horses and other livestock of Mexican farmers, that many Mexicans gave up the effort to settle in that region. Many were forced to abandon their farms and retreat southward to central Mexico. This depopulation of northern Mexico was a major reason the United States Army was so successful in its attacks through northern Mexico during the Mexican American War (1846-1848).

Once the Mexicans were thrown out, Texans began a major push westward to settle new lands. Since these lands were at the heart of Comanche territory, the Indians resisted. However, in the 1850s, the U.S. Army joined the fight to push Comanches westward. Nowhere along the western frontier was the fighting more bitter than in the Texas-Comanche War.

Once U.S. troops left Texas in 1861, Comanche war parties soon recognized that the Texas Rangers alone were not strong enough to resist their attacks. Texas leaders made desperate appeals to Confederate President Jefferson Davis for more assistance, but Davis refused even to allow Texas troops to return to their state because he knew he had to keep his armies strong in the east. Texans became bitter critics of Jeff Davis.

Mistake #3: As soon as he was inaugurated, on March 4, 1861, Lincoln should have formed an alliance with the Comanche, to assist their attacks against Texas. A U.S. Army officer actually met with Comanche leaders, and proposed such an alliance in May, but Lincoln vetoed the idea. What he should have done is to order all the armaments and ammunition being held at the U.S. Arsenal in Liberty, Missouri, to be transferred to Fort Leavenworth, just over the border in Kansas. From there, wagon trains could have taken rifles and ammunition to Indian Territory (today's Oklahoma), for distribution to Comanche warriors, with the stipulation that they be used solely against Texans. Any Comanche warriors who used guns against loyal U.S. citizens would not receive any more ammunition. Guns without ammunition were of little use to the Comanche, so this would have been an effective means to control their operations.

Even if the Union could not afford to open another theater of operations against Texas, Lincoln could have used an alliance with the Comanche to keep Texans preoccupied in defending their frontier, instead of contributing to Confederate independence. In addition, Texas beef was a major source of food for rebel armies, but if Comanche raids captured or killed enough cattle that would have had a major impact on feeding rebel armies.

4.

Even before he was inaugurated on March 4, if Lincoln had foreseen the outbreak of war (as several Republican leaders had tried unsuccessfully to persuade him), he should have tried to mobilize all military resources against the Confederacy. This included not only the training of infantry regiments and artillery batteries, but also of cavalry units. For many centuries, warfare was centered on mounted horsemen. This was still true to an extent in the 1860s.

No cavalry battalion can operate without a dependable supply of horses. In 1860 the state with the largest number of horsebreeders was Kentucky. Though the establishment of slavery in Kentucky made it a natural ally with the other slave states of the South, the percentage of Kentuckians who owned slaves was much lower than in the states of the Deep South. As a state which bordered on the Northern states of Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois, fewer Kentuckians relished the thought of a civil war where they would be the battleground. However, Kentucky horsebreeders were happy to sell their horses to whoever offered the cash.

Mistake #4: Lincoln was obsessed with the necessity for keeping Kentucky in the Union. He stated on more than one occasion his belief that whichever side Kentucky joined would be the victor in a civil war. Given this belief, it is astounding that Lincoln did not take a basic action which would help to insure that Kentucky stayed loyal. What he should have done, even before he was inaugurated, was to suggest to the governors of Ohio, Indiana, and possibly Michigan, that they send their state agents to go to Kentucky and purchase every horse and mule that they could. Then they should have made the focus of their state militia to become the cavalry arm of Union forces.

Because Lincoln did not oversee a coordinated effort to build up the Union cavalry, the Confederacy gained a great advantage. Southern men were more likely to be rural, and therefore more likely to be experienced horsemen. Fully half of all horses and mules used by Confederate armies were purchased from Kentucky. No matter how well trained a cavalry unit might be, it would not be able to operate without horses. And no movement was possible until the horses drank enough water and had enough to eat. During the Civil War, horses did not last long in the Confederate army. Their bodies offered large targets when coming within range of Union artillery batteries and massed infantry. Beyond that, many horses died from exhaustion or illnesses.

Mules were just as important as horses. While Union regiments and the supplies needed to support them were more likely to be transported in railroad cars pulled by locomotives, the relative lack of railroads in the South meant more of the transport of supplies needed by Confederate armies had to be hauled on wagons pulled by mules. The mule and horse suppliers from Kentucky were crucial to the South's military operations. If Lincoln had emphasized a

program to buy up as many Kentucky equines as possible, both the loyalty of Kentuckians and their economic ties to the North would have been stronger.

5.

