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## Why the North Won the Civil War

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## WHY THE NORTH WON THE CIVIL WAR

*Edited by David Herbert Donald with a new foreword by the editor*

(*rpt. ed. New York: Simon & Schuster, c. 1996. Pp. 127.*)

The daunting task of explaining the South's defeat at the hands of the Union began immediately following Lee's surrender at Appomattox. Ironically, participants began suggesting a myriad of excuses even before hostilities had completely ceased. Not surprisingly, many of these initial explanations failed to agree upon causation. Historians, never ones to shy away from a great debate, continued the argument set in motion by Civil War contemporaries. Explanations included Confederate military inefficiencies, as well as inherent weaknesses of Southern economic, transportation, and political systems. Authors observed that internal dissention resulted in disloyalty and that states' rights ideology prevented the creation of an effective centralized Confederate government. Questions concerning the validity of a system based on slavery and an argued loss of will to fight also received ample attention from Civil War historians seeking to explain the Confederacy's defeat.

Any attempt to explain causation of the outcome of the war based on Southern inadequacies necessarily includes at least a cursory look at perceived Northern advantages. Historians have frequently cited the North's victory in terms of superior manpower and resources, as well as the political leadership of Abraham Lincoln, and the failure of European powers to become directly involved in the Southern cause. In *Why the North Won the Civil War*, each of the six authors of this edited collection of essays re-examined a particular explanation of Confederate defeat. The value of this collection, as Donald explained in his foreword, is not to invent new theories, but to "illustrate the advantages of taking new thought about old subjects" (p. 9).

Henry Steele Commager, in his essay "The Defeat of the Confederacy: An Overview," argued that the study of causation

helps us to avoid the doctrine of inevitability in history. The massive abundance of official records and participant writings, Commager observed, qualified the Civil War as an ideal case study of causation. He pointed out further that no historian is satisfied with simply documenting what happened at the expense of ignoring why something happened. It is this explanation of why that often leads to a lack of consensus among historians. Commager's overview of the questions involved helped to set the context for the remaining essays and effectively established that anything but inevitability explained the South's loss to the North.

In the second essay in the study, "God and the Strongest Battalion," Richard N. Current argued that "economic rather than strictly military superiority" (p. 36) resulted in victory for the North. His insightful analysis of Southern economic policy led him to conclude that the Confederacy failed to make the most judicious use of the resources available to it. The South's failure in its handling of finances, manufacturing, and transportation proved to be fatal in what eventually became a war of attrition.

T. Harry Williams' essay, "The Military Leadership of North and South," examined the role of the Civil War general in determining the war's outcome. He argued that generals from both sides had shared schooling at West Point, and that this common training produced generals with similar inadequacies. The standard mid-nineteenth century West Point curriculum favored tactics, engineering, and administration, while de-emphasizing military strategy. The limited amount of military strategy taught to the cadets emphasized fighting on the offensive, the massing of armies, and the use of the frontal assault. Williams concluded that the ability of Federal generals to adopt more modern fighting methods, including the advancing of armies along entire lines of battle, produced a Northern victory.

Essays by Norman A. Graebner and David M. Potter examined diplomatic and political explanations of Southern defeat.



Graebner, in "Northern Diplomacy and European Neutrality," argued that the actions and rhetoric of William H. Seward, combined with a lack of agreement among European powers and the Confederacy's inability to demonstrate the strength necessary to establish its own independence, precluded any international intervention in the Southern cause. Potter, in "Jefferson Davis and the Political Factors in Confederate Defeat," concluded that Davis's failure to implement taxation, combined with his failure to make adequate use of available resources and manpower, accounted for only a portion of his shortcomings. In addition, Potter suggested that Davis's penchant for meddling in military affairs and his inability to admit being wrong jeopardized further the Confederate war effort.

David Herbert Donald's contribution, "Died of Democracy," argued that Democratic tendencies within the Confederacy ultimately resulted in Northern victory. Southern notions of individual freedom created real problems for the Confederacy. "The Southern soldier," Donald observed, "was a democratic, liberty-loving individualist; his Union counterpart became a cog in a vast machine" (p. 86). The South's failure to curtail civil liberties, due to its belief in individual rights, Donald argued, weakened substantially the Confederacy's war effort.

This collection of essays re-examined standard explanations concerning the Confederacy's defeat in the Civil War. Although Donald acknowledged that no new interpretations would be set forth, his study ultimately contained little more than a rehashing of previous arguments. A general lack of footnotes compounded this situation. Despite these inadequacies, this collection of essays did, as Donald expressed in his foreword, help to "demonstrate how complex the problem of historical causation is and how wary writers must be of oversimplification" (p. 11). In these terms, the value of this collection is indeed noteworthy.

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