

## The Influence of Geographical Conditions Upon Civil War Strategy in the Mississippi Delta

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All wars are noted for certain abnormalities and unusual situations that act as distinguishing characteristics. The internal conflict of the American nation from 1861 to 1865 is no exception. Certainly one of the most interesting aspects of the Civil War was the fighting in the great Delta of the Mississippi River. That such was the case is due solely to the geographic condition of the area.

The extent of the Mississippi Delta, although vast, comprises only a small part of what is commonly known as the Mississippi Valley. While the term "delta" is often thought of as referring only to that land deposited at the mouth of a river, in this paper the entire alluvial basin of the Mississippi will be spoken of as its Delta. This terminology is intended to emphasize the continuity of one type of topography throughout the entire area; in fact, in the 19th century, portions of the basin over 250 miles upstream were known as "Delta."

The Delta stretches from the southern tip of Illinois to the Gulf of Mexico, some one hundred miles below New Orleans. It includes the extreme western portions of Kentucky and Tennessee, a large part of western Mississippi, central Louisiana, eastern Arkansas, and southeastern Missouri. (Raisz, 1954; Lobeck, 1955).

The physical feature that prescribes the limits of the Delta is a line of bluffs, more prominent on the eastern side, which rises from one hundred to two hundred feet above the flood plain. The Mississippi follows relatively close to the eastern line of bluffs from the head of the Delta to slightly below Memphis, then it swings in a great curve to the west, touching the opposite bluffs near the mouth of the Arkansas and rejoining the eastern bluffs at Vicksburg. From Vicksburg south the river again follows the bluffs until they disappear in the bayous of eastern Louisiana. The flood plain between the bluffs is as level as its name implies with the exception of the protrusion of Crowley's Ridge in north-eastern Arkansas and the high ground east of the Tensas Basin in Louisiana (Raisz, 1954; Lobeck, 1955; Fiske, 1900). While the Delta today is as cut up with old meanders and tributaries of the great river as ever, the intervening land is not nearly as wild and desolate as it was in the 1860's. In those days, before adequate drainage and levee systems were constructed, the flood plain was largely a series of swamps; this especially held true for the Yazoo Basin where a condition existed which, according to Grant's engineer officer, "renders the country almost impassable in summer, and entirely so, except by boats, in winter." (Everhart, 1954).

The obvious defensive advantages of the above described topographic situation were not lost on either of the opposing military commands. In the bluffs and the river or swamps below them the Confederates had the 19th century equivalent of an indestructible castle wall and moat. The bluffs approached the river only in a few places closely enough to be of real tactical value with the employment of the weapons available. These points were sites for Confederate fortifications: Columbus, Kentucky; Fort Pillow, Fort Randolph and Memphis in Tennessee; and Vicksburg and Grand Gulf in Mississippi (Fiske, 1900; Mahan, 1912). The southern end of the Mississippi was secured from use as an enemy highway to the South's largest city by two brick forts some ninety miles below New Orleans (Potter, 1955).

Since the Commander-in-chief of the Confederate military forces, president Jefferson Davis, had committed the South to a policy of static

defense, the initiative lay in the hands of the Northern forces. (Dowdey, 1955).

The first Union advance in the Delta came from the north in the form of a fleet of river gunboats under the command of Commodore A. H. Foote. The major Confederate fort at Columbus, Kentucky, had been evacuated due to its being rendered untenable by the collapse of the defense line in northern Tennessee. The Federal navy thus came into contact with their enemy at Island No. 10. This midstream position was the only one of the Confederate forts above New Orleans that was not on the line of bluffs. Its low and isolated position allowed the Union navy to run two armored gunboats past in the dark, land troops on the eastern bank to cut the Confederate communications, and force the surrender on April 7, 1862. (Potter, 1955; Guernsey and Alden, 1866; Gosnell, 1949).

The gunboats then moved down-river to attack the next strong point. They proceeded to bombard Fort Pillow and did nothing more than prove the defensive value of the position on the bluffs. Lacking troops with which to launch a land assault on the fort, the Federal fleet was forced to remain inactive. A miscellaneous assortment of Confederate craft soon attacked and inflicted considerable damage to two of the Northern gunboats. The situation then remained as before until the Confederates were forced to evacuate both Fort Pillow and Fort Randolph as a result of the failure of their second line of defense in southern Tennessee and northern Mississippi. (Guernsey and Alden, 1866).

