

Questions for the Media

1. What was your motivation for writing *Campaign for the Confederate Coast*?

I have read a great deal about the Civil War including the combined operations that took place at or near the major Confederate ports, but it occurred to me that I had not found any book that pulled together all the various aspects of the war along coastal waters, including blockade running, the Confederate efforts to assist and then control blockade running, and the influence of international capital and foreign governments on the conduct of the Civil War

2. What special research was involved in the writing of your book?

At the start of the war the blockading vessels were at a distinct disadvantage in their attempt to prevent blockade running at night. At first the blockaders believed that they were preventing blockade runners from making the attempt. News reports showed otherwise. The difficulty was detecting the blockade runners in time to intercept them. In trying to understand how the Federal blockaders developed the tactics to curb blockade running to an extent, I matched the reports of nighttime captures and close encounters with blockade runners with the times of the rising and setting of the sun and moon and the onset and end of morning and evening twilight to estimate what the level of visibility was at the time. To get these times approximately, I referred to the historical data calculated available online from the U.S. Naval Observatory. Even after captures started to be made, the blockade runners kept the upper hand. Blockade running ceased when the Federal army and navy managed to capture the major Confederate ports.

3. What if the Union hadn't won? Where would we be today, do you think?

My statistics professor told me that predicting is hard, especially when it's about the future. Even more so when it is about a future, or past, that didn't occur.

It is important to understand that the conditions for winning the Civil War were very different for the Federals and the Confederates. To win the war, the Federals had to extinguish the Confederate claim of independence, which meant it had to eliminate the Confederate armies upon which the Confederate political claim of independence rested. For the Confederates to win, they had to survive with their armies intact when the Federals grew weary of fighting the war.

A Confederate victory would have led to two independent nations occupying the land mass of the contiguous 48 continental states, possibly with very inimical relations between them. In the southern portion, slavery would remain a vibrant institution for economic and societal reasons. In the northern portion, slavery was a dead institution by the time of the Civil War, but the bitterness of the population for the losses caused

by the war might have increased the bitterness of the white race toward the black. It is not clear that the 13th and 14th Amendments to the Constitution would have been enacted. We should recall that the Civil War resulted in the end of slavery, but it did not markedly improve race relations in the United States. In the actual course of history, it took a hundred years for conditions to start to improve.

Furthermore, it is possible that the successful example of the Confederate assertion of secession and independence might have led to a further balkanization on the continent, with other states and groups of states electing to go their own way in both the northern and southern portions, exacerbating their respective jealousies. This, of course, is probably a worst-case scenario, but consider what history might have been if a strong and unified United States had not intervened in World War I or World War II or if the balkanized states of North America had taken differing allegiances in those conflicts.

The events of history always seem to feel inevitable, but we were very lucky to have had President Lincoln and Generals Grant and Sherman, among others.

4. What were the blockade runners, and how did they help or hinder the outcome of the war?

Under international law as it existed in the 1860s, the oceans were considered as open highways open to the travel of all. Vessels that attacked and captured other vessels without authority were considered pirates, whom anyone was free to hunt down and capture. When a state of war existed between nations, international law recognized certain rights and obligations as between the combatants and between each combatant and neutral nations. Each combatant's naval vessels were entitled to seek out and attack the enemy's naval or commercial vessels wherever they were found outside the territorial waters of a neutral nation. If a combatant declared a blockade of the enemy's coast and ports, and if the combatant took sufficient steps to enforce the blockade, any vessel, whether neutral or hostile, that attempted to sail into or out of the blockaded ports were subject to capture and confiscation along with their cargo.

The blockade runners, therefore, were the vessels that carried commerce between the Confederate states and the outside world during the Civil War.

As to the type of vessels, they were both sailing ships and steamships that were large enough to carry some commercially meaningful cargo and fast or silent enough to evade the Federal naval vessels enforcing the blockade. Some were existing vessels that were turned to this commerce by their owners or were purchased by new owners for blockade running. Some were purpose-built as blockade runners. The latter tended to have low profiles and powerful steam engines.

