



The overlooked lessons of a little-known war...

Earth Thought Notebooks

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Against all expectations, interest in the military aspects of the American Civil War (1861-1865) remained secondary for France during the Second Empire. While a Western nation was cruelly experiencing a new form of warfare - modern and total - prefiguring the two World Wars in some respects, the French army did not perceive the unprecedented transformations that this conflict brought in the art of warfare.

With the celebrations of the centenary of the Great War legitimately occupying the front of the French media scene, another historical event of prime importance, located in the United States, could go completely unnoticed. 150 years ago, on April 9, 1865, at Appomattox Courthouse, General Robert Lee, commander-in-chief of the Confederate armies, came to sign the surrender of his forces to the head of the Union armies, General Ulysses Grant. Although the conflict continued for a few more weeks, the surrender marked the end of a four-year civil war that tore and profoundly transformed the American nation. Beginning on April 12, 1861, the Civil War, as the Americans called it, pitted the 11 southern states against the 23 northern states that remained loyal to the Union.

The first modern and total war.

With its 620,000 dead, this war was the bloodiest the United States had ever known, since it caused more losses in the American army than the two world wars, the Korean War and the Vietnam War combined! For many historians, the American Civil War would mark a double turning point in military history and reflect, for the first time, the impact of the industrial revolution on the art of war. Thus, it would be the first modern war in terms of the size of the theatre of operations, the number of troops involved, the use of new weapons and the related technical innovations, as well as its ideological dimension. It would also be the first all-out war in that it called all men of arms-bearing age into the

armed forces, employed women on a massive scale as replacement labour, concentrated all the resources of its economy on the war effort and mobilized the entire civilian population of all ages ideologically.

Despite its geographical remoteness, France in the Second Empire followed the American crisis with interest. While Napoleon III was rightly concerned about the damage that this civil war was causing to the French economy, particularly with the disruption of its supply of southern cotton, he also saw the benefits to be gained from a conflict that could profoundly alter the geopolitical balance on the American continent.

On the other hand, interest in the military aspects of the conflict remained secondary. While one Western nation was cruelly experiencing a new form of warfare – modern and total – Prefiguring on certain points the two World Wars, France did not perceive the unprecedented transformations that this conflict brought in the art of war. France's blindness cost her to some extent the disaster of the war of 1870-1871. Without falling into the trap of uchrony [1], a brief analysis of the military lessons of the Civil War is necessary in order to grasp all its innovative aspects. Then we will try to understand the reasons that led the French military not to learn the lessons of the greatest conflict ever fought on American soil.

An avant-garde conflict that changed the face of war!

On the strategic level, apart from an unprecedented mobilization of nearly three million American citizens between 1861 and 1865 and the implementation of a real war economy to support these immense masses of soldiers, the novelty lies in the elaboration of the "Anaconda" plan. Having identified the main source of wealth in the South, namely the cotton trade, the North decided to deprive the South of it by encircling it in order to stifle the Confederacy. Thus anticipating the Allied strategy of destroying the major German industrial centres during the Second World War, the Union's strategy was a successful example of a comprehensive approach, because the South, defeated militarily, suffocated economically and isolated diplomatically, was finally forced to capitulate.

In the same way, the "race to the sea" of the northern General Sherman in 1864 reflected on the operational level the increasing importance attributed to extra-military considerations in the outcome of battles. In proposing to ravage the South, Sherman's main objective was to render the military resources of the region unusable by "the complete destruction of roads, houses, and people ... I can accomplish this march and make Georgia howl with pain. His 62. It is since that time that the notion of "raid" has entered the everyday military vocabulary. In the end, the northern and southern staffs had perhaps not studied the eight volumes entitled "Of the war" by the Prussian military theorist Karl von Clausewitz; nevertheless, they discovered and implemented total war on their own.

Finally, at the tactical level, innovations also heralded the face of modern warfare. In the field, the mixture of imagination and ignorance of classical military methods, combined with the technical revolution that was sweeping the United States at that time, produced rich and forward-looking concepts of weaponry and tactics.

