

The Grand Design: Strategy and the US Civil War

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Review

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A Strategic Look at the Civil War

The late Peter J. Parish often voiced the opinion that although some Civil War topics have ‘been done to death’, a surprising number of the more significant themes were neglected or even ignored. The broader question of morale, for instance, - especially on the home front – constituted one of these. Another, related to morale, is strategy. This neglect is quite extraordinary considering the vast literature on the military history of 1861-65. Historians have debated some of the issues raised by Confederate strategy, but general questions have excited little interest. Donald Stoker has set out to rectify this deficiency. He is well-qualified to do so, as he currently serves as Professor of Strategy and Policy for the US Naval War College program at the Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, California.

Stoker begins by exploring the reasons for the neglect of his chosen subject. He puts it down to the preoccupation of historians and indeed the readers of Civil War history, with battles. They approach battles with the enthusiasm of spectators at a sporting match. Battles are important as victory is preferable to defeat, whether or not they prove to be ‘decisive’. But commanders must do more than just win battles they have to demonstrate the necessary resilience and intellectual power to encompass all the elements that secure victory in war. “This is why strategy matters,” Stoker concludes crisply (2). He presents Civil War strategy as a coherent ‘story’ based on a detailed study of the *Official Records* (1880). His perspectives are also informed by the renaissance of American military thought 1975-95 that led to a fresh understanding and enthusiasm for the ideas of Carl von Clausewitz’s *On War* (1832); also to an appreciation of the work of his better-known contemporary, Baron Jomini, who had been written off by an earlier generation of historians as a source of error.

It is strategy Stoker affirms zealously, that determines the course of all wars as it did in the American Civil War. But what is it and how do we define it exactly? The starting point is government policy. Stoker holds that policy “should inform strategy...but not dictate it” (5). This is a contentious opening, as the strategy of democracies should never be subordinated to military considerations. Nonetheless, he acknowledges that policy objectives are ‘critical’ because they determine “so much of where and how the war will be fought” (5). And indeed there can be no quarrel with Stoker’s straight-forward assertion that “strategy defines how military force is used in pursuit of the political goal” (5). But again this definition veers towards giving too much attention to military strategy and not enough to questions of grand strategy, not least dilemmas raised by foreign policy.

Despite some doubts over the book’s fundamental perspective, one cannot praise too highly the depth and acuity of the analysis that Stoker deploys in a trenchant and refreshingly well-written book, mercifully free of dreary jargon. Stoker touches upon most of the debates among Civil War historians. He downplays the overall significance of technology, arguing that it mainly affected tactics, not strategy, though such an assertion underestimates the strategic significance of railroads. Stoker occasionally presents himself too self-consciously as a lonely pioneer, as when he rejects the “definitional mess” surrounding the debate over whether the Civil War assumed a ‘total’ form (6). He equates totality with the nature of a war’s objective, for belligerent populations will fight hard either to attain an aim or resist it, should the aim be viewed as precious or repellent. This conclusion seems to be a very indirect way of agreeing with earlier historians that the Civil War was indeed a ‘total war’. Yet there can be no denying that henceforth no historian of the subject can afford to ignore Stoker’s views, and the legions of Civil War readers must be prepared to have their horizons stretched.

On the Union side, Stoker makes a persuasive case for both the importance of the blockade and its efficacy. His treatment of George B. McClellan’s strategy while general-in-chief is impressively even-handed. He makes a strong case for McClellan’s initial November 1861 appreciation that T. Harry Williams, among other historians, ridiculed. McClellan’s strategy comprised a series of simultaneous offensives enhanced by amphibious operations. But he is not blind to McClellan’s errors, delusions and paranoia; and his preference for limited methods that protected the property of the civilian population earns Stoker’s

condemnation for failing to understand the nature of the war in which he was engaged. At various points, one would have preferred to see more coverage of the systemic weaknesses of US military organization and the command system, the strategic impact of which Stoker acknowledges only in passing (194). He is very critical of the lack of enterprise and inability of Don Carlos Buell to obey orders; he is scathing of Henry W. Halleck's procrastination and congenital inability to see his orders carried out. But all contemporaries regarded the army level as the most important; in the absence of a general staff system it is difficult to see how the general-in-chief could enforce his instructions.

