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America & its Military's Lack of Preparation in its Initial Battles

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Class #35

15 AUG 2009

Unclassified

**Abstract**

America's military preparation and their ability to perform in initial battles of a conflict have failed to meet the standard of excellence that the U. S. military has shown throughout history. This article will look at a few battles in our history and discuss the preparations, or lack thereof, that were made for the battles. America and its military have not been prepared for its initial battles in conflict and have a continuing history that show lessons have not been learned.

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## America & its Military's Lack of Preparation in its Initial Battles

### Introduction

**Background Information:** America's military preparation and their ability to perform in initial battles of a conflict have failed to meet the standard of excellence that the U. S. military has shown throughout history.

**Argumentative Statement:** America and its military have not been prepared for its initial battles in conflict and have a continuing history that show lessons have not been learned.

### First Bull Run

Major General Irwin McDowell was the commander of the Union Army at the First Battle of Bull Run, the first battle in this country's Civil War. McDowell had a sound plan of attack that, if carried out successfully, could win this much anticipated battle and possibly put an end to the rebellion. McDowell moved part of his army down the Centerville turnpike on 21 July 1861 and set up a blocking position at the stone bridge over Bull Run. While this demonstration was going on, McDowell planned to strike at the Confederates at a 90 angle, moving two of his Divisions in a flanking movement to the Union right.

Initial engagements had Confederate forces retreating, and after some back and forth actions, Union numbers started forcing the Confederates to retreat once again. The center of the Confederate line, commanded by Brigadier General Thomas J. Jackson, held its position. This action served as a rallying cry of sorts. General Bee, of an adjoining brigade called to his troops, 'There is Jackson, standing like a stone wall'<sup>1</sup>. The

Confederate line stabilized and as they put fire into the Union line, they started to retreat. This retreat soon turned into a rout and the tide was turned.

### **Both Armies Unprepared**

What went wrong at the First Battle of Bull Run? Both armies faced some of the same problems during the first battle and some were not fixed by the time the last battle was fought four years later. The tactics being used for the war were outdated for the weapons that were employed at that time. The lack of training was a key issue. The Union army's size was approximately 35,000 men when they moved into the area on the 21<sup>st</sup>. However, none of the officers under McDowell had commanded more than 500 troops in action. This was a key issue when the Union army moved from Centerville towards Bull Run that day. The flanking maneuvers took longer than expected and troops were late in fording the river on the Union right because of, amongst other reasons, the commanders' lack of experience moving troops. This made it more difficult for the units performing the faint at the stone bridge as they had to keep up their fire longer, cannons booming for three hours could be heard across the countryside. Confederate leaders started to shift units from this location as they believed that the attacks at the bridge may not be the main assault. Moving these soldiers into position for attack and communicating with the whole army presented other problems as well. None of the brigades engaged in the battle used all of their strength in a single attack. The movement and communication problem was an issue with General McDowell as well. He tried to be in too many places, directing battles and movement instead of a central location from where he could direct the fight and where his subordinates could find him to give as well as receive information. Brigadier General P. G. T. Beauregard, the commander of the

Confederate forces, had done a better job at moving his forces. Although the Confederates were in a defensive position and movements were shorter, most of the Confederate army had moved from long distances to get to the Bull Run area; General Johnston moving 11,000 men from Winchester, VA. The Confederates had, as they seem to have done in many of the future battles of the war, brought units to the fight just at the right time and the right place.

The biggest issue, and it goes with the problems previously mentioned, is the lack of combat experience. While a large number of McDowell's senior officers had considerable experience and many were graduates of the U.S Military Academy, most of the troops in the units were green. These troops not only had little to no field experience, but they had not been together at all as a unit. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Vermont had only been in service for 26 days.

The Confederate army had the edge in leadership. Most of the leadership that would go on to success with General Lee and the Army of Northern Virginia were present at Bull Run. Lee's future Corp commanders, Generals Longstreet, Jackson and later in the war, General Ewell and Early. J. E. B. Stuart Lee's Cavalry Commander was the cavalry commander at Bull Run. General Johnston who later commanded the Army of Tennessee was General Beauregard's number one lieutenant.

