The American Civil War in British Military Thought from the 1880s to the 1930s

NIMROD TAL

For the past fifty years, research on the sources of British military thinkers’ interest in the American Civil War has concentrated on what contemporaries perceived as the elements that shaped the nature of the war and made it relevant for them. In the late 1950s, for example, Jay Luvaas argued that J. F. C. Fuller had analyzed the Civil War for lessons regarding the impact of new technology on strategy, since he regarded it as a war of technological innovations. More recently, Hugh Dubrulle contended that British officers appealed to the war for lessons about the influence of social and political institutions on warfare, because they saw it as a war between two conflicting sociopolitical orders that dictated two correlating and conflicting methods of combat. According to Dubrulle, British military thinkers argued that social inequality in the South produced the virtuous, professional and restrained Confederate way of warfare; whereas mob rule and extreme democracy in the North produced the Union army’s savagery and unrestricted warfare. Even more recently, Brian Holden Reid has shown that the British learned valuable lessons from the Civil War regarding mass conflicts fought mainly by unprofessional citizen-soldiers, since

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it was a war between vast armies of amateur volunteers. Military and Civil War historians have meticulously mapped the British understanding of the technical, political, strategic, and tactical factors that determined the nature of the war and the military lessons derived from it.

Historical research, however, has downplayed British military thinkers’ fascination with the results of the Civil War and, thus, has often missed the lessons they derived from the conflict’s impact on the United States. The intellectuals who shaped Britain’s military inheritance from the American conflict—scholars such as Garnet Wolseley, G. F. R. Henderson, Basil Liddell Hart, and J. F. C. Fuller—were not interested in war merely as a passive entity shaped by historical circumstances. Instead, they devoted their lives to the study of war because they saw it as an agent of social and political transformation. Fuller, for example, claimed that war was “like a scalpel for a surgeon,” a tool for healing society’s ills. In other words, he was not interested solely or even primarily in how sociopolitical structures determine the character of war, but how war determines the nature of sociopolitical structures. More generally, as the military thinkers’ professional backgrounds were based on Carl von Clausewitz’s axiom that war was a continuation of politics by other means, their perception of a given war and the tactical and strategic lessons gleaned from it went hand-in-hand with their moral judgement of the war’s political goals and their assessment of the extent to which these goals were achieved. Therefore, the Civil War’s place in British military thought can be better understood by redirecting the focus from the elements that shaped the war to the historical reality that was shaped by it. More specifically, the question that should be asked is how British military intellectuals viewed the Civil War’s impact on American society and why they thought it was relevant to them. Answers require a change of focus also in the reading of primary sources. Rather than looking primarily for British officers’ analyses of the war, the research should seek out their perspectives on the United States and their judgments of how the Civil War changed America.

4. J. F. C. Fuller to William Sloan (his editor at Rutgers University Press), Mar. 15, 1962, Fuller, IV/6/1-IV/6/48b, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, King’s College (hereafter LHCMA).
5. This article offers another reading of both the archival and published material. Priority is often given to the latter, since British military intellectuals’ books, lectures, and teaching materials presented an inclusive and coherent argument about the relations between the military lessons they took from the Civil War and their view of its impact on the United States. For
This article argues that between the 1880s and 1930s—a formative era during which the military legacy of the Civil War was constantly debated across the Atlantic—British military thinkers turned to the American conflict because it had transformed the United States. More specifically, British officers found a special interest in the war as a historical agent that changed the United States from a premodern, relatively decentralized, isolationist country into a modern, unified global power. In this light, the war offered lessons on an array of subjects relevant, even pressing, for the British. First of all, since the Civil War gave rise to modern America it could be used as a prism for observing American society and government. As American influence on British life increased, so did the need to explain it. Also, as a watershed in American history, the Civil War provided lessons on the power of war to sever the present from the past, that is, to generate social, political, and cultural revolutions. Such lessons became especially important after the Great War, when many people in Britain believed that war had destroyed the old order. Finally, as the conflict that modernized and unified America and forged it into a world power, the Civil War offered lessons on the relationships among modernity, unity, and military and political power, both domestic and international.

