

Opinion

North-South conflict first 'total modern war'

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The widely popular "U.S. Civil War" series, depicted last year over the national public broadcasting systems, provided some excellent insights into a conflict which still sparks heated debate on both sides of the Mason-Dixon line.

Although the series covered the socio-historical aspects of the war well, it failed to highlight the fact that the American Civil War differed from the Western wars that preceded it, and that the North-South conflict changed the way in which many wars would be fought in the future. The war was a watershed event to both American and European military theorists. Western war's fundamental nature changed with this bloody conflict to be later characterized as the first "Modern Total War."

Prior to the American Civil War, Western armed conflicts were fought by armies largely on the European-Napoleonic model. Napoleon, although a brilliant tactician, inherited a superior army from the French Revolution.

With a superb instrument in hand, Napoleon honed his army through changes in fighting organization and through a rigorous training program for his soldiers and officers.

He based promotions on battlefield performance and not aristocratic birth — a revolutionary concept for its time.

More importantly, Napoleon fought wars as a series of battlefield engagements; his objective always being to destroy the opposing enemy army. The defeat of an opponent's army decided all political questions, as it had done in Europe for centuries.

At the advent of the Civil War, Napoleonic notions were still the rules of war-fighting. In fact, Robert E. Lee was a former president of the Napoleon Club at

the U.S. Military Academy. The North-South conflict did not take on the characteristics of "Total War" until Ulysses S. Grant assumed generalship of the Union army. Before that time, both Union and Confederate armies fought in a manner not unlike the way Western wars had been fought for centuries.

In the early years of the Civil War, army met army with the expectation that the political and moral questions of union, and after 1863, slavery with President Abraham Lincoln's embrace of the Emancipation Proclamation, would be decided by victory on the battlefield. Grant had some good reasons for changing the North's strategy after he took command.

The series of battlefield setbacks suffered by the Union at the outset of the conflict convinced North and South alike that Confederate armies and generals were superior. Although partly true, the South had another advantage. Lee largely fought a strategically defensive war until his defeat at Gettysburg. The North was disadvantaged. The defense is inherently stronger than the offense.

Because the North, to win, had to take the fight to the South, Lee often had the enviable opportunity to choose the ground upon which he would fight. The Union's hope of winning hinged upon their employing offensive operations.

The Confederates, for their part, did not have to win, but only to survive; the hope being to wear down the Union's will to continue the fight. Continued survival is a far easier strategic, as well as operational,

concept to put into effect.

To win, Grant changed the old Napoleonic rules, thus marking a profound change in the manner in which the Union fought the war. Grant chose to attack not only the armies of the South, but their sources of industrial and food production. Gen. William T. Sherman's "March to the Sea," and the subsequent destruction of Atlanta, were the most notable examples. Grant chose to attack the base of the pillar — reasoning that the southern armies could not continue to resist without material support. He was right. Grant's decision marks a fundamental

change in the nature of modern war — from the historically accepted clash of opposing militaries to the laying-waste of cities and agriculturally productive countryside.

Grant no doubt felt changing the rules was justified because of the unique nature of the American Civil War. The people of North and South prayed to the same God, revered the same Constitution, and admired the same Revolutionary War heroes. Union and Confederate peoples were much more alike than different. Grant's decision, supported by Lincoln, reflected the deep feelings of both that the Union had to be preserved at all costs.

The American form of government was still relatively young. Americans and Europeans referred to democracy as "the great experiment." The failure of the Union, it was thought, might condemn the new form of governing to the trash heap of history. Such high ideals forced Lincoln to support Grant's apparent brutalization of the South. For the best of motives, war became all the more horrible. As wars thereafter proved, the clash of armies alone would seldom decide the ultimate outcome of armed conflicts.

For good or ill, the American Civil War fundamentally changed the way much of the Western world subsequently went to war. Later wars seldom limited carnage to the battlefield only.

Civilians often came to suffer much the same fate as their armies. The means to make wars became legitimate targets.

Nations that go to war today face, in many cases, potential national disaster. Grant's place in military history as an innovative strategist was thus assured. The legacy of "Modern Total War," although not characteristic of the entire American North-South conflict, is surely its birthplace.