In February 1861, Massachusetts Governor John Andrew and other Republican leaders in New England tried to convince Lincoln that war was coming, and they passed measures to build up their state militias as infantry regiments. This was a mistake on their part, and on Lincoln's.

Mistake #5: The economy of New England was built on seafaring. Many young men in the region took their first jobs as crewmen on whaling ships and on merchant ships. As experienced seamen, it was a waste of their human resources to expect them to train as infantrymen when they already possessed skills needed for a navy.

Just as with the state militias of the Upper Mississippi Valley, Lincoln should have funded Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles' requests to begin a massive shipbuilding program as soon as he was inaugurated, on March 4. Lincoln did eventually do this, but not until months later and not at the scale that was needed.

6.

In his first inaugural address, Lincoln held out peace offerings to the seceded states. But at the same time he specified that the United States government "will constitutionally defend and maintain itself. In doing this there needs to be no bloodshed or violence, and there shall be none unless it be forced upon the national authority. The power confided to me will be used to hold, occupy, and possess the property and places belonging to the Government and to collect the duties and imposts; but beyond what may be necessary for these objects, there will be no invasion, no using of force."

In this regard, Lincoln skillfully maneuvered his response to be midway between a strident declaration of war and a wholesale capitulation which the Northern public had found so distasteful when outgoing President James Buchanan claimed he had no ability to resist secession. Yet, Lincoln's statement that he would "hold, occupy, and possess" federal property convinced Confederate President Jefferson Davis that Lincoln had no intention of giving up Fort Sumter. When Davis stupidly ordered the firing on Fort Sumter, that allowed Lincoln to wiggle out of his promise that "there will be no invasion, no using of force."

Mistake #6: If Jeff Davis made a huge mistake in firing the first shot at Fort Sumter, Lincoln made an equally serious mistake in his response to the Confederate attack. He made a "proclamation" calling for 75,000 volunteers to invade the South "to suppress insurrection." Lincoln called for a special session of Congress, but not to convene until July 4th. Both the call, and the delayed involvement of Congress, made some Americans (in both North and South) fear that Lincoln was acting like a dictator. The idea of 75,000 armed men invading and taking over a state, even a state that declared itself out of the Union, was uncomfortable to many Americans.

Even worse was Lincoln's blunder in sending his request for volunteers to the governor of every state remaining in the Union. That included eight states of the Upper South (Arkansas,

Tennessee, North Carolina, Virginia, Kentucky, Missouri, Maryland, and Delaware), who because they held large enslaved populations tended to identify with the Deep South. No fear of white Southerners was more intense than their fear of slave revolt. While Lincoln had repeatedly stated that he had no intent to interfere with slavery in the states where it already existed, white Southerners wondered if he might be reluctant to send in troops if a major slave revolt occurred, and if he would return slaves who escaped to the North.

If Lincoln was going to issue a proclamation, he should have called for Congress to convene in two weeks on May 1st, not over two months later on July 4th. And he should have made it a general call for volunteers, not from each state. The governors of Virginia, Tennessee, Kentucky and Missouri took the opportunity to issue a defiant response, stating that they would not contribute one soldier to invade another state.

Lincoln's biggest mistake was to assume that the Confederate insurrection would be quickly defeated by a land invasion of untrained volunteers. The South was a vast territory, and the thought that it might be conquered by force within the 90-day enlistment was almost laughable. The truth is that Lincoln, like many other Northerners was as wrong about Southern resistance as the Confederates were about Northern resistance. Americans might have been able to avoid the bloodbath that was to come, if they had listened to experienced military leaders like Sam Houston and William Tecumseh Sherman who accurately predicted what would happen.

7.

In addition to his April 1861 proclamation calling for 75,000 volunteers "to suppress insurrection" Lincoln also declared a naval blockade of the entire Southern coastline. This contradicted his claim that the firing on Fort Sumter was only an "insurrection," because international law only recognized a blockade if it was imposed on one nation by another nation.

Mistake #7: By imposing a naval blockade, Lincoln contradicted his more peaceful wording of his inaugural address, in which he promised "there will be no invasion, no using of force" and said his purpose would only be to "to collect the duties and imposts." Using that terminology seems much less aggressive, but he could have accomplished the same goal. In other words, if a ship coming in toward a Southern port were ordered to furl its sails so that a U.S. navy ship could inspect it for collecting duties on imports, that sounds much less objectionable than to blockade all shipping going into a port. So, if a ship was found to be carrying cannon, muskets, gunpowder, uniforms, or other military equipment, those items could be specified to carry very heavy duties on imports, so heavy that a ship captain would consent to those items being confiscated rather than having to pay such a tax.

