

CIVIL WAR STRATEGY ARTICLE

The American Civil War showed the big differences between Northern and Southern states. As the two sides of the country clashed, the contrast between them was clear. The Union entered with more people and industry. The Confederacy had talented commanders and a strong strategic defense. The differences between the two shaped how both sides fought and thus influenced the outcome of the war.

North Advantages: Industry & Population

The Union appeared to have more advantages in the Civil War. The northern states had a larger population, a stronger industrial economy, and control of the U.S. Navy.

The North had a population of 21 million. The South only had 9 million people, including enslaved people. The North's large population contributed to its industrial advantage. With more workers, the North could produce more goods in factories. The North manufactured 97% of firearms, 96% of locomotives, and 93% of pig iron—a material used to produce wartime items—in the United States.

The U.S. Navy was also under the control of the Union. Lincoln used this strategic advantage to blockade Southern ports to cut off the South's trade routes and the Mississippi River.

South Advantages: Experience & Motivation

While the North had more material advantages, the Southern states had advantages in strategy. The South had a larger land area, more experienced military leadership, and higher morale.

The South's military might was clear in its army. The South had a significantly smaller population but still had a substantial army of around 800,000 soldiers. The Union had more soldiers, approximately 2 million, but the South's army was also more experienced and educated. Seven out of the eight U.S. military colleges were in the South. These colleges produced talented soldiers who fought for the Confederacy.

The terrain of the Southern states also provided advantages. The South was fighting a defensive war on their own territory. The North, in contrast, had to invade the South and fight on unfamiliar terrain.

Southern armies also had higher morale than the Northern armies. Southern soldiers were united by a cause. They were defending their values and way of life while the North fought to preserve the Union and, later in the war, to end slavery.

North Strategies: The Anaconda Plan & Total War

The North and South had different strategic goals and war strategies. Southern states had to remove Northern soldiers from their land to keep their independence. The North had to invade the South, pacify the population, and gain political control.

The North's battle strategy relied on General Winfield Scott's Anaconda Plan. This plan outlined a blockade of all Southern coasts and key points along the Mississippi River to "strangle" the

South like an anaconda snake. This plan would cut off routes the South could use to trade with or get aid from foreign nations. This plan was gradual. It was intended to weaken the South over the course of the war. The North then planned to capture the major Southern cities of Richmond, Atlanta, and Savannah.

As the war progressed, the North favored a “total war” strategy. This strategy involved launching attacks on all targets—not just military ones. The North believed that this strategy would end the war quickly. Union armies attacked economic hubs like factories and burned fields of crops. Union soldiers also invaded and occupied Confederate homes.

This total war strategy brought the war closer to civilians. Women, children, and other nonmilitary citizens saw the violence of the war from a new perspective.

South Strategies: Overseas Assistance & Defensive War

In contrast to the North, the Southern army fought a defensive war. The South believed that if they could fortify their territory and outlast the North, they would win the war. When Northern soldiers entered Southern territory, the South attacked and drove them out.

The South also asked foreign nations for aid. The Confederacy reached out to European countries, like France and Britain, to ask for help. The South hoped to trade their main exports of cotton and tobacco for money or military support. They believed that gaining foreign allies would help bring an end to the Union’s blockades and restore the economy of the South that had been weakened by the Anaconda Plan. However, foreign nations did not offer any material support. Most European countries declared neutrality during the Civil War.

The unique strengths of both the North and the South promised a long, contentious Civil War. Americans worried about how the country would recover from the conflict.

References

Rafuse, E. S. (Ed.). (2005). *The American Civil War*. Ashgate.