While it would be too tedious to list all of these innovations, it is worth recalling those that foreshadowed the scale and violence of future conflicts. The first of these was the spread of new breech-loading and repeating weapons, such as the Spencer rifle and the first Gatling machine guns. Benefiting from the destructive contribution of the "Minié bullet"... – named after the French officer who designed it in 1848... –The development of rifled shotguns quadrupled the range and accuracy of shooting by giving a rotating effect to these conical-shaped bullets. The impact on military tactics was considerable and transformed it on three levels: it condemned attacks in close ranks initially intended to concentrate firepower, it made frontal cavalry charges against infantry suicidal and, above all, it favoured the defensive over the offensive. Henceforth, soldiers no longer went to fire in successive ranks, but flattened themselves on the ground, advanced by leaps and bounds to minimize exposure and dug shelters in the earth at every opportunity. At the siege of Vicksburg in 1863, and even more so at the siege of Petersburg in 1864, the enemy armies were engaged in the cruellest of trench warfare, much like The battlefields were also marked by the appearance of large funnels caused by the explosion of underground mines. In addition, the use of railways in support of military operations grew remarkably. These railway lines, and the railway nodes they created, became key strategic objectives for the transport of troops and logistics. The North was at the forefront in this area, carefully maintaining its railways and even building new ones during the conflict. For example, in September 1863, 16,000 Union soldiers managed to travel 1,930 km in one week to reach the front. It was a real achievement for the time, which foreshadowed the massive troop movements of the 20th century. The telegraph itself was one of the main weapons of war. The Federal Army had an organization called the Military Telegraph Service which made it possible to transmit messages over considerable distances. In 1865, the MTS laid and relieved an average of 320 km of telegraph wires per day, enabling the Union Headquarters to keep in constant contact and to transmit orders instantaneously to its 500,000 men spread over an area of more than 1,200 km². The Navy also benefited from notable advances: First battles with cuirassiers and armoured vessels with swivelling "Monitor" class turrets in March 1862, the first laying of sea mines ingeniously designed by the Southern General Rains and the entry into service of the first operational submarine, the Southern Hunley, in 1864. Amphibious combat, by sea or on navigable rivers, was based on improved land-sea coordination. It allowed the organization of operations that were unprecedented in their audacity, as in 1862 during the capture of New Orleans or during the landing and evacuation of the Army of the Potomac during the campaign of the Peninsula. The third dimension itself was the subject of promising innovations: the use of the observation balloon and the transmission of air-to-ground information. It is true that the French, during the battle of Fleurus in 1794, were the pioneers of the observation balloon, but they abandoned it some time later. In the summer of 1861, the Union took advantage of the first observations of the enemy thanks to a tethered balloon, and, a remarkable feat, the first communication from the air to the ground was made on June 18, 1861 by means of a telegraph wire.

The Civil War veterans left a legacy of innovation to their military successors. Some new ideas, too far in advance, were momentarily discarded to be rediscovered later. But there were enough of them to bring about immediate and profound changes in the conduct of the war. The process of modernizing the battlefield and operations was spread throughout the conflict. Beginning as a Napoleonic-type war, the Civil War ended with a prefiguration of the fighting of the Great War.

In France, the Civil War remained a "distant hurricane".[2]

In spite of all the obvious advances in tactical and technical fields, the French General Staff was unable to take the measure of this American civil war. The lessons of this war did not nourish the military doctrine of the France of the Second Empire and did not make it possible to initiate the fundamental reforms that were nevertheless indispensable. To understand this blindness, one must bear in mind that the French armies of the time were themselves a model for all foreign nations to follow, which did not lead French military leaders to question the real situation. It should also be remembered that France at that time was enjoying military success and had been blessed with uninterrupted colonial glory since the Restoration, which prevented any real work of questioning and forecasting.

