

CIVIL WAR SESQUICENTENNIAL: Strategy, Tactics, and Fighting the Civil War

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Feature Essay

Spring 2013

Hess, Earl *CIVIL WAR SESQUICENTENNIAL: Strategy, Tactics, and Fighting the Civil War.*

Now that we are deep in the sesquicentennial of the Civil War, it is a good time to take some high ground and survey the historiography, remind ourselves what has been done in the past, and tweak our imagination about what ought to be done in the future. Perhaps there are no more fundamental subjects regarding military history than strategy and tactics, although they also tend to be subjects that historians overlooked.

It may come as a surprise to say that Civil War scholars have paid little attention to strategy, for in one way or another it is intertwined in every battle and campaign book ever written about the conflict. Moreover, there are at least a handful of books that take an overview of military operations and as a matter of course discuss some aspects of the subject. But in the realm of modern, concentrated studies specifically focused on strategy, there are very few.

Donald Stoker, a professor at the Naval Post-Graduate School in Monterey, California, authored such a concentrated study of Civil War strategy in *The Grand Design: Strategy and the U.S. Civil War* (Oxford University Press, 2010). In many ways it is the best modern introduction to the subject, a starting point for anyone interested in defining strategy conceptually and seeing those concepts applied to the specific circumstances of the Civil War. Strategy is a hydra-headed monster in today's world, involving multiple layers that include public policy, grand strategy, operations, and tactics.

I believe Civil War scholars have barely scratched the surface of this subject, despite the numerous books that mention or delve into strategic studies in some way. Stoker's book is a good example of what I mean. He accepts and perpetuates most of the old canards that historians have had a tendency to present as fact about Civil War strategy. He believes that Leonidas Polk's occupation of Columbus, Kentucky, was a strategic mistake because it threw that

neutral state into the Union camp. He believes that Henry W. Halleck could have conquered Mississippi and taken Vicksburg after the nearly bloodless fall of Corinth in the early summer of 1862. He discounts the significance of the Union re-opening of the Mississippi River. Most importantly, Stoker ignores the significance of logistics and supply when contemplating strategy. Armies could not go anywhere if they lacked the logistical capacity to move troops, food, and ammunition to those areas, and any student of strategy needs to give a great deal of attention to these aspects of the subject.

Like so many other Civil War historians before him, Stoker tends to view strategy as moving pawns across a flat board instead of understanding it as Civil War commanders were compelled to understand it, as the physical, emotional, and mental reality of life in the 1860s. Moreover, there is too much tendency to simply accept what successful generals such as Grant and Sherman had to say in their memoirs about strategy instead of reading the dispatches in the *Official Records* with care and thoroughness. And there is too much tendency to accept what well-respected historians of the recent past have stated in their popular studies.

I urge Civil War military historians to forget for a time what anyone else has said or written and instead go back to the essential primary sources (the *Official Records* chief among them), keep an open mind, and place themselves in the realm of 1863 instead of 2013. This may seem trite advice, but I am convinced a good many well-meaning historians do not do it as well as they should. All of the old canards mentioned above as accepted by Stoker and a host of other historians are in desperate need of a challenge, for there is plenty of evidence in the primary material to replace them with alternate interpretations.

The realm of tactics also is a fundamentally important aspect of military operations, but relatively few historians have devoted concentrated effort to it. Like those scholars who mention strategy, many historians have dealt with grand tactics while discussing individual battles and campaigns, but no more than perhaps half a dozen books, articles, and dissertations specifically look at tactics as a subject of study. Moreover, all of them look at grand tactics (the higher level of the subject, dealing with whether it was wise for a commander to attack or to defend) rather than at the lower level of the subject (which deals with the complicated formations and maneuvers of the linear system). More importantly, all of the tactical historians have taken it for granted that the rifle musket used by both armies in the Civil War was a devastating new weapon of destruction that

killed soldiers at a range of 500 yards rather than the older smoothbore musket's effective range of 100 yards. Civil War officers and soldiers alike failed to understand that change and continued to fight in ways compatible with the smoothbore, and the results were indecisive battles and a prolonged war of unrivalled blood-letting. Nearly every historian who has written on the subject has looked for evidence to support this old assumption, ignoring a body of evidence in the primary sources that strongly contradicts the argument. The major works representing this old assumption remain Grady McWhiney and Perry D. Jamieson, *Attack and Die: Civil War Military Tactics and the Southern Heritage* (University of Alabama Press, 1982), and Edward Hagerman, *The American Civil War and the Origins of Modern Warfare: Ideas, Organization, and Field Command* (Indiana University Press, 1988).

The English historian Paddy Griffith initially questioned this thesis in his book *Battle Tactics of the Civil War* (Yale University Press, 1989). But Griffith looked mostly at the actual range of combat as evidenced in the official reports to argue that combat in the Civil War took place at short ranges consistent with the smoothbore musket instead of at the long range of the new rifle musket. This point decisively challenged the basis of the old interpretation. Griffith's argument was bitterly disputed and criticized by most Civil War historians at the time, but by soon after the turn of the new century Mark Grimsley and Brent Nosworthy accepted Griffith's argument and supported it with their own research into the official reports.

My own book, *The Rifle Musket in the Civil War: Reality and Myth*, (University Press of Kansas, 2008), built on the initial contributions of Griffith, Grimsley, and Nosworthy and extended it to subtopics other than the actual range of firing in the Civil War. The result was a thorough refutation of the old interpretation and the proposal of a new one to replace it. For many reasons, Civil War armies failed to take advantage of the longer range of the rifle musket. Technical difficulties played a role; the bullet fired by the rifle musket had an arced, or parabolic, trajectory. That meant the bullet sailed above the heads of approaching infantrymen for much of its flight across the battlefield. Neither army taught its recruits how to use the rifle to compensate for this fact. More importantly, officers and enlisted men alike were convinced (with good reason) that close range firing was more effective than long range firing and deliberately waited until an attacking enemy was less than 100 yards away before opening fire. Even more compelling, a comparison of casualty rates in smoothbore battles of the 18th century reveals that the older weapon produced losses that were just

as high, in many cases higher, than those of Civil War battles.

The new interpretation of the rifle musket—that it had relatively little impact on Civil War operations other than to improve skirmishing and sniping—opens up many doors to new interpretations of tactics as well. Previously, historians had assumed that the linear tactical formations employed by both armies in the Civil War were outmoded and contributed to horrific casualty rates because they were not matched to the capabilities of the new rifle musket. But if that new weapon was used in a way that its effect was the same as the smoothbore, then the linear tactical formations were not only useful but the correct type of tactical system to be employed. In fact, one can make an argument based on reading the official reports that most Civil War officers learned those complicated formations and maneuvers well and used them very effectively under great duress on the battlefield to save their units from unexpected threats or to exploit initial advantages by employing adept moves at the right moment.

There is a danger that the study of traditional military history, what many scholars derisively call “drum and bugles,” will atrophy in an age when social and cultural history is riding high. We can avoid that only if we reorient our thinking away from merely writing good stories for popular consumption and toward a thorough re-evaluation of our craft. The only way to do so is by re-visiting the primary material, thinking in new ways about our subject, and re-invigorating it with new (and supportable) interpretations as well as by opening up new subjects of study.

Earl Hess is Professor of History and Director of the History Program at Lincoln Memorial University, has numerous books about Civil War battles and campaigns. He has recently released a new book, Kennesaw Mountain.