

*“If definite truth were possible in history,  
historians would soon have nothing left to write about.”*  
- James McPherson

## **Introduction**

As I began reflecting on the novel Why the Confederacy Lost, written by Gabor S. Boritt, I also began thinking about the purpose of the Northshore Educational Consortium, and the Teaching American History Grant Program. Often times in the study of history people search for specific reasons as to why events unfolded as they did. Throughout my education, and certainly in my years teaching, this has been a quest of mine, and it has been quite a challenge. Stated simply above by the well-known Civil War historian James McPherson, this is often times impossible.

In completing this year of study specifically dedicated to the study of slavery, the Constitution and the American Civil War, I decided that I wanted to know more about why the Union was victorious. It is clear to me now after reading Why the Confederacy Lost that there is not one definite reason for its results. A combination of many different proceedings together allowed the Union to ultimately become victorious, and the Confederacy defeated. Historians have argued many different opinions based on strong reasoning. The following essay will review several opinions from authors in the novel regarding the reasons for the outcome of the Civil War.

## **Summary of reasons for the Outcome of the Civil War**

In the book Why the Confederacy Lost several possible explanations of the outcome of the Civil War are presented. Five different articles written by well-known Civil War Historians are included in this novel, and each argues different reasons for the fall of the Confederacy, or

the success of the Union. The following is a brief summary of each article explaining some of the reasons highlighted in this text.

The first article in the book is written by James McPherson. The quote located at the beginning of this essay comes from this section of the novel. In his article, titled “American Victory, American Defeat,” McPherson basically comes to the conclusion that there is not one specific reason as to why the Confederacy lost, but rather several events that led to its demise. He points to both internal and external theories for the Union victory and the Southern defeat, and claims that neither can be studied exclusively. McPherson generally prefers to look each theory together as a whole to come up with his explanation for the end of the war.

He begins his explanation by talking about the different internal theories for the end of the Civil War. Internal theories include problems within the Confederacy, such as issues with the Confederate generals and their leadership skills, as well as the lack of leadership provided by Jefferson Davis. He also discusses the fact that many of the states in the Confederacy were fighting for their individual state’s rights, as opposed to the Confederate cause. However, he dismisses all of these theories as being solely responsible for the Confederate failure because it could be argued that the Union faced the same problems with their respective generals, president, and state support for the war.

Next, McPhearson brings up and refutes the “internal alienation” theory, which states that the south lost because slaves and non-slaveholding whites were isolated from the conflict. He feels this can not be solely to blame because the amount of people that were actually alienated from the war tends to be exaggerated by historians. Finally, he mentions a “lack-of-will” thesis, which suggests that the South was not motivated to win. They were not motivated because of a lack of nationalism, guilt over slavery, and their strong religious sense which was being tarnished

by death and destruction. However, it is easy to refute all of these theories as being the sole cause of the end of the Civil War because most would say that the South was more motivated to win this war than the North as they believed they were defending the correct way of life. He also discredits this thesis by pointing out that often the North was struggling with these same issues of motivation to fight.

Finally, towards the end of his essay, McPhearson turns to the external causes of Union victory and Southern defeat. He discusses the fact that the Union had overwhelming numbers and supplies. Though this can also not be pointed to as a sole cause of victory, as in many other wars the underdog was able to be victorious. He goes on to sum up his argument by stating that he believes that the superiority of Union military leadership at the end of the war, the management of military logistics and supplies, and the executive leadership were some of the major factors that led to Union victory. Though he does not feel that this alone won the war, and that each battle and decision was significant, he does feel that these were very influential. In general, I found this section of the book to be very interesting, and it left me with a lot to ponder.

The second article in the book, titled “Military Means, Political Ends: Strategy,” was written by Archer Jones. This article mostly focuses on the fact that many military strategies by both sides were influenced by their politics implications. He immediately begins by highlighting the difference between military and political victories, and how influential the connection between these two issues became in the war. Jones mentions how it was vitally important for both sides to consider each military strategy from a political perspective as well. He starts by explaining the original political strategy of the Union, commonly known as the Anaconda Plan. This strategy relied on the idea that the North would crush the South, and thus it influenced the military tactics in the war. This strategy on the part of the North also influenced the Southern

defensive military and political strategy. As the war continued, each battle was influenced by both political and military tactical decisions. Jones backs up his theory using several different examples of battles fought throughout the war, and how they both had military and political motives. He also adds in that as the war went along, the strategies got more complicated and more intertwined.

After concluding his very interesting discussion of political and military strategy throughout the war, Jones finally makes the statement that he believes the Confederacy lost because of a lack of political motivation, and not because of military belief. Southerners eventually were made to believe that it was going to be far too costly to them to continue the war, so they simply quit. Due to the Union blockade, the Southern standard of living had gone down vastly affecting their morale. At the same time, the Northern strategy to conquer Southern territory convinced people that failure was inevitable. It was this loss of motivation politically that led to the Southern military defeat. Ultimately, I found this article to be excellent at justifying the Southern loss at the end of the Civil War. It provided me with a lot of strategic information that I hope to be able to use in the future when teaching about the war.

The third article, titled “Upon their Success Hang Momentous Interests: Generals” was written by Gary W. Gallagher. He focuses mainly on the decisions of three major generals in the war; Robert E. Lee, Ulysses S. Grant and Tecumseh Sherman. He talks about many of their major decisions, and how they affected the war. Their actions not only affected the outcomes on the battlefield, but they also influenced the political actions of their leaders and the moral of their people. Gallagher supports this theory by discussing each of the three general’s individually and how they influenced the outcome of the war.