However, in France, the extent of the conflict on the other side of the Atlantic was not unknown. From the end of the Civil War, French volunteers who had taken part in the conflict in one way or another, left numerous writings, ranging from very detailed works, such as that of the Prince of Joinville, "... the first communication from the air to the ground was made on June 18, 1861 by means of a telegraph wire. Campaign of the Army of the Potomac. March-July 1862", that of the Count of Paris, " Voyage en **Amérique (1861-1862)**", or that of General Count de Trobiand, "Four years of campaigning in the Army of the Potomac...", to the peripheral works of personalities outside the military profession, such as the engineer and journalist Auguste Laugel, "The United States during the war (1861-1865)", or that of the correspondent of the Revue des deux Mondes, Ernest Duvergier de Houranne, "Eight months in America». Above all, however, the French General Staff belatedly dispatched an official military mission from April to December 1864 to monitor operations on the northern side, mainly to study technical innovations. Two French officers, Lieutenant-Colonel de Chanal and Captain Guzman, finally, after many adventures, joined the front in General Meade's staff. They had the opportunity to follow the Wilderness campaign and in particular the difficult siege of Petersburg mentioned above. On their return, they wrote a very detailed memorandum on the organization, equipment and tactics used in both camps. 3] They were deeply impressed by the almost systematic digging of entrenchments, the revolution in tactics brought about by the use of new weapons, the reconfiguration of the mass armies, as well as the progress in transport and communications: in short, no novelty escaped their analysis!

But the French staff did not imagine that the characteristics of this type of conflict could be imposed for future wars.

The first explanation for this disastrous prejudice is blindness due to pride. Many French officers only wanted to see, in this civil war, a succession of hazardous and disorderly battles, led by undisciplined troops and conducted by untrained officers. Colonel Ardant du Picq himself, who was the great French military theorist of the time, saw only "melee fugitives" and "long-distance skirmishers' fights" [4]. 4] And in this, France did no better than Prussia which, behind its great chief of staff, General von Moltke, would have said that the Civil War was a meeting of "armed cohorts busy chasing each other all over the country" [5]. It must be said that at the dawn of the War of 1870, the reputation and professionalism of the French army among the other European military powers was particularly appreciated. Nothing seemed to justify taking an interest in a conflict simply opposing civilians, the only ones who were even slightly educated were those who had been taught the French regulations of 1842! It is true that in 1861, in both camps, the tactics employed, the formations used or even the uniforms worn revealed French inspiration (there is a great similarity between the dress of the Zouaves engaged in the Crimean War and that of the Union soldiers). The curricula of the military school at West Point placed great emphasis on the study of the military history of France and the Napoleonic campaigns in particular.

But even worse than this self-satisfaction, many French officers watched with disdain as a young nation without military traditions was being torn apart in what they saw as a brutal and vulgar civil war. Moreover, the latter did not exalt any of the traditional military values prevalent in imperial armies. Raised in the school of the offensive spirit, French officers believed that victory was achieved primarily through a combination of moral strength and physical bravery. However, the Civil War clearly demonstrated that, faced with modern weaponry, courage alone could no longer win. The glorious but extremely deadly charges of the French cavalry at Fröeschwiller-Wœrth, Mars-la-Tour or Sedan in 1870 are symptomatic of the French mentality that still believed in the power of shock.

The second explanation for this lack of foresight is the mirage of the victorious colonial campaigns. Apart from the two European campaigns, the Crimea in 1854-1856 and Northern Italy in 1859, the French army distinguished itself on many continents in successful colonial expeditions: the conquest of Algeria from 1830 to 1870, Senegal from 1854 to 1865, Indochina and China from 1858 to 1860, Syria in 1860-1861 and, to a much lesser extent, Mexico from 1862 to 1867. Everywhere, France was victorious and the conduct of its army struck public opinion throughout the world. In these distant campaigns, the leader had great freedom of action and, with boldness, bravery and a vigorous offensive spirit, many difficulties were overcome. But the defensive posture, clearly evident during the Civil War, was in contradiction with the spirit of the "furia francese". These colonial wars therefore had a perverse effect: lulled by these successes, the imperial general staff imagined itself to be at the top of the military art and refused to reform. Worse, the military leaders believed that the expeditions they led were a reflection of modern warfare. The drunkenness of victory led to conservatism and then to doctrinal sclerosis. To sum up abruptly the indigence of the French army at that time, let us quote Professor Emeritus André Corvisier, who sees "...] forty years of intellectual sclerosis and refusal of in-depth reforms in the military field both in terms of doctrines of use and the choice of equipment. The defeat of 1870 was not the defeat of the soldier but of a land command which, except for the chassepot episode, refused to innovate or did so too late. The French general staff went to war without doctrine, except that "only war learns war" and that, in the hazards of war, improvisation based on active soldiers and good professionals makes up for all the organizational deficiencies" [6].

