

THE LAST CONTINGENCY: THE FINAL CHANCE FOR SOUTHERN VICTORY IN THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR

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By the year of 1864, the North and South had been at war for roughly three years. A year previously, the Confederacy experienced a great military defeat at Gettysburg; a battle that many believe represented the South's last chance for victory and secession. However, there was still a chance of a negotiated independence for the Confederacy. The South's chance lay in making the war too tiring and costly for the Northern public to accept. 1864 was also a presidential election year, and if the Confederacy had not been so spectacularly defeated on the battlefield during the election, there is a chance that President Abraham Lincoln would have lost his bid for reelection to the Democratic hopeful, George B. McClellan. Had he won, the outcome of the Civil War would likely have been very different. However, McClellan did not win, and Lincoln became the President, ensuring the North's continued commitment to the war. This course of events in 1864 is an example of historian James McPherson's contingency theory, which asserts that the Union's Civil War victory was not pre-determined, and instead it was contingent on the outcome of key event that could have went the other way and led to a Confederate victory. This paper will argue that the outcome of the Civil War hinged, not on the well-known numerical superiority of the North, but rather on the avoidable failures of Confederate leadership, which led to massive battlefield defeats in 1864.

The North did have superior manpower and resources. The North had a greater population, larger industrial capacity, and better logistical systems than the South did. They had a better navy that they were able to blockade and corner the South, and the North had the better diplomatic game with overseas nations. Finally, the North was more united than the South; many areas in the South were Unionist, most notably the area of West Virginia and this has led many to argue that the North simply overwhelmed the Confederate forces. This explanation originated first from the defeated Confederate soldiers themselves. Robert E. Lee's speech at Appomattox implies this with his remarks about how "The Army of Northern Virginia has been compelled to yield to overwhelming numbers and resources."¹ Similarly, when asked about the Confederate defeat, a Confederate soldier replied that, "they never whipped us, Sir, unless they were four to one. If we had anything like a fair chance or less disparity of numbers, we should have won our cause and established our independence."² Later generations continued to point to the Union's undeniably superior resources as the primary cause of their victory. Historian Richard Current stated that "God was on the side of the heaviest battalions,"³ while Shelby Foote in Ken Burns's Civil War documentary noted that "the North fought with one hand behind its back: and that the South never had a chance at all."⁴

Other historians, however, have challenged the assertion that the North's victory was inevitable. In particular, James McPherson's posited "contingency theory," which argues that

the South had many chances for victory at various points during the war.⁵ Historians like Gabor S. Boritt and Gary Ecelbarger have supported McPherson's theory, with Ecelbarger citing the conflict for Atlanta as being a critical turning phase in the war.⁶ Others like Reid Mitchell, accept the contingency theory, but also acknowledge that the Union had the odds stacked in their favor due to their superior resources.⁷ Whereas, Albert Castel explicitly rejects the idea that superior numbers and logistics guaranteed Northern victory.⁸

Of all the potential outcomes during the war, McPherson's argument that the events of 1864 and Lincoln's resulting reelection represented both the last and best chance for Confederate victory is the strongest.⁹ By 1864 there was a peace faction movement in the North that sought to achieve a negotiated peace with the South. On varied fronts, the Union forces seemed stalled, and with no foreseeable end in sight to the war. After three years, the carnage of war had taken its toll on many on both sides. There was a real danger that the Northern public would grow tired of the war and elect another President to push forth a negotiated peace settlement. The North's advantages were only relevant to the victory if they had the willpower and competence to utilize them properly. and if the Northern public had realized that they had effectively won by the fall of 1864.

Abraham Lincoln's reelection was uncertain. If he did not win, then the war may have ended in a negotiated peace settlement. Lincoln faced a popular opponent, former Union General George B. McClellan. McClellan was charismatic, determined and an easy candidate for the Democrats to rally behind. Lincoln's potential defeat at the hands of McClellan was contingent on the outcome of two events on the battlefields in 1864. One was the Confederate government's decision to replace General Joseph E. Johnston with General John Bell Hood in Georgia. The change in leadership prompted a foolish assault that decimated the Confederate forces in Georgia and allowed General William Tecumseh Sherman to take Atlanta and win a smashing victory for the Union forces. The other event that impacted the election was General Philip Sheridan's campaign in the Shenandoah Valley and his defeat of the Confederate forces led by Jubal Early. These two great battles were key victories for the Northern war effort. They raised Northern morale and convinced the people that victory was very much possible.¹⁰ The war continued for several more months, but these two events played a pivotal role in deciding the outcome.