Since this study is centered on the British understanding of the Civil War's impact on the United States between the 1880s and 1930s, the analysis of their military lessons from it is situated in a dual context of the conflict's meaning and of the United States' place in the British mind in a period of American ascent. Both components were nuanced and fluctuating. The Civil War was seen differently in the southern states, northern states, among African Americans, and in Britain. Furthermore, over the years the war's meaning...
changed. Historians generally agree that in the 1880s the conflict’s conciliatory representation began to dominate the way it was understood. During this period, the Civil War was depicted in both America and Britain not only as the struggle that divided the United States, but also as a step, indeed a tragic one, toward national reunification and the consolidation of governmental power. By the same token, the British view of the United States changed over time and often according to class, gender, race, political affiliation, vocation, and individual interests. In general the British saw the United States as a

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8. There are also dissenting voices, such as that of John Neff, whose study highlights the divide and simmering resentment between North and South that persisted into the twentieth century. See Neff, Honoring the Civil War Dead, 4–13. Having achieved its place at the core of American culture in the 1910s, the conciliatory reading of the war was significantly challenged only at the time of the war’s centennial (1961–65), when the conflict’s African American legacy began to gain momentum. See Cook, Troubled Commemoration.

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By focusing on the Civil War's lasting impact on the United States, one attains a clearer understanding of the lessons that British military thinkers derived from the conflict and their abiding fascination with it. We also come to a greater grasp of the place of the Civil War in the minds of British officers. In their minds, the Civil War was key to the growth and character of the United States as a nation, not only as an army. Extending this understanding further, the Civil War was an American yardstick against which British military thinkers measured their own country. Thus, this is not an article dealing with the military history of the Civil War in a narrow sense, but a study of the conflict's history that engages, enriches, and is enriched by cultural, social, political, and transatlantic Civil War history. In this, it reflects how British military thinkers understood their profession and through it the history, meaning, and use of the American Civil War.

The article begins with a discussion on how, contrary to conventional wisdom, changes in the Civil War's meaning and the United States' rise to power altered the lessons that British military thinkers had drawn from the war between the 1880s and 1910s. In the major works on the Civil War of Henderson, Wolseley, and others, there are clear signs of changes in how these thinkers and their contemporaries on both sides of the Atlantic viewed the war's impact on the United States. The goal of this discussion is to show the importance of integrating the academic debate about the memory of the war and the historical growth of the United States into the debate about the British military inheritance from the Civil War. Once the links among Britons' growing power with an increased bearing and influence on their affairs. W. T. Stead's 1902 prediction of the "Americanization of the world" was but one example of British perception of America's growing presence in and affect on British life. This understanding became more widely recognized as the century wore on and the United States became part of the context in which Britons experienced their world.


interpretation of the war's meaning, American ascendency, and the lessons derived from the war are established, the article systematically analyzes the seminal writings on the Civil War by Liddell Hart and Fuller, the preeminent military intellectuals of the interwar period. By comparing the lessons they learned from the war with their views of Britain and America, a connection is made between Liddell Hart's and Fuller's perception of the Civil War and their broader political thinking.

From the outset, the Civil War caught the British military's attention. As Dubrulle argued, during the war British officers looked almost solely to the Confederacy for positive lessons. On political grounds, British military thinkers supported the Confederacy's struggle for national independence and for the preservation of its agrarian way of life and its social and political hierarchies. British military thinkers attributed the Confederacy's superb military conduct to these values and goals. By contrast, they viewed the North as imposing an unwanted unity and decadent lifestyle on the South. Northern institutions—especially capitalism and mass democracy, which the British regarded as derivatives of mob rule—appalled Britain's military elite, who regarded them as the source of the North's military weaknesses and failures. Despite their interest during the war, British thinkers' interest waned soon afterward. Although today most scholars reject Luvaas's contention that prior to the Great War, Britons learned little from the American conflict, no major work appeared on the subject in Britain between the late 1860s and mid-1880s. Instead, the American Civil War gave way to studies on the Austro-Prussian War (1866) and Franco-Prussian War (1870–71), both of which seemed more relevant.