Restricting confiscation to imports that have military uses would also be good because, as owners of Southern blockade runners were to find, their profits were greatest when they brought in luxury goods for wealthy plantation owners. Grand pianos, fine lace ladies dresses, polished mahogany furniture, etc. did nothing to aid the Confederate war effort, but they did represent the export of Southern wealth to foreign merchants. Such luxury items contributed to the ruinous inflation that bedeviled the Southern economy, while also causing resentments by poor Southerners who could not pay such high prices while the wealthy classes continued their profligate lifestyle.

8.

If Lincoln had made a more measured and less antagonistic response to the Confederate bombardment of Fort Sumter, it is possible that the secession of Virginia, Arkansas, Tennessee, and North Carolina might have been avoided. Those four states had much more population and industrial capacity than the original seven states of the Deep South. Lincoln's refusal to believe that Virginia would secede led him to neglect making even rudimentary protections of federal property. As a consequence, ramshackle mobs were able to capture lightly-guarded gun-making machinery housed in the U.S. Arsenal at Harpers Ferry, as well as over a thousand cannon at the Norfolk Naval Yard and several ships (including the hull of the *U.S.S. Merrimack* which was used to make the feared ironclad *C.S.S. Virginia*).

The Upper South did not secede in response to Lincoln's election, in the months following November 1860, but only to the belligerence of Lincoln's call for 75,000 volunteers "to suppress insurrection" in the months following April 1861. During that six month interval, there was no civil war. The fragile peace that marked that six months, might have been able to extend another six months, or longer.

Mistake #8: In 1861 the state legislature of Kentucky was split exactly evenly, divided between those who favored secession and those who wanted to remain in the Union. Wise compromisers constructed a policy of "neutrality" in which they warned both Confederate and Union military leaders to keep out of the state. They warned that if one side invaded their state, they would immediately throw their support to the other side. Only the stupidity of Confederate General Leonidas Polk, in moving his army into the state, led to Kentucky leaders declaring firmly for the Union.

Seeing the success of the Kentucky neutrality policy, Lincoln should have offered that option to all the border states. If he had done so, that might have prevented the secession of Virginia, Arkansas, Tennessee and North Carolina. Lincoln's top priority should have been to do whatever he could do to prevent them from joining the rebellion. A neutral state is much better than a member of the enemy.

If Virginia had not become the largest state in the Confederacy, the rebels would have been denied the products of Richmond's Tredegar Ironworks, the largest industrial plant in the South, and would not have captured the Norfolk Naval Yard, one of the largest naval bases in the United States. If Virginia had not seceded, then neither would North Carolina.

Though Arkansas was sparsely populated, it was strategically crucial for the entire Mississippi Valley. If Arkansas had not joined the Confederacy, secessionists in Missouri would have been left powerless, and the Five Tribes of Indian Territory would not have made treaties of alliance with the Confederacy. The Union would have controlled the Mississippi River to the border of Louisiana, and would have had a viable route to mount an invasion of Texas.

9.

Though Lincoln was a Westerner, once Virginia seceded his primary goal was the capture of the new Confederate capital of Richmond. Confederate President Jefferson Davis held just as fervently to the belief that he would win Southern independence by capturing Washington, D.C.

Neither of them paid attention to the clearest parallel, when the British captured the U.S. capital during the War of 1812. The United States did not surrender and stop fighting when that happened, and neither side would have given up if their capital had been captured in 1861. The Civil War was won by the North only when they (eventually) followed General Scott's Anaconda Plan, which relied on capture of the Mississippi River and a strong naval blockade of the entire Southern coastline.

Mistake # 9: In July, Lincoln's volunteers were nearing the end of their 90-day enlistment. Lincoln completely ignored the sage advice of General Winfield Scott, and ordered General Irwin McDowell to invade Virginia and attack a Confederate army at Manassas, just 25 miles west of Washington. Both Scott and McDowell protested that the volunteers were not adequately trained to undertake offensive warfare, but Lincoln dismissed their objections. So McDowell moved his 35,000 men forward. The end result of the Battle of Bull Run was a complete rout of the Union army. Many troops threw down their guns and fled in disarray all the way back to Washington. General McDowell took the blame for the defeat, but in reality that defeat was squarely due to Lincoln's incompetence as a military strategist.

10.

