

“Politics and Doctrine of America’s First Battles”

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Generally when war is discussed and politics are brought into the conversation most thoughts naturally progress toward the idea of political considerations being the direct governmental policies or stances leading up to an engagement or battle, or possibly the benefits of governmental policy to a positive outcome of a probable engagement or battle. However, at times politics year’s prior to an engagement and even doctrine, which during peace time can be shaped by politics are deeper than actions, agenda, or political maneuvering directly related to the war or battle. Few, if any of America’s first battles have been free of political considerations.

Throughout history politics have had a way of shaping the United State's approach, entry, and even the goals of taking armed action against its enemies. Not all political considerations are necessarily bad or were the sole reason of the United State's less than successful first battles. However, "several generations of professional Soldiers have had a long standing tradition of deploring and denouncing political interference in strategy and operations, as if war and politics could be kept in a separate, sealed compartment" (Heller, 1). The mere use of military force in any sense is rooted in political decisions, goals, or objectives. As history has proven it appears that the battles or engagements that were far less than successful for the United States are the battles in which poor political decisions leading up to or during the battle were made.

When looking at the loss of the first battle of the Revolutionary War there were several political considerations that directly lead up to General Washington's American Continental Army being "pushed from Brooklyn and eventually from New York altogether" (Battle of Long Island 1). Upon declaring their independence from Britain Americans were reluctant to create standing armies, a Congress, or even state government executive agencies that were powerful enough to form a strong central government or give it the executive authority it needed. This in and of it's self made the task of controlling and supporting an army combined of Continental and state units a huge obstacle for the generals and other military leaders charged with the defense of the United Sates. During this time of little centralized government Officers that did not receive the commands or recognition they pined for ultimately turned to congress to obtain what they sought. There most likely was good reason why these Officers did not receive the commands they wanted, so turning to congress for assistance simply brought more political agenda to the table for an already weak central government.

Trying to appease the situation Congress appointed men to assist Washington in administering and supplying the Army. As well Congress created a Board of War and Ordnance during this time. However, Congress gave neither the appointed Generals nor the Board specific jurisdiction. This combined with Washington's refusal to assume power directed by Congress lead to representatives of both the Continental and state supply departments to compete for the same scarce military supplies.

Along with the political considerations that have lead to Washington being poorly equipped, supplied, and manned to defend Long Island there were also the doctrinal aspects of Washington's Army being poorly prepared to defeat the British. To this point in history Americans had served with or against very few, other than the British. This equated to the Americans only being experienced in the very doctrine that the British used. As well, until the Revolutionary War American military heroes "had been British Generals or generals the British admired" (Heller, 2). Combine this with the Colonists preparing their militias almost solely on British manuals or using actual British Soldiers to conduct their training and one can see that the tactics and techniques that Washington's army was going to take to Long Island were going to be of little surprise to the British.

Looking at the issues that lead up to the American Civil War it would be hard to separate politics from the war. Prior to the war starting the American political system had been trying unsuccessfully to resolve the "complex web of constitutional, economic, political, and moral issues that for years had been generating tension among the states" (Heller, 3). Today some would argue that slavery was the root political and moral issue to bring the Union and Confederate armies to engage.

While President Lincoln was considered a moderate Republican that denounced slavery his primary reasoning for taking up arms was to defend the Union from the states that had seceded and formed the Confederacy. “The root causes of the Civil War can be broken down into state’s rights, slavery, political, and Economic considerations. Slavery, while listed as a separate cause, had significant influence on the other three” (Causes, 1). Some saw mobilizing to protect the Union from the Confederate “state’s rights” as political propaganda that simply facilitated an underlying objective of the abolition of slavery. In the Union it self there was vocal democratic opposition that pressured Lincoln against any type of Civil War. This democratic opposition known as Copperheads “nominally favored the Union and strongly opposed the war, for which they blamed abolitionists, and they demanded immediate peace and resisted draft laws” (Copperheads, 1). Copperhead’s desire for compromise on slavery was in direct opposition of the radical Republicans that criticized Lincoln for moving too slowly in trying to abolish slavery.

The totally separate and different opposition from Copperheads and radical Republicans, both political in nature, pushed Lincoln into an almost no-win political decision. The Confederacy was being established to support and defend the south’s support of slavery. This meant war was almost inevitable. As Lincoln mobilized a severely undermanned army this mobilization set off a second round of secessions in the upper south which only encouraged the radical Republicans to pressure Lincoln to act. Additionally, because of the three-month term of the first 75,000 volunteers in the Union army Lincoln had a “deadline” for action. Political considerations had pushed Lincoln into having to act without regard to the Union Army being prepared for offensive operations.

Doctrinally, the Union Army accepted and applied the Napoleonic doctrine. This doctrine emphasized offensive action almost disregarding caution and defensive tactics totally.

Additionally relying on “surprise and audacity to win a quick and decisive victory” (Heller, 4).

This doctrine combined with the paralleled pressures from the general public and radical Republicans for a march against the Confederate capitol of Richmond put the Battle of The First Bull Run on the time table of politics rather than a time table of planning and preparedness. This ultimately led to General McDowell’s Union Army being forced to retreat to nearby Washington D.C.

Some may argue that once a battle has been initiated that politics plays no part in the outcome. This argument doesn’t take into account that throughout history during peacetime that many political decisions and agendas played out have in some instances charted particular armies into and down a path of inevitable defeat.

In 1776 Congress made the political decision to declare the independence of the “United Sates after more than a year of all out war, and in a time when the British government had shown signs of wanting to reach compromise” (Heller, 7). This political move by Congress left Washington no other choice other than to stand and defend a leading American city with far less Soldiers who were not adequately prepared, equipped or supplied.

The pre-civil war years known as the “antebellum years” (Pre-Civil War Era, 1) were a time of major political struggles. The focus during this time was on the state’s rights. The decisions of army end strength, training, and preparedness were left mostly to the individual states. This ultimately left Lincoln in 1860 with no clearly defined, organized, or commanded Army.

In conclusion politics to a large degree have played a role in the U.S. military being unprepared to execute its primary mission at the outbreak of hostilities. Not necessarily the

politics that have caused the hostilities are the same politics that have created the unpreparedness, but more so the politics during peacetime leading up to the hostilities have created an Army that is at times unprepared. A smaller role player in the United States' preparedness has been doctrine. Whether it be adopted doctrine from the adversary with which we are about to engage or doctrine that is outdated and has not been practiced or taught it can not be ignored that the very tactics and techniques practiced and taught by an Army are in direct correlation to its preparedness.

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