The period between the 1880s and 1910s, when the Civil War became a key subject of inquiry in the British Army and many military writers turned to it for lessons, can thus rightly be seen—using Luvaas's word—as a "renais-

sance." Since the 1930s, historians have been claiming that during this rennaissance British military thinking on the Civil War remained almost as it had during the war. In 1933, Liddell Hart, who did much to advance the argument that before 1914 the British had learned nothing new from the Civil War, argued that after the American conflict, Gen. Robert E. Lee succeeded where he had hitherto failed: namely in conquering both the North and Britain. After the 1950s, Luvaas, Liddell Hart's protégé, continued to propound the view that Britain turned almost solely to the Confederacy and for the same reasons as before. Dubrulle—challenging Luvaas's contention that before 1914 the British learned little from the Civil War—concluded nonetheless that Wolseley continued to study southern generals, as did many in the British Army between the 1880s and 1914, and that "the biases of previous authors—particularly an admiration for Confederate hierarchical society and the leadership it produced—crept into [G. F. R.] Henderson's . . . work."

However, by the 1880s the context in which British historians analyzed the Civil War had changed markedly from that of the 1860s. In the most tangible sense, the aftermath of the Union victory created a reality quite unlike the one Britons had seen during the conflict. For example, Gladstone's 1862 statement that the southern states leaders "have made a nation" proved wrong. It was equally clear that slavery in the United States was a thing of the past. Militarily, the Confederate army was defeated. As late as 1864, Arthur Fremantle still predicted that "[the South] display[s] a unanimity and a heroism which can never have been suppressed in the history of the world, [and] is destined, sooner or later, to become a great and independent nation." Southern heroism, however, had proven insufficient. After the war, there was a new basis for lesson learning. For example, with the abolition of human bondage in the United States, many Britons revised their generally negative view of Lincoln's slavery policy: they now saw it as morally driven rather than manipulative.

14. Liddell Hart, draft of review of Fuller's "Grant and Lee," 1933, LH 10/1933/109–161, LHCMA.
Furthermore, by the 1880s, British scholars interpreted the Civil War within a new commemorative framework that redefined its meaning and outcome. The last decades of the nineteenth century saw the rise of the conciliatory narrative, which emphasized that both northerners and southerners had fought gallantly for just causes and demonstrated their patriotism. According to this constructed memory of events, both sides celebrated the stronger national reunification that followed the war. Within this narrative, events and heroes gained new symbolization and substance. Lincoln, for example, was appraised more as a national unifier than a war leader, thus earning a standing in the national rather than sectional pantheon (where he had previously been placed). In keeping with this reconciliatory narrative, the generals were portrayed chiefly as Americans, rather than northerners or southerners, who had fought each other reluctantly and supported reunification after the war. J. C. Ropes, for example, whose works were a primary source for British military figures until the end of the interwar period, argued in the 1880s that “the courage and endurance displayed by both sides were wonderful indeed.” Elsewhere, he claimed that no hatred ever existed between the generals who, after the war, pursued reunification. Subsequently, the generals from both sides came to symbolize American unity rather than sectionalism. As John Neff has shown, Robert E. Lee, upon his death in 1870, more than any other Civil War hero, became the foremost emblem of sectional reconciliation in the United States. By the turn of the century, war narratives began to depict the conflict and its aftermath as a unifying event that generated and promoted American patriotism. In the process, Generals


18. For a concise account of the conflicting narratives of the Civil War, see Gary W. Gallagher, Causes Won, Lost, and Forgotten: How Hollywood and Popular Art Shape What We Know about the Civil War (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2008), 2–4.


22. Neff, Honoring the Civil War Dead, 161–62.
Grant, Jackson, and, above all, Lee were identified as wholly American as much as they had been northern and southern.

Thus, the leading British military writers, who largely adopted this narrative between the 1880s and 1910s, especially regarding southern generals, often circumvented their protagonists’ sectional background. G. F. R. Henderson, for example, the driving force behind the revived interest in the Civil War in the British army, regarded “Stonewall” Jackson primarily as a westerner, like Lincoln. Comparing the two, he noted: “Descendants of the pioneers, those hardy borderers, half soldiers and half farmers, who held and reclaimed, through long years of Indian warfare, the valleys and prairies of the West, they inherited the best attributes of a frank and valiant race. Simple yet wise, strong yet gentle, they were gifted with all the qualities which make leaders of men.” In the same vein, in Henderson’s discussion of secession, Lee and Lincoln represented similar, nationalistic views. “In time . . . under the influence of such men as Lincoln and Lee, the nation might have found a solution to the problem, and North and South might have combined to rid their common country of the curse of human servitude.” For Henderson, Lee and Jackson ultimately were among the “staunchest Unionist[s]” in the South, not different from Lincoln and the northern unionists. 23 Wolseley, too, a great admirer of the South and critic of Lincoln during the war, discovered in Lee much of the American character Lincoln possessed. 24 “To me,” he wrote in 1887, “two figures stand out in that history towering above all others . . . One, General Lee, the great soldier; the other, Mr. Lincoln, the far-seeing statesman of iron will, of unflinching determination. Each is a good representative of the genius that characterised his country.” Concluding his account, Wolseley expressed his confidence that Lee “will be regarded not only as the most prominent figure of the Confederacy, but as the great American of the nineteenth century . . . whose memory is equally worthy to be enshrined in the hearts of all his countrymen.” 25 This is not to say that British military thinkers did not write admirably about the Confederacy.

