

NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIVERSITY

NATIONAL WAR COLLEGE

**THE DECLINE OF THE DECISIVE BATTLE: CHANGES IN THE CONDUCT
OF WAR BETWEEN THE NAPOLEONIC WARS AND THE AMERICAN CIVIL
WAR**

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MILITARY THOUGHT AND THE ESSENCE OF WAR
SEMINAR B

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Report Documentation Page				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
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1. REPORT DATE 2004		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED 00-00-2004 to 00-00-2004	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE The Decline of the Decisive Battle: Changes in teh Conduct of Wars Between the Napoleonic Wars and the American Civil War				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) National War College,300 5th Avenue,Fort Lesley J. McNair,Washington,DC,20319-6000				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT see report					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 13	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			

The Decline of the Decisive Battle

The U.S. Civil War is generally accepted to be the first modern war; that is, a conflict that has more in common with the wars that followed it than those that preceded. There is no shortage of scholarly work that examines the many reasons why this is true, particularly within American scholarship. The sheer number of dead and wounded suffered by both sides, and the decision to continue the conflict in the face of these stunning losses, is arguably the greatest evidence of the revolutionary nature of this conflict.¹ While most European leaders failed to study the conflict to determine any changes to the character and conduct of war (a phenomenon explained by Von Moltke the elder's statement that there was little to be learned from the Civil War because it was fought with ill-disciplined armed mobs herded about by incompetents or romantic fools²), they succeeded only in delaying the appearance of these changes in the European theater. One of the salient features of this conflict is that the changes to the conduct of war led to the conclusion that seeking and winning the decisive battle was no longer sufficient to win the war. The disappearance of the decisive battle was a function of many factors, one of which was the widespread use of rifled firearms and subsequent battlefield preeminence of the defense.

The development of rifled firearms had a telling tactical effect on the battlefield. The firearm most prevalent on the Napoleonic battlefield was the smoothbore musket, which had a sustained rate of fire of 2-3 rounds per minute and a maximum range of 300 yards (but an effective range much closer to 50 yards).³ Some historians summarize the only tactic suitable to be used on open ground was to "...advance to close range, deliver a shattering point-blank volley hoping the speed of advance would increase the attackers casualty rate and their own fire would shatter the morale of the enemy," causing him to flee the battlefield.⁴ Other research indicates that attacking forces would move forward in close bunches to maximize firepower, engaging

with musket fire at ranges of 200, 150, 100, and 50 yards, before fixing bayonets for the final assault.⁵ Since there were not enough rifled barrels within the ranks prior to 1861 to make a difference and musket fire was thought to be too inaccurate to warrant marksmanship training, the deciding factor became the discipline of both forces to maintain the directed formation. Since teaching drill was easier and less expensive than teaching marksmanship, the accepted technique became to maneuver a relatively untrained but spirited mass in tight formation in order to bludgeon and overwhelm the enemy with a bayonet charge when both sides met. The preliminary artillery fires and musket fires at steadily decreasing ranges were intended to disrupt the opposition in hopes that the enemy's spirit of *élan* would fail first, making the concluding bayonet charge the decisive moment.

This spirit of *élan* (described with great precision by du Picq in his work Battle Studies) was generally accepted as the greatest variable in combat, essentially forcing both sides into a contest of whose *élan* is greater. Since there was no scientific means of divining the more powerful *élan*, combat was the sole means to determine which of the two sides possessed the greater psychological make-up. Presumably, once one side's *élan* proved to be superior the war was essentially over, as breeding *élan* took more time than was available between one battle and the next. While this may have been true for two relatively equally armed participants on flat ground, a clever use of terrain and the ability increased agility in having more units capable of individual movement advantaged the side of better generalship. Hence, Napoleon's Grand Armée, whose ranks were filled with tens of thousands of soldiers inspired by the revolution, and a number of sufficiently trained Lieutenants capable of following the Emperor's vision, dominated the European theater until the competition caught up in terms of army size and ability to maneuver.⁶

By the time of the American Civil War, advances in rifled barrels and the expanding use of the Minie ball changed the geography of the battlespace considerably. While there were differences in capabilities of specific firearms, rifles were generally able to fire six rounds per minute accurately at 300 yards, with marksmen able to kill at 500 yards. Repeating rifles, less accurate than a standard rifle but still better than a smoothbore musket, could fire up to 21 rounds per minute.⁷ The historian Charles Fennel Jr. concludes that, “The net result (of this increased accuracy) was that offensive forces came under effective enemy fire at a distance of about 10 times greater than in earlier wars.”⁸ Furthermore, increased rifle accuracy now meant that riflemen could engage artillerymen at ranges similar for both weapons systems. The effect on the ground was that artillerymen in the attack were unable to get close enough to infantry to deliver effective offensive fires without themselves falling victim to riflemen⁹. Other than perhaps a broader use of skirmishers than in previous wars, there is no evidence that the leaders of either side saw this technological advance as necessitating a dramatic change in the tactics of the attack. On the contrary, both sides appeared to believe that while the ability to kill at longer ranges necessitated a change in technique, there was no need to depart from using massed formations as the maneuver unit of choice.