The owners engaged in the trade because it was potentially sufficiently profitable to justify the risk, although some ventures had bad luck and went bankrupt. The state of

war between the Federals and the Confederates caused a powerful demand for munitions and military supplies in the Confederacy, and the existence of the blockade created a scarcity of goods of all kinds, which drove up the price of goods generally and created an opportunity to buy goods cheaply in Europe, for example, and sell them for a much higher price in the Confederacy.

5. What role did cotton play in the American Civil War?

Cotton was a significant indirect cause of the Civil War; it was an economic resource that helped to finance the Confederate war effort, and it came close to causing the British to intervene in the Civil War.

Agriculture was important to all the states in 1860, but certain crops grew primarily in the states that formed the Confederacy. Cotton was the most important of these. The others were tobacco, rice, and sugar. All four require substantial amounts of manual cultivation and thus benefitted from the gang labor techniques that employed slaves. The data concerning 1860 imports and exports puts the importance of cotton to the American economy in perspective: cotton exports represented about half the value of all exports from the United States.

The link to the Civil War is political. Prior to the 1850s, both major political parties had substantial northern and southern wings, which made them less hostile to the subject of slavery. The Republican party was organized during the 1850s, and its proponents were bound together by a desire to limit the spread of slavery beyond the states in which it then existed, although the views on slavery in the party ran a wide gamut, from being tolerant of it to being determined to eliminate it altogether. The party took hold in the northern states where slavery, for the most part, had not existed for decades; it had a weaker existence in the states of the upper south where slavery remained lawful but was in decline as an institution, but it was not present in any form in the states of the deep south where cotton, rice, and sugar were grown.

The Republicans ran a candidate in the 1856 presidential election who won most of the electoral votes in the northern states but lost the election. The Republicans nominated Abraham Lincoln for president in 1860. In both campaigns certain southern extremists argued that the election of a Republican president would be, in itself, cause sufficient for the southern states to secede from the union, and the secession movement started immediately after news of Lincoln's election became known.

The use of cotton to finance the Confederate war effort got off to a slow start. After the war began, there was an informal effort to prevent the exportation of raw cotton in an effort to blackmail the European powers – primarily Britain and France – into recognizing the Confederacy as an independent nation. The effort was transparent because it was spoken of openly in the newspapers. When Confederate diplomats argued to the British that the Federal blockade was illegal because it was not being

enforced adequately, the British replied, if the blockade is not being enforced, where is the cotton?

Before the Civil War, the United States was the source of nearly all the world's supply of raw cotton. Britain and France were the largest consumers of raw cotton. Cutting off the world's supply increased the price of raw cotton. By the time the Confederates accepted the reality that the war was not going to be short, they turned to cotton as their most valuable resource for financing the war effort. Unfortunately, the embargo kept most of the cotton remaining in the Confederacy after the war started where it was. The embargo also gave the Federal Navy time to increase the blockading force and make blockade running somewhat more difficult.

It is a curious fact that at the time the Civil War started, the world was suffering from a glut of cotton and cotton products. As a result, many British cotton mills had curtailed or ceased production, which threw many mill workers out of their jobs. This had a cascade effect on landlords and merchants from whom the mill workers purchased their goods. Notwithstanding the glut, many British politicians drew a direct line from the unemployed mill workers to the Civil War in America. There was talk of demanding a cessation of hostilities for talks or arbitration with a threat to intervene if the Federals did not agree. Indeed, the British government threatened war early in the Civil War when a Federal gunboat stopped a British mail packet on the high seas and arrested some Confederate diplomats on their way to Europe. In that case the Federal government backed down and released the diplomats.

The talk of intervention continued in Britain, perhaps driven on by the impetus to *do something*. Cooler heads argued that rather than going to war over cotton, it would be cheaper to feed the unemployed cotton workers with champagne and venison.

As the Civil War continued and the size of the Federal Army and Navy grew – especially with the construction and launching of a flotilla of ironclad vessels that were more than a match for the mostly wooden ships of the British Navy – and when the British considered the vulnerability of the British possessions in Canada, with its long and undefended border with the northern United States, the British impetus for war subsided.

6. You say that the battlefield is a place of constant and sometimes unexpected change, a complex problem to be solved. What do you mean by this in the context of the American Civil War?

