

THE SKIRMISHER

A Civil War Journal For Students

CIVIL WAR TRUST

GEOGRAPHY IN THE CIVIL WAR

VOLUME 2

STRATEGY AND TACTICS

“Strategy” is the establishment of an overall goal to achieve. “Tactics” are the methods employed to achieve that goal. Geography shaped the strategies and tactics of the Civil War.

Mountains, rivers, valleys, forests, cities, and the coastline of the United States were all important factors in the decision-making of the Union and the Confederacy. This issue of *The Skirmisher* will address these factors in understanding the Civil War.

THE ANACONDA PLAN

The North wanted to end the Civil War as quickly as possible and reunite the states. That was their “strategy,” or goal. Union leaders devised three primary “tactics,” or methods, to achieve that goal. Those tactics became known together as “The Anaconda Plan.”

1. Blockade the Atlantic and Gulf Coasts
2. Control the Mississippi River
3. Capture Richmond, Virginia



The Anaconda Plan (Library of Congress)

The blockade was mostly in place by early 1862. Union warships blocked Confederate traders and strangled the Southern economy.

The Mississippi River was in Union hands by mid-1863. Controlling the river split the Confederacy in two and allowed Union armies to penetrate the Deep South.

Richmond was not captured until early 1865. Its capture signaled the Confederacy’s inability to defend itself by that point in the war—the Confederate armies surrendered shortly afterward and the states were reunited.

MOUNTAINS, VALLEYS, AND RIVERS

Civil War armies moved by foot, on horseback, and occasionally on train cars. Civil War generals carefully considered the impact of geography on the movements and battles of the soldiers under their command.

Mountain ranges could only be crossed by going through “passes,” narrow slots of lower, easier terrain through the craggy peaks. Since there would only be a few passes through any given mountain range, Generals would often position their armies behind mountain ranges in order to better predict and block their opponents’ movements.

Valleys served as highways for Civil War armies. A valley floor was much easier to traverse than the mountains on either side.



The Shenandoah Valley offered a concealed route from Pennsylvania to Virginia, making it one of the most strategically valuable geographical features of the Civil War.

Rivers were daunting for Civil War armies. While an individual today might be able to swim across a river, a whole army of 100,000 soldiers and cannons could not do so without great chaos and water damage to their equipment. With these factors in mind, Civil War generals often built defensive lines behind rivers.

VOICES FROM THE STORM: JEDEDIAH HOTCHKISS

Jedediah Hotchkiss was one of the Confederacy's premier mapmakers. He worked closely with Stonewall Jackson, Robert E. Lee, and other generals as they planned their military operations. Here, he describes mapping one of Jackson's battlefields.

"I have been spending two days on the memorable Kernstown battle field, mapping it & the vicinity.I traced with sad interest the wondrous line of march of one regiment that regarded not the fire of artillery, but went on to its post of duty, and the position of another that met & repulsed the pursuing foe & by one dreadful volley sent a hundred of them to eternity and let but one of its own brave lads accompany them to the judgment bar to tell why it had thus sent them there."

ACTIVITY: A VALLEY CAMPAIGN

Pair off with a classmate. One of you will be a Union general and the other a Confederate general. You each command armies composed of 5,000 infantry, 2,000 cavalry, and 24 cannons. The Union army starts at Winchester (blue square) and the Confederate army starts at Staunton (red star). Your goal is to capture your classmate's starting city.

Each of you will write a paragraph describing how and where you would move your soldiers in order to capture the city. When you are finished, read each other's paragraphs. Draw out the movements on the map. Discuss the following questions:

1. How did mountains, valleys, and rivers influence the movement of the armies?
2. How did your knowledge of your classmate influence your plan?
3. Based on the competing plans, where do you think battles would have been fought? What do you think would have been the outcomes of those battles?

