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## Who Whipped Whom?: Confederate Defeat Reexamined

Grady McWhiney

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### In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

WHO WHIPPED WHOM? Confederate Defeat Reexamined Grady McWhiney Sometime after the Civil War an unreconstructed rebel, Robert Toombs, was arguing with a Federal army officer over the relative fighting qualities of Union and Confederate soldiers. "Well, we whipped you," the exasperated officer finally told Toombs. "No," Toombs retorted, "we just wore ourselves out whipping you."<sup>1</sup> Although as a general Toombs left a great deal to be desired, he was a perceptive military analyst. His statement that the Confederacy beat itself may have been intended as a joke, but as an appraisal of how the South lost the Civil War it was surprisingly accurate. More than 600,000 Americans died in the Civil War—a greater American mortality than in the two World Wars and the Korean Conflict combined. The charge of the British Light Brigade at Balaclava (almost 40 per cent of its men were shot in the "Valley of Death") has symbolized needless sacrifice, but heavier losses were common during the Civil War. Some sixty Union regiments lost more than half their men

in a single engagement, and at least 120 Union regiments sustained losses equal to the Light Brigade's. In eleven different campaigns the Union suffered ten thousand casualties; over a thousand men were killed or wounded in fifty-six different actions. At Gettysburg one out of every five Federal soldiers present was hit, and a Minnesota regiment was decimated—it lost 82 per cent of its men. Proportionally, Confederate losses were even greater. More than eighty thousand Confederate soldiers fell in just five battles. At Gettysburg three out of every ten southerners present were hit; one North Carolina regiment lost 85 per cent of its strength, and every man in one company was killed or wounded. In the first twenty-seven months of combat the South lost 175,000 men.<sup>2</sup> This number exceeded the entire Confederate military service in July, 1861, and the strength of any army Robert E. Lee ever commanded.»Pleasant A. Stovall, *Robert Toombs* (New York, 1892), p. 322. <sup>2</sup> William F. Fox, *Regimental Losses in the American Civil War, 1861-1865* (Albany, 1889), pp. 47, 554, 22; Thomas L. Livermore, *Numbers and Losses in the Civil War in America: 1861-65* (Bloomington, 1957), pp. 63-64, 140-141. <sup>3</sup> CIVIL WAR HISTORY Losses were so staggering because officers on both sides fought by the books, and the books were wrong. Every treatise on tactics available in the 1860's was outdated. All the official and unofficial tactical manuals insisted that bayonets would decide the outcome of battles and that troops should assault either in long lines or in massed columns.<sup>3</sup> Such assumptions were tragically in error, for by 1861 bayonets were obsolete weapons and played no significant role in the outcome of the Civil War. During the Virginia campaign of 1864, when there was more close combat than usual, 33,292 Federal soldiers were treated for bullet wounds but only thirty-seven for bayonet wounds.<sup>4</sup> Before the Civil War bayonet attacks had been justifiable because the basic infantry fire arm—the smoothbore musket—was highly inaccurate. A soldier might fire a smoothbore musket at a man all day from a distance of a few hundred yards and never hit him.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, field commanders of the early 1800's favored smoothbores over rifles for general infantry use. Rifles required too much time and effort to load because each bullet had to be slightly larger than the bore; otherwise, when the weapon was fired, the bullet would fail to spin through the barrel along the rifled grooves. These rifled grooves gave the rifle both its name and its superiority in <sup>3</sup> See Winfield Scott, *Infantry Tactics* (New York, 1861); William J. Hardee, *Rifle and Light Infantry Tactics* (Philadelphia, 1861); Silas Casey, *Infantry Tactics* (New York, 1862); George B. McClellan, *Manual of Bayonet Exercise: Prepared for the Use of the Army of the United States* (Philadelphia, 1862); John H. Richardson, *Infantry Tactics, or, Rules for the Exercise and Manoeuvres of the Confederate States Infantry* (Richmond, 1862). <sup>4</sup> Among the works which explain how new weapons outdated Civil War tactics, I have found most useful: J. F. C. Fuller, *The Generalship of Ulysses...*

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*Grady McWhiney*

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More than 600,000 Americans died in the Civil War—a greater American mortality than in the two World Wars and the Korean Conflict combined. The charge of the British Light Brigade at Balaklava (almost 40 per cent of its men were shot in the "Valley of Death") has symbolized needless sacrifice, but heavier losses were common during the Civil War. Some sixty Union regiments lost more than half their men in a single engagement, and at least 120 Union regiments sustained losses equal to the Light Brigade's. In eleven different campaigns the Union suffered ten thousand casualties; over a thousand men were killed or wounded in fifty-six different actions. At Gettysburg one out of every five Federal soldiers present was hit, and a Minnesota regiment was decimated—it lost 92 per cent of its men.

Proportionally, Confederate losses were even greater. More than eighty thousand Confederate soldiers fell in just five battles. At Gettysburg three out of every ten southerners present were hit; one North Carolina regiment lost 55 per cent of its strength, and every man in one company was killed or wounded. In the first twenty-seven months of combat the South lost 175,000 men.<sup>2</sup> This number exceeded the entire Confederate military service in July, 1861, and the strength of any army Robert E. Lee ever commanded.

<sup>1</sup> Pleasant A. Stovall, *Robert Toombs* (New York, 1892), p. 322.

<sup>2</sup> William F. Fox, *Regimental Losses in the American Civil War, 1861-1865* (Albany, 1883), pp. 47, 534, 22; Thomas L. Livermore, *Numbers and Losses in the Civil War in America: 1861-65* (Bloomington, 1957), pp. 83-84, 140-141.





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