However, in the years leading up to 1864 there was a possibility for the Confederates to gain the upper hand. In the eastern theater, the Army of the Potomac was plagued by a series of ineffectual or timid commanders who could not utilize their resources effectively to defeat the Confederacy. Lincoln was frustrated with his commanders until he was able to find the generals he was looking for that could achieve victory with ruthless drive. He found those generals in Ulysses Grant and William Sherman who quickly made his Civil War victory dreams a reality.¹¹ By late 1864, the South had lost the will to fight as the North pushed forward. Apart from the morale boost brought by these victories, they had the very real strategic and tactical effects of shutting down Southern supply lines and dealing immense damage to Southern infrastructure,

especially in the fertile granaries of the Shenandoah Valley. The South was defeated, and the North won the military portion of the Civil War.

To understand why 1864 presented the last chance for a Confederate victory, one must look at the military and political situation of the events leading up to 1864. The North and the South had engaged in military warfare for three years now. The South tended to dominate in the Eastern part of the war while the North dominated in the Western and home fronts of the war. In political and military terms, the South had some chances for independence. Given the North's inherent advantages in manpower and logistics, the most optimal of all those chances relied on the North not choosing to go to war at all. If the North had realized these advantages, then they could gradually grind down and crush the South.¹²

Early in the war certain individuals like Winfield S. Scott realized this and drew up the Anaconda plan to crush the South. This plan would become the bedrock of Northern victory. By contrast, the South adopted a more reactive strategy, of waiting on the defensive to repel the Northern invaders and hold out until they gained sovereign recognition of their new state. The North would play the role of the attacker and the South that of the defender. It was a dynamic that held true save for a handful of instances such as Lee's two invasions of the North in 1862 and later in 1863, both with the intent of gaining European recognition of the Confederacy in what they hoped would be a "Southern Saratoga," In both aspects, Lee failed to achieve that sort of great victory, and indeed he avoided destruction narrowly.¹³

The year of 1864 saw the long-awaited clash between the two leading generals of both sides, Robert E. Lee and Ulysses S. Grant. Each had won a series of victories for their respective sides and both here highly regarded by the Presidents of their nations. It proved to be a great clash in the East. Lee had won victories against the Union army in the East before, and Grant had cut his teeth in carving up Confederate territories in the Western theater. By 1864, Lincoln had called Grant to command the Army of the Potomac and thus set the stage for the finale of the war. While Lee had won bold and stunning victories against previous Union generals, his victories were as much his tactical skill as his opponent's hesitation and incompetence. Most of his previous Union opponents were not inspiring men. That would change when he fought Grant who possessed both the skill and more importantly the willpower to achieve victory.

Grant's conduct of the war in the East was different than that of the previous generals and contributed to the South's loss. Previously the armies retired after great set-piece battles to give the soldiers time and rest to recuperate for the next battle. Grant pursued total warfare and continuous attrition warfare against Lee. It had the effect of whittling down the numbers of Lee's army in continuous attrition warfare. The Confederate army steadily disintegrated because it could not absorb the kinds of losses it was sustaining from the battles with Grant. Eventually, the Confederate army was forced into the bloody siege of Petersburg where the first instances of trench warfare appeared to observers. This siege warfare strategy allowed the Confederacy to hold off the Union forces for the nine months they fought there until Grant extended the lines so

much that Lee was forced to retreat. This series of battles concluded in Lee's famous surrender at Appomattox.¹⁴

While Grant pinned down Lee in Virginia, he had capable subordinates who won battles that the North needed to achieve that victory on the home front. The victories in the other theaters provided the needed impetus for Lincoln to win a second term. Grant issued orders for General Philip Sheridan to take care of the Shenandoah Valley and end the Confederate control of that area. He also issued orders for General Sherman to go through Georgia and split the South in half. Both campaigns had great consequences. According to Grant "It was followed later by Sheridan's campaign in the Shenandoah Valley; and these two campaigns probably had more effect in settling the election of the following November than all the speeches, all the bonfires, and all the parading with banners and bands of music in the North."¹⁵ The two conflicts were the last chance for the South to achieve a negotiated peace. They were unable to avoid the outcome and thus could not secure their independence.¹⁶

In Georgia, the Union advance was commanded by William T. Sherman, one of the generals Grant promoted and charged with defeating the Confederates in the state. He initiated a strategy of total war in order to destroy the Southern war industry. Opposing him was General Joseph E. Johnston, a skilled and cautious general who stymied Sherman's advance into Atlanta. This defensive strategy worked well for the Confederacy because of technological advances in weaponry during the Civil War; firepower had become more lethal and advanced. Much of this had been proven on Civil War battlefields like Fredericksburg, Gettysburg, Cold Harbor and other destructive direct assaults that fared poorly in the attack.¹⁷