The Federals secured the last Southern strong point north of Vicksburg by destroying the hopelessly inferior river squadron that was the only defense for Memphis (Guernsey and Alden, 1866). Thus, in June of 1862, the river was Union from Cairo to Vicksburg; events in the deep South had moved Union influence north to the same town.

David G. Farragut took New Orleans the last week of April in a campaign that astonished the world with its thoroughness and speed. After bombarding the guardian forts with little result, he merely ran his fleet of sea-going sloops and gunboats up the wide channel between the forts to the city beyond. The forts were then forced to surrender when cut off from their source of supply. Farragut's success is due not only to his larger quantity and better quality of guns than the Confederates, but to the low position of the forts. Both Fort Jackson and Fort St. Phillip were so low that they could not deliver the plunging fire so deadly against ships, while broken levees had actually resulted in the flooding of Fort Jackson. (Guernsey and Alden, 1866; Potter, 1955).

The Federal fleet had proceeded upriver to Vicksburg after receiving the surrender of New Orleans. The ships bombarded the guns on the bluffs and even managed to run past the town at night, but this was all they did and the Confederates remained secure (Everhart, 1954). It took fourteen more months of campaigning for the Union to capture the town that Lincoln clearly saw as "the key to all that country watered by the Mississippi and its tributaries." (Bradford, 1956).

As the Union fleet was forced to retire south, due to the falling water in the river, the Southern forces were free to construct a fort at Port Hudson, Louisiana, (another point where the bluffs touched the river) and thereby gain control of the Mississippi from below the mouth of the Red River to Vicksburg. (Everhart, 1954; Guernsey and Alden, 1866).

In the fall of 1862 General U. S. Grant assumed command of the operations against Vicksburg, a task which, when accomplished, would secure him a first rate military reputation. His first attempt, a land at-

tack from the north, failed because the Confederate cavalry destroyed the railroad that was his line of supply. The reason for Grant's dependence on a railroad instead of the indestructable Mississippi as his supply route was the sixty mile wide Yazoo Basin that separated him from the river. (Grant, 1885; Everhart, 1954; Turner, 1953).

In conjunction with this move Grant sent W. T. Sherman in a direct assault against the bluffs just above Vicksburg. This attack was repulsed with losses ten times those of the Confederates. (Everhart, 1954).

Grant spent the winter and spring months in attempts to get around Vicksburg with the gunboats. These efforts took the form of canals, expeditions into the bayous west of the river, and forays into the Yazoo Basin; none succeeded. In April of 1863 Grant decided to march his troops along the few dry roads on the west bank of the river and cross below the town. Transport was provided by gunboats and steamers that ran past the batteries with inconsequential losses. His forces still could land only where the bluffs did not dominate the river, for the gunboats had pounded the Confederate forts at Grand Gulf for six hours without effect. (Wilson, 1881; Everhart, 1954; Grant, 1885).

Once on the eastern shore Grant invested Vicksburg with a lightning-fast land campaign. Still, the town held out behind its impregnable lines and endured a rain of six thousand mortar shells per day from the boats on the river. The surrender was achieved only after the defenders had no other alternative save starvation. Five days later, on July 9, 1863, Port Hudson capitulated and the Mississippi Delta was under Union control. (Everhart, 1954; Wilson, 1881; Henry, 1936).

Throughout the rest of the war the activity in this area was limited to routine patrols and guerilla warfare. The only major attempt to extend Union influence to the west of the Delta ended in the failure of the Red River Expedition in 1864. This disaster almost lost the Union its entire river fleet, whose commanders learned the hard way to stay on the more dependable waters of the Mississippi flood plain. (Henry, 1936).

The topography of the Mississippi Delta region made it, in effect, a third sea that split the Confederacy in two. The short range artillery of the Civil War made the practical military situation much different from what it would be today. (An important instance of the profound effect of the influence of available weapons upon the utilization of geographical conditions.) The control of the Delta was open to the combatant with the preponderant naval power. The forts on the line of bluffs forming the "west coast" of the eastern Confederacy were never attacked directly by gunboats or troops with any success. Had the South been able to put a sufficient naval force on the Delta, they not only could have stopped the Union navy's flank attacks, but might have realized the offensive possibilities of the situation to a degree that would have affected the outcome of the war. However, it is no discredit to the defenders of such gallant posts as Vicksburg that they finally fell victim to a lack of support from the interior. They did all that an alliance of man and nature could.

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