

The Influence of Geography on War Strategy

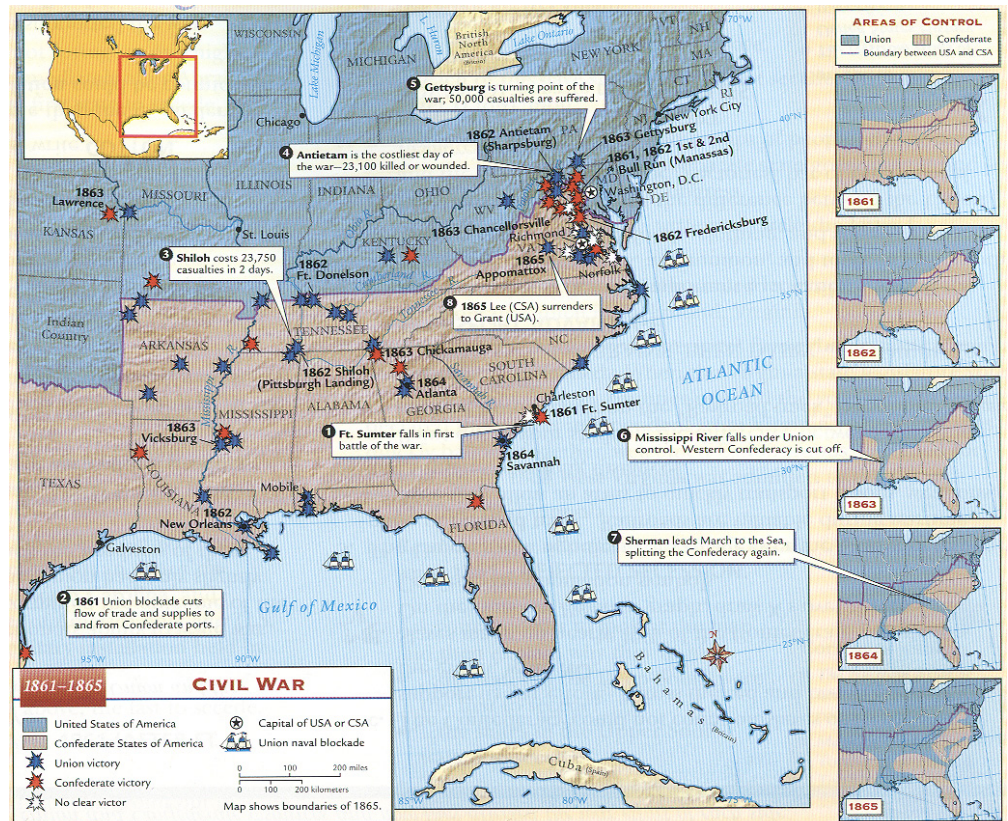
One of the key influences on war strategy, today as well as yesterday, is geography. In the past, in fact, geography often was more important than strategy – actually determining the outcome of a battle or war. Control of a mountain pass or the high ground gave one side a distinct advantage over another. Can you think of other geographic features that would have a major effect on the progress and outcome of a battle?

Geography and the Civil War

How did geography influence the war strategy of the Union?

Lincoln and his military advisers developed a war strategy based on geography. What geographic features might influence Union military strategy?

One key feature of the southern landscape is its long coastline. It stretches from Virginia around Florida to Texas, and is dented with inlets and harbors. Another feature that stands out is the Appalachian Mountains. The mountains effectively divide the Confederacy into east and west. A third prominent physical feature is the Mississippi River, which divides the Confederacy further.



The Union Blockade

Why did the Union blockade the southern coastline?

The long southern coastline concerned northern strategists. They knew it would be important to keep the South from getting needed supplies. Remember that most American manufacturing was located in the North. The Confederacy would have to depend on imports carried by ship to replenish their supplies.

What could the Union do? They decided to blockade the entire southern coastline. Union naval ships patrolled the offshore waters, capturing Confederate merchant ships bound for Europe for supplies or returning with them. The blockade, which stretched for 3,500 miles, became increasingly successful. At first, the Union navy could not effectively block the mile upon mile of coastline because Confederate ships were too numerous. As ships were added to the Union navy and lost from the Confederate one, the blockade grew more effective.

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The Southern Landscape

Why was the Southern landscape a major influence on both war strategy and the war's outcome?

Virtually all the battles of the war were fought on Confederate land. Therefore, the geography of the South was of vital importance to both sides. Why did most of the war unfold in the South? Remember that although the South fired the first shots of the war, southern strategy was not aggressive. To restore the Union, northern armies had to invade and defeat the Confederacy. The goal of the Confederacy, on the other hand, was to defend itself until the Union tired of fighting. The Confederacy need not invade the North because it sought no Union territory.

Divide and Conquer

How did the Union plan to fight the war on Confederate land?

Knowing their armies must invade, Union military advisers devised a plan to divide the South. Remember that the Appalachian Mountains and Mississippi River system already physically divided the South. Control of both would divide Southern armies and block supply routes. It would also require the outmanned Confederate army to fight on two fronts, stretching their limited manpower thin in certain places.

In the West, control of the Mississippi and then its major tributaries—the Tennessee and Cumberland rivers—would further divide the South. It would be more and more difficult for reinforcements and supplies to reach Confederate forces. In fact, the Union was so conscious of the importance of geography and of rivers, they named many battles after nearby streams. The Confederacy named the same battle after the nearest town. The Battle of Bull Run (the Union name for a battle near a stream in northern Virginia) was also the Battle of Manassas (the Confederate name for the same battle near a small town in the area).

In the East, the North realized that controlling the mountainous spine of the Appalachians would isolate the tidewater South from vast lands of the Confederacy to the west. Union forces could then swiftly surround and capture Richmond and end the war.

A Successful Strategy

Did Union strategy work?

Lincoln had the confidence in his plan to stick with it. He knew that it was based on the geography of the land. Each part of the plan capitalized on a different physical aspect. The war actually unfolded according to the plan Lincoln and his advisors had created.

The blockade eventually crippled the South. Shortages of almost every item became common. Neither southern industry nor southern agriculture could keep up with military or civilian needs. The Union army and navy gained control of the Mississippi and Tennessee river valleys, splitting the Confederacy. From that point on, Union victories divided the Confederacy into smaller and smaller isolated pieces. As the end of the war drew closer, Union troops surrounded Richmond, which was cut off from western reinforcements. Lincoln's confidence in the plan paid off. Strategy built on geography was one of the major keys to northern success in the Civil War.