Increased lethality of the individual infantryman created a problem when using cavalry as a shock force as well. The advantage that cavalry brought to the attack was speed. Cavalry units were relatively easy to control as they were generally used as the final blow, falling on a flank while the enemy was engaged to the front. Clearly, a large group of horsemen armed with sabers and pistols (not significantly less effective than a musket and bayonet) attacking from an unexpected direction could have a serious effect on the *élan* of the defending infantrymen. Once again, accurate rifle fire at ranges of 300 yards meant that the cavalry could not get close enough

to infantry in sufficient numbers to deliver effective blows with pistol and sabre.¹⁰ While cavalry troops fighting as dragoons and skirmishers were effective throughout the war, increased small arms accuracy forced the cavalry from its role as a shock force.

Despite the advantages in rifle technology, there are several reasons why massed formations remained an attractive alternative to battlefield commanders. The most convincing of these is, I believe, that command and control of massed formations was easier. While executing fire and maneuver at the skirmisher level was effective at slowing the advance of armies marching in column, there were probably insufficient command and control means available to take advantage of fire and maneuver on a large scale. It is easy to indicate a defensive position on terrain and instruct a group of skirmishers to engage an opposing unit on the march to delay their arrival on the battlefield, but it is another proposition all together to control fire and maneuver along a forward axis. Command and control during the Civil War was exercised by adhering to a pre-battle plan and using signal flags and bugles to control movement during the battle. Once the battle began, even these means were less than ideal as bugle calls cannot give specific directional instructions and flags are effective only when the receiving unit is in a position to see them. Using flags and bugles to signal advance, dismount, and retreat was feasible, but they were incapable of communicating messages as complex as provide a base of cover for the unit moving on your left flank (a reasonably simple directive to execute). Since there was no means available to control units executing fire and maneuver, commanders were limited to assigning missions to units to “fix” or “attack” and little else.

Given that a means to control more agile units did not present itself, commanders found themselves forced to modify how they employed large units. Since attackers were now under accurate fire from ranges exceeding 500 yards, units began to form for the attack at a greater

distance from the enemy lines. As units had to deploy on line to maximize their firepower forward, the result was that attackers marched across generally open terrain for long periods of time (moving on-line through woods is exceptionally difficult to control at a speed faster than a slow walk), and were subject to increasingly accurate fire from the defender. The result is that fewer men of the assaulting force were able to reach the breach point unharmed, leaving the attacking side with perhaps a penetration of the line but no means to exploit it.¹¹ An example of this phenomenon is during the Battle of Gettysburg, when Picket's charge succeeded in penetrating the Union line but there were no coherent Confederate forces available either to exploit the breach or to hold it. In short, the expansion of the battlefield in depth meant that actions that had been decided by maneuver in the past were now decided by firepower.

Although only minor changes to offensive tactics appeared, the same is not true when Civil War leaders considered the defense. Both sides apparently recognized that the increase in firepower demanded construction of earthworks and fortifications to provide cover. As time passed and soldiers saw for themselves the value of fortifications, there is evidence that they did not need to be ordered to dig either when defending or when halted.¹² Indeed, the siege campaigns conducted during the war featured significant fortifications built both by the attacker and the defender as well as offensive and defensive trench works. The large tent encampments needed to keep these huge standing armies in the field became field fortifications in themselves as individual soldiers began to dig trenches every time they stopped.¹³ The evidence indicates that while increased rifle accuracy led to a greater use of fortifications for defensive protection; there was no similar change to offensive techniques that reduced the maneuvering attackers' vulnerability. It follows that if a defensive position is fortified at all 360 degrees of approach, a

turning maneuver (the classic Napoleonic maneuver of decision) can no longer be an effective tactic.

The result of these reactions to rifled fires during this period was that the defense became the most efficient means of killing the enemy. Even at the time there was theoretical discussion that the defense was the “more powerful” means of conducting war, albeit the less decisive one.¹⁴ Rather than accepting this theory on its face, it is worthwhile to examine why this was true in America in the 1860s. The concept of decisive battle suggests that upon its completion, one side is driven from the field in such a state of disrepair that the loser’s political leadership sees no further advantage in pursuing combat. Even if one is conducting a strategy of attrition that focuses on the enemy’s will, it is difficult to get a decisive result from a victory in the defense. A successful defense requires that the enemy attack. A decisive defense, by extension, requires an enemy to continue to attack until its force is not only defeated but incapable of defending itself. Given that both sides of the Civil War had reasonably intelligent military leadership, it is difficult to imagine the circumstances where a general would continue to attack a position over a series of days that leaves his Army not only ineffective but virtually unrecognizable as a coherent force. Barring the suicidal tendencies of an attacker, the lone means available to the defender to achieve a decisive result would have been an immediate counterattack with a force of sufficient size both to pursue and to annihilate the enemy’s army.

