

TEACHING AMERICAN HISTORY

THE UNITED STATES CIVIL WAR

BOOK REVIEW

Jones, Archer. Civil War Command & Strategy: The Process of Victory and Defeat. NY: The Free Press, 1992. ISBN 0-02-916635-7

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Archer Jones' *Civil War Command and Strategy: The Process of Victory and Defeat* is an undocumented work comparing the Union and Confederacy at their highest political and military levels. As the title suggests, Jones focuses on the personalities and policies central to both sides of the conflict. In one of his more controversial arguments, Jones suggests that both North and South were similarly equipped to succeed, despite the vast differences in population and industrial capacity in favor of the North. He further suggests that it was the evolution of Union command structure and strategic goals that ultimately led to victory.

Jones begins by describing the antebellum U.S. military structure, and how this led to similar problems for both sides. A major point was the lack of field leadership experience in any large scale engagement, and the limited experience in general with the exception of service in the Mexican War. One of the few exceptions to this rule was Winfield Scott, who by 1861 was too old and infirm to take the field, and whose largest previous command would amount to a fraction of those engaged in Civil War campaigns. A major focus of the book is on the comparison of Union and Confederate military and civilian leadership and how they evolved during the course of the conflict. His overall assessment seems to be that while both Lincoln and Davis did commendable jobs given the circumstances without interfering too much with their commanders, Union command structure and strategies evolved and adapted leading to eventual success.

In his discussion of the northern high command, Jones describes Lincoln's lack of military background, but ability to learn quickly and understand the "big picture." He portrays the president as having been more politically savvy than his Confederate counterpart and more able to get what he wanted out of people, while progressively more willing to remove commanders when necessary. Jones outlines the overall Union strategy of conquering southern territory and reducing enemy resources, while trying to maintain public support in the face of a protracted and costly war. He makes a strong argument for Union successes in adapting to achieve their strategic goals. In particular, he commends their efforts to counter Confederate concentration in space with concentration in time, and by taking the war to the southern populace and supply bases in order to sap the enemy's ability and willingness to continue fighting.

Jones, although not without criticism for Davis, tends to treat the Confederate president better than most other historians. The author suggests that Davis wisely focused on the preservation of southern territory rather than annihilation of the enemy, although his commanders did not always do the same. In terms of southern strategy, Jones stresses the difficulty faced by remaining on the defensive while not losing too much public support by giving too much ground. He illustrates the importance of interior lines to the South and praises Davis and commanders like Beauregard for effectively adapting new technologies such as the telegraph and railroad to Jominian theories of concentration. Jones' criticisms of the Confederate president are mostly limited to poor appointments and reluctance to remove cronies from key military posts.

The bases of many of Jones' theories are rooted in his observations about the nature of the American Civil War. He asserts the indecisiveness of campaigns and battles, suggesting that a reversal in any one battle would do little to severely impact the outcome of the war. Jones stresses the importance of the turning movement both on the tactical and strategic level, and suggests that the relative equality in mobility of the opposing armies led to frequent failure of the former. While many contemporaries and historians claim that the pursuit of defeated forces after such battles as 1st Manassas, Sharpsburg, or Gettysburg may have brought about an earlier decision, Jones defends the caution shown by the victorious commanders based on the advantage of retreat over pursuit, especially in terms of speed. He also recognized the importance of exhausting enemy will and resources over seeking their annihilation, arguing that the Union high command's recognition and adaptation of this theory led to eventual success. The impact of raids is also a central theme to Jones' work. He describes the effectiveness of small scale raids on Union communications by commanders such as Forrest and Morgan, while later large scale raiding strategy by Union forces in Georgia, the Carolinas, and the Shenandoah Valley wounded the Confederacy beyond repair.

In addition to his assertion that the Union and Confederacy fought the war on an equal footing, Jones makes other assumptions that are potentially hard to swallow. He suggests that the Union naval blockade was relatively ineffective. Jones also downplays the importance of the Mississippi River to both sides, and the impact of rifled firearms and the use of entrenchments. These assertions

would have carried more weight had Jones documented his findings with any evidence whatsoever.

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