was assuming a key position in the reconciliatory depiction of the war, many emphasized that the Confederacy, as the North, had fought for American values. “In fact,” wrote the British major George Redway in 1910, “the South went to war for ‘State Rights’ which were as sacred to America in the middle of the nineteenth century as Self-Government is to Canada today.”

By the turn of the century, Wolseley, Henderson, and numerous other British officers often portrayed their southern heroes as American first and Confederate second.

The British also studied the war within the context of their revised view of the United States. Between 1861 and 1865, the Civil War had placed the viability of the American political system in doubt. Many in Britain regarded the conflict as a test that would determine whether American democracy—a novel political ideology and form of government—could endure. Deterred by the scale of violence and skeptical about the possibility of achieving reunification, some believed the war was proof that the American experiment

27. Foster, Ghosts of the Confederacy, 79–103.
29. Kinser, American Civil War in the Shaping of British Democracy, 2.
had already failed. Furthermore, contemporary British military observers frequently criticized American democracy as the cause of the war and the reason for its immeasurable destructiveness. However, after the war and in the following decades, the United States proved to be anything but a misguided endeavor. Increasingly industrialized and with a fast-growing population, financially booming, and more willing to assert its power in the western hemisphere, the Gilded Age United States was unquestionable for its durability. The British did not overlook America’s rise to world prominence. Whether the United States was a benign or malignant entity, however, was open for discussion. As Hugh Tulloch has observed, for example, by the 1880s, many British conservatives, previously critical of the United States, had come to commend it. Regardless of their judgement, which was in fact nuanced and flexible, few in Britain challenged the fact that America was an ascending power on the international stage.

The Civil War and reunification became the keys to understanding the rise of American power rather than the harbingers of its demise. For example, in an April 11, 1893, speech in the House of Commons, Ellis Ashmead-Bartlett, Conservative civil lord of the Admiralty, drew a lesson from the American experience about the importance of national unity in his opposition to Irish Home Rule and noted, “If the progress, the wealth, and the prosperity of the people of the United States appear now to be almost boundless, it is mainly because they came to this great national decision 30 years ago, that any sacrifice was worthy to be undertaken in order to maintain their Union.” To those still critical of the federal system as the cause for the Civil War, James Bryce answered in his seminal 1888 study of the United States, “not merely that the national government has survived this struggle and emerged from it stronger than before, but . . . Federalism did not produce the struggle, but only gave to it the particular form of a series of legal controversies over the Federal pact.” Similarly, reunification and reconciliation were linked to

30. Gladstone, for example, believed already in 1862 that the United States was incapable of reunification. See Jones, Union in Peril, 183–85.
the United States’ increasing military power and expanding intervention in world affairs, as demonstrated in the Spanish-American War (1898). Many in Britain saw the war with Spain as the ultimate evidence that reunification was complete. In 1899, for example, the Pall Mall Gazette stressed that the war with Spain “consummated a process of consolidation which had been going on for something like twenty years.”

As late as 1927, Frederick Maurice, a prominent British military intellectual who wrote major works on the Civil War in the mid-1920s, noted, “The Union of North and South which . . . was made indissoluble at Appomattox, was dramatically portrayed in the war with Spain, when a son of Colonel Marshall performed for a son of Grant the same functions which from 1862 to 1865 the father had performed for Lee.” By the early decades of the twentieth century, and especially during the Civil War’s semi-centennial between 1911 and 1915, the war had become a symbol of American unity and power and the key to the United States’ modern identity.