### **War is Coming – the Country is Divided**

The preludes of war on the horizon were evident long before the first shots were fired on Fort Sumter in South Carolina. Signs were evident even before South Carolina became the first state to secede from the Union. Right through 1860, there was a confidence in America, in both northern and southern factions that there would be no

war. It wasn't until Fort Sumter was fired on that President Lincoln called for troops. Many of these enlistments were for only three months. This delay in a call for troops was another reason the soldiers were not trained at the time of battle, as there was a push to initiate the first battle before many soldiers enlistment was over. It was not until after the battle and casualties were totaled, which were more than many expected, that the nation was aware of or ready to accept the number of personnel needed to fight this war. General Sherman had always predicted the war would be bigger and take longer than most had viewed. Some even questioned Sherman's sanity when he expressed some of his thoughts on how long and how many it would take to fight the war. Sherman's aggressiveness and rigorous training would prove itself later in the war when he drove his army from Atlanta to Charleston.

### **Kasserine Pass**

Eighty years later when elements of the U. S. Army moved into Tunisia against General Rommel's Afrika Corp we would repeat many of the mistakes from the Civil War and go into the fight with new problems. Rommel's forces moved into Tunisia along with additional forces from Italy and engaged Allied and American forces in battles from 14 to 17 February 1943. The final battle ending at Kasserine pass pushed a panicked and unprepared U.S. Army in retreat. The causes of defeat were many. One that has repeated itself throughout history is that of an untrained army. Unlike the Union forces going against their brothers across Bull Run, the U.S. Army's enemy was not inexperienced. Many of the German soldiers had years of experience including tours on the Russian front. The American Army not only had little to no experience but even lacked this type of training. The leadership for the U. S. was once again problematic.

Many officers had little or no experience operating with units larger than a battalion. Doctrine had been established in WWI and some could not see past that paradigm.

The other major issue was a lack of necessary equipment. The military had been severely downsized after World War I. Complacency and no desire in general to deal with war preparation was the feeling across the country. Later, when the U.S. was in a depression it had difficulty funding any build up. When the build up finally began it was slow and the training and equipment suffered for it.

### **Arguments – Have Lessons Been Learned?**

A further pattern in history indicates that not just the military but the country in general, and the government in particular have not adequately prepared this country at critical times to defend itself and prepare for conflict.

### **No Navy Necessary? - Federalist vs. Republicans**

The country questioned the need for establishment of a navy back at this nation's early years. Some warned that a navy would expand the power of the federal government to the detriment of the states. Elements with-in the government argued that a navy would increase the public debt and would lead to higher taxes. James Madison and Republicans argued that a navy was hopelessly unaffordable. Once started, a navy would become a self-feeding organism.

### **A Modern Day Problem**

General Shinseki, Commander of the Joint Chiefs of Staff at the time publicly clashed with Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld during the planning of the Iraq war over how many troops the U.S. would need to keep in Iraq for the postwar occupation of that country. As Army Chief of Staff, General Shinseki testified before Congress that

"something in the order of several hundred thousand soldiers"<sup>2</sup> would probably be required for postwar Iraq. This was an estimate far higher than the figure being proposed by Secretary Rumsfeld in his invasion plan, and it was rejected in strong language by both Rumsfeld and his Deputy Secretary of Defense, Paul Wolfowitz, who was another chief planner of the invasion and occupation. From then on, Shinseki's influence on the Joint Chiefs of Staff reportedly waned. The Army Chief of Staff retired in June 2003 from the Army after 38 years of military service.

In January of 2007, President Bush said the main reason past efforts to stabilize Baghdad had failed was that "there were not enough Iraqi and American troops to secure neighborhoods that had been cleared of terrorists and insurgents."<sup>3</sup> This strategy has worked in Iraq and the tactic is now being started in Afghanistan. The question remains, why was the Government so reluctant to use this tactic suggested years ago?

I believe many of these problems will exist with the military and the country for some time if not forever. The concern of the general population is more focused on domestic issues than with overseas military issues since the Vietnam War and those concerns were of ending the war. This country united after the attacks on 9/11/2001; however the fight shifted to Afghanistan and then Iraq. The countries concern soon shifted to political scandals, weekend sporting events and what Hollywood celebrities were doing. Not since WWII has this country been totally committed in this nation's conflict.

### **The Army Overcomes Obstacles**

History has also showed how this countries military has fought through barriers and does what is necessary to win and keep this nation free. The Union Armies under

General Sherman fought and moved through Georgia, South Carolina and into North Carolina at the end of the Civil War. General Patton moved his 3<sup>rd</sup> Army through France into Germany at the end of WWII. Today's military has adapted and changed to improve its fight on terror.

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## Endnotes

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- <sup>3</sup> Shanker, Thom "New Strategy Vindicates Ex-Army Chief Shinseki", *The New York Times*, January 12, 2007
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