In response to criticisms from Jefferson Davis, Johnston summarized the strategic situation in Georgia, concluding, "Therefore, a victory gained by us could not have been decisive, while defeat would have been utterly disastrous."¹⁸ The risks of a defeat outweighed the rewards of a victory. Rather the victory for the Confederacy in 1864 relied on simply holding out long enough. Johnston preserved the lives of his men and refused to give Sherman the kind of grand setpiece battle that would allow the Union forces to bring their logistical advantages to bear against him.

Even Johnston's opponents agreed that he was making the correct tactical decisions. Grant himself wrote in his memoirs, "For the most part I think Johnston was correct" explicitly noting that Johnston might have been able to delay Sherman's advance by a year to the point where the North might have gotten tired of the conflict.¹⁹ General Sherman, Johnston's opponent in that campaign, also agreed that Johnston had made the correct decisions, stating that his tactics were "cautious but prudent."²⁰ Johnston's tactics would preserve his army and effectively stymie Sherman's advance into Georgia. The one frontal assault that Sherman did execute at Kennesaw Mountain ended in a bloody repulse of Northern forces who suffered heavy losses.²¹

Johnston's cautious tactics eventually got him replaced. Despite his sound and prudent generalship, he had a terrible relationship with Confederate President Jefferson Davis.²² The two men did not get along very well. Davis was also notorious for interfering in the military

commands of his generals.²³ These faults were combined with his frustration at Johnston's defensive tactics. He replaced Joseph E. Johnston with a general named John Bell Hood, who had served with the army of Northern Virginia. John Bell Hood brought a much more direct and aggressive command structure to the army in Georgia that ended with its destruction. Hood proceeded to leave Johnston's fortifications in Atlanta and run his army into the ground through a series of frontal assaults. The Army of the Tennessee simply disintegrated in a series of costly attacks on the prepared Union defenses. Even after Sherman moved on, General Hood continued to run his army into the ground by attacking Nashville and Franklin.²⁴

The change in command was greatly benefited Sherman in Georgia. He asked his officers, some of whom knew Hood from the prewar days, what kind of man he was. Sherman learned that Hood was a brave and reckless fighter, but not as intelligent or reserved as Johnston.²⁵ Sherman was faced with a different kind of opponent from Hood, an aggressive one that finally gave Sherman the fight he was looking for. He was able to force the Confederate army into a series of battles that would whittle them down due to attrition and destroy them, which allowed Sherman to take Atlanta and move through Georgia and into South Carolina.²⁶

Northern reaction to the fall of Atlanta was filled with delight. Harper's Weekly celebrated the news with joy noting that "There is not a man who did not feel that McClellan's chances were diminished by the glad tidings from Atlanta; nor any one who does not know that if Sherman had been defeated, the friends of the Chicago candidate would have felt surer of his success."²⁷ General Sherman himself noted in his memoirs of the fortunate timing of the victory, stating that "This victory was most opportune; Mr. Lincoln himself told me afterward that even he had previously felt in doubt, for the summer was fast passing away; that General Grant seemed to be checkmated about Richmond and Petersburg, and my army seemed to have run up against an impassable barrier, when, suddenly and unexpectedly, came the news that "Atlanta was ours, and fairly won." It was welcome news for the Union.²⁸

By contrast, the mood of the Confederacy to the fall of Atlanta, demonstrated the other side of the contingency theory. The loss was a blow to Southern morale on home front. Mary Bodkin Chestnut wrote with lamentation that Atlanta had fallen, and the Confederate Army faced misfortune, saying that "These stories of our defeats in the valley fall like blows upon a dead body. Since Atlanta fell I have felt as if all were dead within me forever. Captain Ogden, of General Chesnut's staff, dined here to-day. Had ever brigadier, with little or no brigade, so magnificent a staff? The reserves, as somebody said, have been secured only by robbing the cradle and the grave-the men too old, the boys too young. Isaac Hayne, Edward Barnwell, Bacon, Ogden, Richardson, Miles are the picked men of the agreeable world."²⁹ The citizens of the Confederacy lost their will to continue fighting the war.

