

Volume 18

Number 031

**A House Divided: (86) Bloody Civil
War Tactics – I**

Lead: One hundred and fifty years ago the Republic was facing its greatest crisis. This continuing series examines the American Civil War. It is "A House Divided."

Intro.: *A Moment in Time* with Dan Roberts.

Content: In the course of military history it has often been the case that armies prepare for the last war. Unable to see into the future, changes in strategy, tactics and weaponry come only with the experience of the current war. It is one of the great tragedies of

the American Civil War that the learning curve among military leaders was so slow that tactics even up until the last year produced a grisly ingathering of casualties on both sides – more than 600,000 dead over a four-year period. Recognizing that disease was one of the most vicious of executioners in both Rebel and Yankee armies, leaders still were painfully slow on the uptake, not realizing that the tactics they were using increased casualty rates.

Most leaders were schooled in the tactics of the Napoleonic Era, often known as the offensive-defensive theory. Many had fought in the Mexican War and had applied such tactics to great advantage. It was

thought that the best way to use infantry was to organize troops into disciplined ranks, closely accompanied by light artillery, march them forward, fire, re-load, fire, re-load and so forth until a final 80-yard bayonet charge would slice into the opponents ranks. This fit into the romantic notion, particularly among Southern troops, that glorified the valorous charge across a battlefield throwing oneself into the enemy with abandon. It soon became clear that the cost of such an exercise was enormous. One important reason that the Civil War was so bloody was that a change in the weapon given to the average soldier was not accompanied by a commensurate change in tactics.

Until two years into the Civil War, infantry soldiers typically used single-shot, smooth-bore muskets loaded at the muzzle. Such a weapon was at best difficult to re-load on the run. The maximum range was 250 yards, but on a good day a soldier, even an entrenched one, could hardly manage an accurate shot of more than 80 yards. The tactics of the early nineteenth century were designed to maximize the effectiveness and concentrate the firepower of such a weapon. The 80-yard bayonet charge could succeed because troops could cover that ground and overwhelm the enemy in the time it took entrenched soldiers to re-load. Artillery could accompany the infantry because both cannoner and horse were reasonably

safe from enemy fire until they were close enough to help the charging infantry. All that began to change with the arrival of a new weapon. Next time: the age of the rifle.

From the School of Professional and Continuing Studies, University of Richmond, this is Dan Roberts.

Resources

Catton, Bruce. *The American Heritage Picture History of the Civil War.* New York, NY: American Heritage Publishing Company, 1960, 1988.

Hattaway, Herman and Archer Jones. *How the North Won: A Military History of the Civil War.* Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1983.

Keegan, John. *The Face of Battle..* New York, NY: Viking Press, 1977.

Mahon, John K. "Civil War Infantry Assault Tactics," *Military Affairs* 25 (1961): 57-68.

McPherson, James M. *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era.* New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1988.

McWhiney, Grady and Perry D. Jamieson. *Attack and Die: Civil War Military Tactics and the Southern Heritage.* Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama, 1982.

<http://eh.net/encyclopedia/article/ransom.civil.war.us>.