To begin with, every battlefield sees the thrust and parry of the combatants that in themselves affect the situation to which the opposing commanders must respond. More specifically to the Civil War, compared to the size of its population and geographic size, the United States had a tiny army and navy. The post office in 1860 had more employees than the army had soldiers. Accordingly, neither the Confederates nor the

Federals had military or naval forces sufficient to the size of the conflict to which the Civil War grew. At the time of the first battle of Bull Run, the opposing armies had grown to about 110,000 men. Both armies continued to grow, but the Confederates soon topped out while the Federal forces continued to grow much larger. While this conveyed a potential advantage, it was offset by the different conditions of victory for the Federals and the Confederates. For the Federals to win the Civil War, they had to extinguish the Confederate claim to political independence, which meant they had to destroy the Confederate armies upon which the Confederate claim of political independence rested. For the Confederates to win, they had to survive the war with some portion of their army intact. For most of the war, the Federal military leadership was incapable of employing its forces effectively in coordination with one another, and thus had not been able to capitalize on the superior manpower resources that the Federals enjoyed. Appointing General Ulysses Grant as General in Chief made a difference. Grant likened the employment of the Federal armies to a balky team that could not pull together. President Lincoln said of Grant's approach, those not skinning can hold a leg. Of course, it must be observed at when Grant took command, three years of war had taken their toll on Confederate forces while the number of Federals under arms had grown in spite of casualties suffered.

For the naval forces, the most obvious example is the development of ironclad warships. When Virginia seceded from the union, the Federals abandoned the Norfolk Navy Yard and, in the process, burned and scuttled some of the ships that they could not remove. The Confederates raised the USS Merrimack and undertook converting her into an ironclad, which they eventually launched as the CSS Virginia. Having learned (by reading the newspapers) of what the Confederates had in process, the Federal navy department solicited proposals to build their own ironclad warships. When the CSS Virginia steamed into Hampton Roads in the Chesapeake Bay, it wreaked havoc on the wooden Federal warships on station there. The Confederates had achieved a monopoly on ironclad warships in that theatre of operations, and it proved dominant. After the Virginia retired for the evening, the newly commissioned USS Monitor arrived at Hampton Roads. The next day, the two ironclads fought the first battle between armored warships, the result of which was a draw, but the Confederates local monopoly on ironclad warships had been ended.

It is a commonplace observation about the Civil War that the Federal states possessed the larger portion of the industrial capacity in the country as a whole. This showed itself in the Civil War primarily in the naval arena. The Confederate undertook to build a flotilla of gunboats, none of which was completed. They undertook to build a flotilla of ironclads, only a small handful of which were launched. The Federals bought and built a large navy and a substantial flotilla of ironclads vessels.

7. For all intents and purposes, the age for honoring the heroes of the Confederacy has come to an end. Indeed, many prominently displayed monuments to the Confederacy have been removed from public display. Should these monuments be put in a museum

where their words and deeds and legacy can be studied as part of American history or forgotten altogether?

History should never be erased, glossed over, or sanitized for current consumption or political purpose. The monuments in question are mementos of the Civil War, but they are documents that speak to the time in which they were created. The Confederates generally fought the Civil War because they disliked the result produced by the political processes conducted pursuant to the Constitution. The Confederates generally fought to protect the institution of slavery, which today we consider vile. Many if not most Individual Confederate officers and soldiers fought nobly for a political cause in which they genuinely believed. Their courage, effort, and sacrifice deserve to be honored, even if their cause does not. The Confederate monuments to the Civil War are documents of a post-Civil War era that sought to preserve the social conditions and political power base that existed during the antebellum period, with a class structure based upon race and wealth.

8. You work part time as an interpreter at the Hagley Museum in Wilmington, Delaware, demonstrating and explaining the operation of the steam engine. Tell us about that and any other demonstrations you've been involved with.

The Hagley Museum preserves the remnants of the original DuPont gunpowder factory. The site is located on the banks of the Brandywine River and was chosen because the factory used waterpower to operate its machinery, originally with waterwheels and later with water turbines. As the operations grew over time they turned to steam and other power sources to supplement the waterpower.