In the case of General Grant, Gallagher discusses his reputation of being a butcher. Statistics prove that Grant's strategy in the war was to overwhelm the South with Northern resources. This strategy allowed the North to use one of its natural advantages against the enemy, and the credit for this decision must go to Grant. Also, it was his decisions relating to military strategy in 1864-65 that led the South to have no choice but to surrender.

At the same time, it is necessary to regard General Sherman as almost equally important to Grant in bringing victory to the Union. Gallagher discusses the fact the Sherman was the one who made the conflict a total war, as he felt it was a war between all people, not solely two armies. Sherman executed some of most complicated battles throughout his march to the sea, and together he and Grant formed a great partnership.

Finally, Gallagher discusses the largest obstacle for the success of Grant and Sherman. Robert E Lee is considered by many to be one of the most cunning strategists in the Civil War. Lee was incredibly aggressive at different points of the war, which led him to early success in battle. Unfortunately, Gallagher points out that historian's question Lee's arrogance as the war progressed. They also question his focus on Virginia as a reason for overall Confederate losses, as he was by far the most influential Confederate general.

Ultimately, Gallagher feels many of the decisions made by the Confederacy led to their demise. He says that their decisions not only changed the outcome of the war but its duration. This article was insightful, and provided more information about the importance of some of the prominent Generals. It further added to my understanding of the reasons for the outcome of the Civil War, and the great influence generals had on it.

The fourth article in the book, written by Reid Mitchell, is titled "The Perseverance of the Soldiers." This article focuses on the soldiers who fought this war, and their attitudes towards

the conflict. He believes that Northern troops had a significantly stronger morale and purpose throughout the war, and this helped them to be ultimately successful. He points out the fact that the North had a significantly large amount of men volunteering to fight to preserve the Union because they felt it was their duty and the right thing to do. He talks about the fact that most people felt very enthusiastic about joining the army because of a great sense of nationalism. He also mentions how the Emancipation Proclamation has a great effect on the North. Not only did it cause many people to reenlist in the North due to their support for the end of slavery, but it also crushed the morale of the South, forcing them to fall to defeat.

Mitchell also points out that the South chose to fight a war that was not best for their circumstances. For example, they could have chosen to fight a defensive war using guerilla style tactics, which would likely have broken down the Northern will. Instead the Confederacy chose to fight head to head battles against the well fortified North. They also fought a war based on defending the evils of slavery. Fighting to defend slavery divided the population in the South, and left soldiers feeling unsupported in the fields. Finally, with much of the war being fought in the South, many Southern soldiers chose to desert the army to go home and protect their families.

Therefore, Mitchell believes that the Union soldiers were ultimately able to outlast the Confederates, which ultimately allowed them to win. This theory is not to suggest that Southern soldiers did not believe in their cause, or that they were weaker, but simply that the North was prepared to fight to preserve the Union more than the South was ready to secede from it.

The last essay in the book is titled “Black glory: The African-American Role in Union Victory,” and it was written by Joseph Glattharr. This article focuses on the influence of black soldiers on the outcome of the war. He points out the fact that it was very difficult for black soldiers to even enlist in the army, but once they did they were influential. Those that could not

find a way to physically fight in the war help the efforts of the Union through sabotage on farms, destroying Confederate resources, and general misbehavior at the risk of their lives. Also, many slaves eventually chose to flee their plantations in seeking freedom with the Union army.

Upwards of 15-20% of the slaves that were held in the South sought refuge with the Union army during the war, and many offered their service in whatever way to the forces that had liberated them.

Finally, Glattharr pointed out several different battles in which black soldiers made a significant difference, including the battle at Fort Wagner. He points out that black men had a true cause to fight for, and this drove their dedication to the war. He also points out the fact that this hurt the Confederacy not only because it added men to the Union army, but because it also took away from labor helping the South. Considering all of this, Glattharr concludes that black soldiers were vital to the war effort.

## **Conclusion**

After considering the several different chapters that were presented in this novel I have decided that I agree with James McPherson the most. I think that his chapter, which focuses on the fact that there is not one specific cause to the end of the war, but rather several causes which led to the defeat of the Confederacy, seems the most complete. McPherson presented several different interesting facts in his section, and he was able to refute several of the major theories of why the Confederacy lost the war. He presented the strongest, most complete argument, and I believe this is why his article was placed first in the novel. I believe that the only way to look at the end of the Civil War is to examine many different advantages that led to the Union success, and disadvantages that led to Southern defeat.

There are a lot of ways that I can foresee using the information that I learned from this book in my classroom. I want to create a lesson using the McPhearson essay where I present the different theories about what led to the outcome of the Civil War. I feel as if I could ask students to do further research into one of the different possible reasons for Union victory, or Southern failure. Once they have done research to support their theory, they will be discussing their theory in class. Ultimately, I would then ask the students to reflect on all the different possible theories relating to the outcome of the war, and make their own decisions as to what they think was most influential.

The other lesson I could see myself creating relates to all of the articles in the book. I could assign groups of students to read different articles, and decide what they articles attribute to ending the war. The groups could then be asked to present their findings to the class, and discuss whether or not they agree with the author of their article.

Overall, the thing that I plan on taking from this assignment the most is the varying points of view about the reasons for the outcome of the Civil War. I can use this information when presenting the end of the Civil War to help students to understand that there is not always just one answer for why things happened the way that they did. This book was a wonderful addition to my studies of the Civil War period in this course.