In his memoirs, Johnston himself recognized the vital nature of taking Atlanta noting that "The importance to the Confederacy of defeating the enterprise against Atlanta was not to be measured by military consequences alone. Political considerations were also involved, and added much to the interest of that campaign."³⁰ This provided the Confederacy with the breathing room

they needed on the negotiating table as Johnston further notes: “If Sherman had been foiled, these teachings would have caused great exaggeration of the consequences of his failure, which would have strengthened the peace party greatly; so much, perhaps, as to have enabled it to carry the presidential election, which would have brought the war to an immediate close.”³¹ Unfortunately, his opponents recognized this as well.

Sherman was able to do this only because of Johnston’s removal and his replacement with John Bell Hood. Hood sent his army against the Union forces, leaving Georgia open to Sherman’s advances. The reason for this mistake is due to the flaws of Confederate President Jefferson Davis, who interfered too much and played favorites with his generals. At first glance Davis might appear to have the excellent qualifications for a wartime commander, since he served as secretary of war for Franklin Pierce. Unfortunately, his flaw of micromanaging and playing favorites would be his undoing.³² It was because of Davis’s choice that the defensive-minded commander that the South needed in Georgia, was replaced Hood who was not suited for the task at hand.

The North’s Shenandoah Valley campaign of 1864 led to another decisive military victory that convinced the home front that victory was near. The campaign was ordered by General Grant to clear out the Shenandoah Valley of Confederate forces. It was a fertile area that supplied Confederate army with food and resources. In the words of General Grant “The Shenandoah Valley was very important to the Confederates because it was the principal storehouse they now had for feeding their armies about Richmond. It was well known that they would make a desperate struggle to maintain it.”³³ Burning and destroying the valley’s resources would be a prudent strategic move to weaken the Confederate armies and increase Northern fortunes in Virginia.

Grant put General Philip Sheridan in charge, a daring young cavalry officer who made it his mission to destroy the Confederate forces in the valley. According to his own memoirs “General Grant had not only decided to retain in the Shenandoah Valley a large force sufficient to defeat [General Jubal] Early’s army or drive it back to Lee, but he had furthermore determined to make that sections by the destruction of its supplies, untenable for continued occupancy by the Confederates. This cut off one of Lee’s mainstays in the way of sustenance, and at the same time diminish the number of recruits and conscripts he received.”³⁴ Sheridan would face Confederate forces under the leadership of Early, one of Lee’s officers. There would be some battles and clashes until Sheridan made great successes at the battles of Fisher Hill and Cedar Creek that saw the Confederate forces smashed in battle. Both of these battles were great propaganda victories for the Union. Over the course of the campaign, Sheridan followed the example of General Sherman and proceeded to destroy as much as he could of the farms and mills in the Shenandoah region to deny it as a place of operation for future Confederate forces. It was an excellent example of contingency, with both obtaining a political victory for Lincoln and achieving a strategic goal at the same time.³⁵

The Shenandoah Valley campaign unquestionably affected the election of 1864. According to Sheridan's memoirs "the authorities at Washington having impressed upon me that the defeat of my army might be followed by the overthrow of the party in power, which event, it was believed, would at least retard the progress of the war, if, indeed, it did not lead to the complete abandonment of all coercive measures."³⁶ Sheridan's victory at Cedar Creek was said to have averted a "national disaster" due to the upcoming nature of the elections.³⁷ General Grant himself noted that "I had reason to believe that the administration was a little afraid to have a decisive battle at that time, for fear it might go against us and have a bad effect on the November elections. The convention which had met and made its nomination of the Democratic candidate for the presidency had declared the war a failure." In this case, the North won that decisive victory.³⁸

For the election of 1864, it was between the "National Union" led by Lincoln, which was the Republican Party with some pro-War Democrats added to the mix. They were opposed by the Democratic Party, most notably the anti-war faction among the Democrats, who were derisively called "copperheads" by their detractors. The Democratic Party had nominated George McClellan. A proud and charismatic man, he had served as a successful railroad president before the war and was effectively the army's golden boy in the immediate prewar years. However, he was too timid as a soldier. After he was dismissed by Lincoln, McClellan would reappear as the Democratic candidate for victory, railing against Lincoln's continuation of the war. As things stood at the latter half of 1864, he had a good chance of victory. McClellan and Lincoln had not gotten along in their previous years. Lincoln saw McClellan as being too cautious and ineffectual. McClellan had nothing but disdain for Lincoln, referring to him in derogatory terms. While McClellan himself was pro-war and favored the Union, the Democratic Party as a whole pushed forth a platform for peace. It was likely that a Northern victory with McClellan in command, may have led to a more generous peace settlement for the Confederacy. Due to the great Union military victory at Atlanta in 1864, Lincoln was able to rally the popular support that he needed to carry the election successfully. Lincoln won over seventy percent of the electoral vote. This is the contingency theory that had Lincoln not won that election due to the Northern military successes on the battlefield; then the Confederacy would have a peace settlement.³⁹