The steam engine uses a locomotive style boiler with a firebox at one end and a smokebox at the other. When I arrive in the morning, I check the water level in the boiler and shake down the grate to remove any ashes left over from the prior day's operation. I build a fire in the firebox with newspaper and kindling, and then I add some larger logs. When the fire gets going well, I spread the logs across the surface of the grate, and I sprinkle a shovelful of coal across the top of the logs. The boiler contains about 300 gallons of water, and it takes some time to get that much water up to a boil.

The boiler was built in the 1930s and the engine in the 1870s. The engine generates about 12 horsepower. The cylinder together with the slide valve is about the size of a breadbox, but the flywheel is about five feet in diameter and about ten inches across. It's made of cast iron and weighs about 1,800 pounds.

When the steam pressure in the boiler gets sufficiently high, I operate the engine by opening a valve just above the cylinder. As the engine turns, I explain how the different parts work together. A couple of leather belts connect the fly wheel to a line shaft that runs across the ceiling of the engine house and used to transmit the power generated by the engine up the hill to a nearby factory building. It is a brief explanation because I

have to get the visitors back on the bus in about five minutes. For visitors who walk to the steam engine I can give longer demonstrations and answer questions.

During the day I feed coal to the fire about every 20 minutes. I have to keep the pressure at a level sufficient to turn the engine but not let it get too high. Toward the museum's closing time, I let the fire burn low and the pressure drop. During the day I monitor the water level.

The steam engine house is a cozy place to be when the weather's cold, but it can be a tad close in the summer even when we turn the nineteenth century air conditioning up high by opening the windows and doors.

The other jobs I have done at the museum are to demonstrate the machine shop and operate the roll mill.

The machine shop recreates a repair facility that the DuPont company would have operated about 1870 to make replacement parts for the factory machines that broke or wore out. The machine tools include lathes, drills, a milling machine, a shaper, and a planer. All these devices are machines that use pieces of metal to cut other pieces of metal. They do it in different ways so that, used in combination, they can transform a basic piece of metal into a more complex and useful form – say to cut a disc of cast iron into a gear with identical teeth at fixed intervals about the circumference, with a hole in the center to slide the gear onto a shaft, and a keyway to lock the gear and the shaft together.

Power in the machine shop is provided by a line shaft that runs across the ceiling, and leather belts connect the shaft with the various machines.

The roll mill demonstration begins with an explanation that black powder gunpowder was an industrial product as well as a military product. It then goes into an explanation of how waterpower is created, with a dam across the river, half a mile upstream, diverting water into a millrace running parallel to the river. The millrace keeps at roughly the same level while, in that half mile, the river has fallen about 14 feet. The weight and movement of the water that flows from the millrace down to the water turbine at the level of the river cause the blades of the turbine to turn, which moves the machinery.

The machinery consists of two iron roller wheels that are attached to a vertical shaft that rises from the center of a wooden tub in a small building built with three stone walls, a flimsy roof and an open face looking out across the river. The structure and the equipment are called the roll mill. The three ingredients of gunpowder – charcoal, sulfur, and saltpeter – were mixed together for the first time in the roll mill, so this is where the product became explosive for the first time. The building was, in essence, a cannon that shot the effects of the large gunpowder accident out across the river.

Each of the iron wheels weighs eight tons, and the iron equipment that supports and turns the wheels weighs another eight tons. Each water turbine ran two roll mills, one on each side of it.

After operating the machinery, I would take the visitors to a nearby roll mill building and show them some finished gunpowder. I would explain that although it is called *gunpowder*, it is really a granular substance, the size of the grains determining how quickly the gunpowder would burn. To fire a pistol, you would use a very fine grain, and to fire a musket, you would use a slightly larger grain. During the time of the Civil War the Federal army was experimenting with what they called mammoth powder, with grains about an inch across.

I would conclude by demonstrating the product in operation. I would pour a small amount of gunpowder into a testing device called an *eprouvette*, insert a short fuse, light it, and casually walk away. Upon the explosion, I would bark out, "WHO can I interest in a barrel of DuPont's finest!"

The steam engine is the best job to do, the machine shop is the best room in the museum, and the roll mill is the best story to tell.