37. Frederick Maurice, preface to Lee’s Aide-de-Camp, ed. Frederick Maurice (1927; repr., Lincoln, Neb.: Bison Books, 2000), xxiii.
38. On the semi-centennial celebrations, see Blight, Race and Reunion, 394–97.
As the context in which British military thinkers interpreted the Civil War changed, so their lessons changed as well. Strategically, as Reid has argued, the British sometimes found the lessons from the Union army more valuable than those from the Confederacy. For example, in light of the rising tensions in Europe, Britons saw the necessity and effectiveness of a war of attrition as executed by the North. Furthermore, British attention to the North for strategic lessons was based on a new awareness of the North’s politics, its goals, and the impact of its victory on the United States. Unlike during the war years, the British lauded the Union’s fight for national unity, democracy and modernity, which were now seen as the forces that propelled America forward. In his 1887 essay in praise of Lee, Wolseley saw “in the dogged determination of the North . . . the spirit for which the men of Britain have always been remarkable.” Drawing from the North the importance of unity for national power, Wolseley wrote that “of Englishmen who believe that ‘union is strength’ and who are themselves determined that no dismemberment of their own empire shall be allowed, few will find fault with the men of the North for their manly determination, come what might, to resist every effort of their brothers in the South to break up the Union.” The Union’s war of attrition, which Wolseley had castigated in the 1860s, was reinterpreted at the turn of the century as determination and sacrifice for a noble cause. Henderson, too, long considered a southern admirer, openly criticized the Confederate cause and championed the North’s right to resist secession while the South “ignored or missed [the Constitution’s] spirit.” Although he blamed the abolitionists for inciting the war, Henderson nevertheless stressed that “the South chose to bring down in ruin the splendid fabric which their forefathers had constructed.” Similarly, the North’s modern lifestyle was no longer the object of British military thinkers’ criticism. The North’s urban life, lively entrepreneurship, and thriving businesses were the engine of American growth: “For more than fifty years after the election of the first President, while as yet the crust of European tradition overlaid the young shoots of democracy, the supremacy, social and political, of the great landowners of the South had been practically undisputed. But when the young Republic began to take its place amongst the nations, men found

39. Ibid., 409.
40. Wolseley, General Lee, 6, 5.
that the wealth and talents which led it forward belonged as much to the busy cities of New England as to the plantations of Virginia and the Carolinas." The northern spirit, rather than the southern, made the United States a modern nation. By the turn of the century, British military men were far less critical of American democracy, too, and mass, untrained armies—which they had blamed during the war for the conflict's unrestricted character. P. H. Dalbiac, a former officer and Conservative MP, wrote in his 1911 book about the Chancellorsville and Gettysburg campaigns, "From the first they [both northern and southern soldiers] showed themselves capable of taking punishment with the penitence and endurance of trained soldiers; and the enormous percentage of losses suffered by both sides without demoralisation teaches us what can be expected from armies of citizen soldiers, when called upon to do their duty in defence of their homes and the belongings which are dear to them." A democratic people's army, which the North traditionally represented and which appalled British observers in the 1860s, was not necessarily perceived as impractical by the 1910s. Moreover, Dalbiac ascribed mass democracy and a people's army not solely to the North but to both armies. Between the 1880s and 1910s, Britons' praise of the Old South and its romantic way of life did not overshadow their admiration of the North's struggle to preserve American unity, modernity, and democracy.

By the interwar period, the Civil War had been rooted in British memory as the conflict that gave birth to the modern United States and put it on its course to world dominance. During and after the Great War, that United States reached closer to Britain than it had ever before, politically, militarily, financially, and even physically, when over a million American soldiers had passed through Britain. Liddell Hart and Fuller noted the ascendancy of the

42. Henderson, Stonewall Jackson and the American Civil War, 1:82, 84.
United States and its increased bearing on their lives. As Azar Gat has shown, Liddell Hart’s concern in the 1930s that America would inherit Britain’s place on the global stage led him to warn that another war with Germany “would result in the subservience of Britain to the United States and in the end of the Empire.”\footnote{Azar Gat, \textit{Fascist and Liberal Vision of War, Fuller, Liddell Hart, Douhet, and Other Modernists} (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998), 187.} The United States’ expanding presence in Britain and its rise to global power drove Liddell Hart and Fuller to explain how and what kind of America the Civil War had created. Fuller acknowledged that his visit to the United States in 1924 was the source of his interest in the Civil War. While both military thinkers may have been compelled to study and comment on the United States, their views on it and thus of the Civil War differ.