The summer of 1864 was a decisive moment in Civil War history. Military success on the battlefield led to political success at the home front. It helped to ensure the reelection of President Abraham Lincoln and the successful conclusion of the war. These events are centered on the theory of contingency, that the South had opportunities to win a psychological victory over the North. Contingency theory in the summer of 1864 hinged largely on two campaigns, the Battle for Atlanta and the Shenandoah Valley campaign. The fall of Atlanta was caused by the removal of General Joseph E. Johnston whose replacement John Bell Hood, destroyed his army in an unwise series of reckless assaults. Because of these two campaigns, the Northern victory in the following year was assured, and the South lost their will to fight.

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- ¹ James McPherson, "American Victory, American Defeat," in *Why the Confederacy Lost* ed. Gabor S. Boritt (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 18.
- ² McPherson, "American Victory, American Defeat," 18.
- ³ Richard N. Current, "God and the Strongest Battalions," in *Why the North Won the Civil War*, ed. David Herbert Donald (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2005), 22-38
- ⁴ Ken Burns, *The Civil War*, PBS, video, directed by Ken Burns (1990: PBS, 2015), Online.
- ⁵ McPherson, "American Victory, American Defeat," 18, 28
- ⁶ Boritt, *Why the Confederacy Lost*, 15; Gary Ecelbarger, *The Day Dixie Died* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2010), 222-225.
- ⁷ Reid Mitchell, "The Perseverance of the Soldiers," in Boritt, *Why the Confederacy Lost*, 63.
- ⁸ Albert Castel, "Why the North Won and the South Lost," *Civil War Times Illustrated* 39, no.2 (May 2000): 56-61.
- ⁹ James McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 854-856.
- ¹⁰ McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 692, 713, 715, 718, 721, 743, 750, 754, 771, 858.
- ¹¹ McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 718.
- ¹² McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 858.
- ¹³ McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 333, 334, 336, 337, 338, 545, 664, 665.
- ¹⁴ McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 722, 726, 732, 734, 735, 756.
- ¹⁵ Ulysses S. Grant, *Memoirs and Selected Letters*, ed. Mary D. McFeeley and William S. McFeeley (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1990), 511.
- ¹⁶ McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 758, 722.
- ¹⁷ McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 473,474, 475, 476, 722, 743, 744, 748, 749.
- ¹⁸ Joseph E. Johnston, *Narrative of Military Operations Directed During the Late War Between the States*, ed. F. E. Vandiver (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1959), 356.
- ¹⁹ Grant, *Memoirs and Selected Letters*, 505.
- ²⁰ William T. Sherman, *Memoirs of General William T. Sherman* (1875; repr., New York: Da Capo Press, 1984), 2:75
- ²¹ McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 748, 749.
- ²² McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 365, 366.
- ²³ David M. Potter, "Jefferson Davis and the Political Factors in Confederate Defeat," in Donald, *Why the North Won*, 106, 107, 108.
- ²⁴ McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 753, 754, 755, 774, 812, 812.
- ²⁵ Sherman, *Memoirs*, 2:72, 75.
- ²⁶ McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 774, 809.
- ²⁷ "The Effect of the News From Sherman," *Harper's Weekly*, September 17, 1864.
- ²⁸ Sherman, *Memoirs*, 2:109.
- ²⁹ Mary Boykin Chestnut, *A Diary from Dixie*, ed. Ben Ames Williams (1949; repr., Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), 436.
- ³⁰ Johnston, *Narrative of Military Operations*, 363.
- ³¹ Johnston, *Narrative of Military Operations*, 363.
- ³² Potter, "Jefferson Davis," 102-104, 107, 109.
- ³³ Grant, *Memoirs and Letters*, 614.
- ³⁴ Philip H. Sheridan, *Personal Memoirs of P. H. Sheridan* (1888; repr., New York: Da Capo Press, 1992), 265, 266.
- ³⁵ McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 758, 777, 778, 779, 790.
- ³⁶ Sheridan, *Personal Memoirs*, 2:273.
- ³⁷ "Phil Sheridan Riding to Victory," *Harper's Weekly*, November 5, 1864.
- ³⁸ Grant, *Memoirs and Letters*, 2:622, 625.
- ³⁹ McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 716, 771, 772, 804, 805, 858.

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