On the day after the disaster at Bull Run, Lincoln's vice president Hannibal Hamlin and his friend Senator Charles Sumner went to the White House and had a conversation with the President. Both of them urged Lincoln to offer freedom to African American men who would join the Union armed forces and fight against the rebels. Since Hamlin had earlier urged Lincoln to build up a strong navy, and both he and Sumner were from New England seafaring states, it is evident that they wanted the U.S. Navy to become a training ground for black sailors. There were already many black crewmen serving on New England whaling vessels. It was certainly quicker to train sailors for yeoman service on sailing ships, than to train them to be effective in offensive battle tactics.

Mistake # 10: Despite the earnest pleading by these two seasoned political leaders, Lincoln rejected their advice out of hand. The reason he gave them was his fear that if he enrolled enslaved men, even in the navy where their presence would be less noticeable, this would push Kentucky to leave the Union. If Lincoln had ignored signs in April that Virginia would secede, he now was overly fearful about Kentucky. By the end of July, the danger that Kentucky would secede was minimal. Yet, another full year would pass before Lincoln finally agreed to join a majority of Republican Congressmen, who favored emancipation of enslaved people as a war measure. He only signed his Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863.

In short, Lincoln's policies between his April proclamation and his July orders leading to the Battle of Bull Run were disastrous. Four more states joined the Confederacy during these months, doubling it in size, and many more white Southerners, even those who owned no slaves, were motivated to join the Confederate army in order to protect their home from the feared ravages of an invading army. Bull Run offered the rebels a real hope that they could win, which led more Southern men to join the rebellion.

It takes a long time to train an army to mount an effective invasion of an enemy's homeland. If, instead of attempting a massive land invasion by large armies, Lincoln had relied on a quick

naval operation of gunboats moving from the north down the Mississippi River, before Confederates had time to build strong defenses, while U.S. Navy ships captured New Orleans and Baton Rouge from the south, this would have cut the Confederacy in half in 1861, instead of two bloody years later. By making an alliance with the Comanche Indians, Lincoln could have drastically reduced supplies of meat going to rebel armies, neutralized Texas, and forced it to fight indigenous warriors instead of Northern volunteers.

Meanwhile, a quick naval buildup based on the New England shipbuilding industry and a large supply of experienced sailors could have a critical impact on the economy of the seceded states with the less antagonistic policy of “collecting a tax on imports” than a total blockade. This would deny to the rebels military necessities like armaments from abroad, just as buying up horses and mules from Kentucky would prevent the strong operation of Confederate cavalry.

If Lincoln had placed emphasis on a quick buildup of the U.S. Navy, with a massive shipbuilding program, these ships could have patrolled up and down the Southern coastline, picking up escaping slaves and training them as yeoman sailors. This would have increased the recruitment of Union forces so much that a military draft of Northern white men would probably not have been necessary, which would have meant less war weariness in the North. Plus, if Lincoln had moved to attack slavery in 1861 that policy shift would have weakened the Southern economy as more of the South’s labor force escaped to join Union forces, while also reducing the chance that Britain and France would have intervened on the side of the South (which almost happened in 1862). In addition, if black men were trained as sailors, they would have had greater employment opportunities as crewmen on merchant ships after the war. Freedmen would not have been caught, under the control of the Southern white landholding class, as impoverished laborers in the exploitative sharecropping system.

For all these reasons, and others, Abraham Lincoln’s military policies during the first two years of the war were problematic, to say the least. Like most American presidents, Lincoln grew in office, beginning in November 1863 when he articulated a new vision of America, in his Gettysburg Address. And his real legacy was his political skill at getting the 13th Amendment approved by Congress. Nevertheless, probably Lincoln’s biggest mistake was abandoning his first Vice President Hannibal Hamlin in 1864, who by that time was firmly allied with the Radical Republicans in Congress, and choosing the conservative Democrat Andrew Johnson to be his second vice president. Johnson was, without a doubt, one of the worst presidents in all of American history.

Lincoln’s other legacy, to continue to hope that Southern white Unionists would restore the old Union, was as mistaken in 1865 as it was in 1861. Andrew Johnson could legitimately claim that he was merely following the same policies as Lincoln, who never supported the confiscation of plantation lands and the redistribution of those lands to the freed slaves, in payment for their years of unpaid labor.

Unlike the winners of most civil wars, Radical Republicans like Thaddeus Stevens and Charles Sumner did not call for Confederate officials and military officers to be executed, exiled, or imprisoned. But they did want them to be permanently prohibited from voting and holding government positions, while the freed people should be guaranteed equal political and civil rights. If these changes had been enacted in 1865, the Jim Crow system of white supremacy

would not have taken root, and a genuine reconstruction of the South would not be delayed for a century. Our nation has suffered as a result, and continues to suffer to the present.

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158 views