As discussed earlier, the available means of command and control required that the battle plan be briefed in advance and in detail so that actions on the battlefield could be synchronized to the degree possible. The conditions following a failed attack were likely too unpredictable to allow either side to plan a counterattack in advance; that is, it was impossible before the battle to know which defending units would be of sufficient strength to counterattack and assigning that

mission to all units was not a feasible course of action either. Intelligence capabilities and communication systems were too primitive to provide commanders sufficient fidelity of the failed army's composition, disposition, and strength to make the direction of a decisive counterattack clear at the opportune time. While it is easier in retrospect to know the moment when an attack has failed, it must have been very difficult for the Civil War defender to know precisely when the attacking force had surrendered the initiative, and the time to launch the counterattack has arrived. In general, it was much easier for an attacking force to know when an attack had failed and to prepare to defend against a counterattack than it was for the defending force to perceive the opportunity, organize the counterattack, and launch it.

There are, of course, other factors that led to the absence of a decisive battle in the Civil War. The national economies of both the Confederacy and the U.S. had been fully integrated into their respective war efforts, so both sides had sufficient means available prior to 1864 to regenerate combat power regardless of the outcome of any single battle.¹⁵ Some historians argue that a decisive battle before 1865 was unlikely because both sides were prepared to pit their full destructive energies against each other.¹⁶ Consequently, even had there been the capability to conduct an organized counterattack following a successful defense it seems unlikely that domestic political conditions would have allowed that to be a decisive event in the Napoleonic sense.

Another feature of the Civil War was that it was fought in different theaters, between which maneuver on a strategic level was possible. That is, armies operating in one theater could move fast enough to have a tactical impact in a second theater. The most efficient means to move forces from one theater to the other was the railroad, and the U.S. enjoyed a significant advantage in this regard.¹⁷ While the Confederates did theoretically enjoy interior lines, the

lesser amount of railroads (and the South's inability to maintain them or to produce rolling stock) and subsequent loss of the inland waterways essentially eliminated this natural advantage.¹⁸ It is true that specific Confederate units did display the ability to move strategically without either rail or waterway assistance, the example of Stonewall Jackson's forces marching over 600 miles in 35 days during the Shenandoah campaign and putting 65,000 Union troops out of action in the process is perhaps the most striking.¹⁹ Nonetheless, the Union ability to move forces strategically with greater speed than the Confederacy meant that regardless of the performance of the Army of the Potomac, there was another armed force capable of moving rapidly to that theater to continue operations against the Army of Northern Virginia. The effect of this capability was to give the Union government the assurance that one bad engagement near the capital was not necessarily cause to sue for peace. Consequently, the North enjoyed an advantage of potentially greater means in terms of employing armed, trained, and mobile forces in all theaters without facing the diplomatically problematic decision to draft more soldiers from the civilian pool.

There were a variety of factors that led to the absence of a decisive battle in the Civil War, all of which would play a role in the wars of the twentieth century. It is a bit of an oversimplification to state that a decisive battle in the Napoleonic sense is impossible during a national or "people's" war, but the essence of the argument is sound. While there was a delay between the French revolution's contributions of making an entire population available for war and the disappearance of the decisive battle, it is clear that the American Civil War was not the aberration in military affairs that the Europeans thought it was. Rather, it was the harbinger of things to come. The character and conduct of war changed between the Napoleonic wars and the Civil War, specifically in the disappearance of the decisive battle. Technology certainly hastened

the change in war's conduct as it escorted the defense into prominence, but the change in war's character towards total war may have had as much to do with changing national attitudes about defeat as it did technological advancements. By the end of the First World War, countries would no longer associate the loss of a battle with the loss of the war.

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Notes

¹ Mark Grimsley, “Surviving Military Revolution: The U.S. Civil War,” in The Dynamics of Military Revolution, 1350-2050, ed. MacGregor Knox and Williamson Murray, (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 90.

² Paul Lewis Isemonger and Christopher Scott, The Fighting Man: The Soldier at War from the Age of Napoleon to the Second World War, (Stroud, Gloucestershire: Sutton, 1998), 65.

³ Isemonger and Scott, 18.

⁴ Isemonger and Scott, 94.

⁵ Isemonger and Scott, 20.

⁶ Granted, this is somewhat of an oversimplification but for the purposes of this work it seems an acceptable generalization.

⁷ Isemonger and Scott, 72.

⁸ Charles C. Fennell, Jr, “The Civil War: The First Modern War,” in The American Military Tradition: From Colonial Times to the Present, ed. John M. Carroll and Colin F. Baxter (Wilmington, Delaware: SR Books, 1993), 62.

⁹ Fennell, 67.

¹⁰ Fennell, 67.

¹¹ Fennell, 67.

¹² Isemonger and Scott, 55.

¹³ Isemonger and Scott, 67.

¹⁴ See Book One, Chapter One of Carl von Clausewitz, On War, edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976) pgs 75-90, for a full explanation of why defense is a stronger but less decisive form of fighting than attack.

¹⁵ Fennell, 66.

¹⁶ Grimsley, 75.

¹⁷ Fennell, 71.

¹⁸ Fennell, 71.

¹⁹ Isemonger and Scott, 68.