McClellan tried to resolve these difficulties by combining the levels in his own person, but he became over-burdened and his failures in both areas redounded to his discredit. McClellan could not adjudicate between conflicting priorities and competing resources because, as an army commander, he was a self-interested party, and kept his subordinates weak, so that his own 'decisive' operations on the Peninsula could be the strongest. Such structural weaknesses were just as significant as personal failures when calculating the reasons for the Union failure to win the war by the autumn of 1862.

Similar systemic cavities were even more pronounced in the Confederacy. Stoker offers some telling criticisms of the southern inability to think strategically; calm, wide-ranging deliberation seems conspicuous by its absence in the highest levels of the Confederate government – though he praises the insights of Robert E. Lee highly. Stoker is especially critical of the hasty decision to precipitate the war before the Confederacy was ready to fight it. He claims with every justification that not only did the South fight the war materially above its weight, but also intellectually. He considers Jefferson Davis's decision to act as his own general-in-chief a disaster, as his methods combined excessive centralization with a singular failure to adumbrate a clear strategy and stick to it. The South was simply too weak to profit from its initial attachment to a 'cordon' strategy, which was more an impulse than a true strategy, and its commitment to the spurious 'King Cotton' embargo even more disastrous; both compounded southern weakness, representing a winding country lane to defeat rather than the highway to victory. Leonidas Polk's thoughtless violation of Kentucky's 'neutrality' exposed the entire Mississippi basin to Union attack. Confederate defeat cannot be described as inevitable, for the South demonstrated a capacity to launch a counter stroke in the autumn of 1862. But the connection of these thrusts with a strategic plan, Stoker holds, was incidental at best.

He also makes two other significant points that concur with the views of this reviewer. First, the defensive could not serve as a panacea that could solve all the South's woes; secondly, the Eastern theatre remained the Confederate 'centre of gravity' in Clausewitzian terms. Yet the South's chances of winning declined drastically after September-October 1862 because "The Confederate system, leadership, and strategic environment all contributed" to southern defeat (27).

Not all Stoker's arguments carry equal conviction. He is full of praise for Lincoln (though he regards his genius as political rather than military). His central strategic insight grasped that Confederate armies were its true centre of gravity for without them it would collapse. Yet Stoker is not always consistent in exploring this theme, especially in relation to geographical objectives, notably towns and cities. He argues earlier that "the most important line of advance that the Union could choose" in 1862 was Chattanooga; but later he is critical of the "obsession" with Tennessee (115). Sherman's marches are applauded as "strategy at its grandest" but their object was not the destruction of a Confederate army but the erosion of the southern will to continue the war (381).

Three other themes do not receive a very impressive treatment. First, civil-military relations, though Stoker stresses their 'significant impact' on strategy's creation at the outset, they are discussed incidentally and the importance of political party considerations is ignored (4). Secondly, the international dimension only receives a sketchy outline. Here it is significant that Stern criticizes the Red River campaign because it did not contribute to Confederate defeat, when it had important, long-term foreign policy objectives. Thirdly, Stoker pays little attention to the problem of logistical sustainability when mounting advances over such great distances. Here Stoker's view that operations in the Mississippi basin were a "glaring mistake" does not convince (229). Eventual control of this vast waterway, as Stoker eventually concedes, aided sustainability of all Union advances because it formed an invulnerable supply route (317-18).

Most books that open up neglected topics tend to provoke as much disagreement as agreement, and this one is no exception. Yet it certainly stimulates and sets the thoughts racing – even though it might not provide all the answers to the many questions raised.

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