What about today?

In many respects, the Civil War represented, by its scale, the two world conflicts, because it was both a modern war and a total war. In particular, it was the first war in which public opinion was one of the major stakes, because the will to win depended on it. It was the first war in which the widespread use of new deadly weapons multiplied the loss of human life to unprecedented proportions. Finally, it was the first war in which the civilian population was clearly designated as a target on which systematic destruction had to be carried out and a policy of terror applied in order to break the military potential and moral resistance of the adversary.

Like the majority of European nations at the time, France did not learn the lessons of this American civil war, which was so rich in military lessons. Victim of its sense of superiority and blinded by the deceptive success of its colonial campaigns, the French army of the Second Empire locked itself in a spirit hostile to technical innovations and refractory to any doctrinal reform.

The disastrous war of 1870-1871 was experienced as an electric shock and the French

general staff embarked on a series of profound reforms that modernised the military tool, such as the complete reorganisation of the land forces into large units, the territorial network into smaller units, and the creation of a new army. the creation of a General Staff under the Minister of War, the institution of the Ecole Militaire Supérieure de la Guerre (Military Academy), the creation of a General Staff under the Minister of Defence, and the creation of the Ecole Militaire Supérieure de l'Armée de l'Armée. The creation of a General Staff at the Ministry of War, the establishment of the Higher Military School for the training of staff officers, the renovation of military exercises, the accelerated modernisation of armaments and railways, etc., are just some of the measures that have been taken. At the request of the Ministry of War, the memoir of the French military mission written during the Civil War was even republished in 1872! At the end of the 19th century, the Civil War was then studied, but less than the war against Prussia or the Napoleonic campaigns. What was missing then was a global thinking of the campaigns and operations according to the politico-strategic objectives.

What can we conclude from this brief historical evocation, and what can we keep in mind today? Without repeating all the lessons already mentioned, we could, as a first step, simply acknowledge the importance of maintaining a high level of doctrinal reflection and the development of military thinking, by encouraging writing, innovation and foresight. A mission that is already devolved to the Centre for Doctrine and Use of Forces, enriched by the essential part of feedback, but also to the training and instruction schools, including that of the highest level which is the Centre for Advanced Military Studies. This mission is all the more difficult because it is a question of maintaining a pragmatic and realistic strategic and tactical sense in an era when means command the ends. Secondly, it would be necessary to accept the need to always remain vigilant and curious without ever allowing oneself to be trapped in an agreed pattern of conflict with its ready-made solutions. The current war against terrorism cannot be the only model of war; while it legitimately influences our doctrines, training and equipment, it must not be an absolute value that overshadows the rest. Thinking, training and maintaining the means to fight in all types of conflicts in order to be able to counter the full spectrum of threats and to be able to respond to polymorphous adversaries remains vital for our country. History teaches us that war is protean; ignoring it would be guilty.

"A people that forgets its past is condemned to relive it" (Winston Churchill).

1] Uchrony is a genre based on the principle of rewriting history by modifying an event in the past.

2] Commander Jules-Joseph Rovel, "A study of railroads from a military point of view" Constantine, 1872, p.2.

[3] The archives of this captivating account can be found in the Defense Historical Service, in box 1M1681 "Memoirs and Reconsiderations Series (War Records) United States 1757-1871".

4] Colonel Charles Ardant du Picq, "[4] Colonel Charles Ardant du Picq, "Combat Studies: Ancient and Modern Combat", Paris, 1880, p.280-281.

5] James M Mc Pherson, "The **American Civil War (1861-1865)**", Paris, 1991, p.360.

[6] André Corvisier, "Military History of France", Presse universitaire de France, 1992, T2, p.571.

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