Liddell Hart was critical of contemporary America, as reflected in his influential 1930 biography of Gen. William T. Sherman, who was more than just a military hero to him. In writing the biography, Liddell Hart produced arguments that went beyond the military sphere. He repeatedly stated that he saw the general as the embodiment of American identity and culture. “The man is William Tecumseh Sherman,” he wrote, “who, by the general recognition...”
of all who met him was the most original genius of the American Civil War. And who, in the same breath, is often described as 'the typical American.'” Liddell Hart was equally attracted to Sherman’s importance as an American as to his generalship. Furthermore, his motivation for writing Sherman’s biography was “to give the European reader a clue to the better understanding of the American character as it has evolved from its ‘prototype.’” Through Sherman’s character, Liddell Hart sought to observe the modern United States.

In the biography and other publications, Liddell Hart described what made Sherman “the typical American.” It was his modern northern character: he was rough, stubborn, nonconformist, unsentimental, and realistic and lacked any pretense. He was a fast-talking compulsive smoker who attached no importance to appearance, to which his unkempt hair and beard attested, a believer in hard work as the key to success, and he possessed a businessman’s eye on every aspect of life. At the same time, however, Liddell Hart also criticized traditionally northern characteristics, such as unchecked democracy, mob rule, aggressive capitalism, and hollow enthusiasm over war. “Despite the tempestuousness of his speech and manner,” Liddell Hart noted, “Sherman was no ardent cavalier, to be swept away in a surge of martial enthusiasm and popular excitement to a gallant but useless sacrifice.” Elsewhere, he described how Sherman ran his business under a strict, coherent moral rule and quotes him saying, “I know this is not modern banking but better to be honest.”

Indeed, there is no reason to assume that Liddell Hart sought in Sherman a channel to express his pro-northern sentiments. Although it never materialized, Liddell Hart’s private papers disclose that in the early 1930s, shortly after he published Sherman’s biography, he contemplated a project on Confederate general John C. Pemberton, whose life and activity in the war he found fascinating. A close look at Liddell Hart’s depiction of Sherman reveals how traditional, premodern and un-revolutionary, indeed “un-northern” this “typical American” actually was.

In Liddell Hart’s work, Sherman was a symbol of the early republic that was lost in the Civil War. To illustrate this, he portrayed Sherman as the savior of


47. See Liddell Hart, Sherman, 15–20, 38–39, 65, 75, 70–71, 9. On Sherman’s smoking habits and unkempt appearance, see Liddell Hart in an outline for a lecture at Schools of Engineering, Chatham from Nov. 1932, in LH 12/1932/4b, LHCMA.


49. LH 15/1/39, LHCMA.
the country his ancestors had created almost a century before the Civil War when they signed the Declaration of Independence. In addition, Liddell Hart distanced Sherman from the United States of his time and was thus able to look critically on post–Civil War America. In the preface to the biography, he stated that other than clarifying the United States for the European reader, Sherman’s story would “give the American reader the opportunity of testing, by the acid of Sherman, the purity of the present product and how far reality corresponds with the ideal set up by the most realistic of idealists.”

Liddell Hart’s criticism of contemporary America and what he considered its major drawbacks appear in his description of Sherman’s constant clashes with his contemporaries in the North. According to Liddell Hart, Sherman failed miserably in two main areas that illustrate the general’s alienation from his own country and time: in his relations with northern politicians and the public. Liddell Hart described how, on the one hand, Sherman’s superiors unjustly deplored him because of his scorn and inability to cope with their ignorance and populism (including Lincoln’s in the early stages of the war). On the other hand, the northern general’s hatred of the mob, his petulance and irascibility toward the press, and failure to manipulate the masses meant that he was also under constant attack from below. Sherman’s “‘press complex’ ousted his reason,” Liddell Hart wrote. “Thus it is not surprising that he soon suffered a counter-blast.” Thus, when the Civil War created a nation forged in the image of the triumphant North, it gave rise to mediocre politicians and furnished the public with exaggerated political power through the mass democracy.

Liddell Hart analyzed the Civil War through the prism of his understanding of the Great War’s impact on British politics and society. Liddell Hart thought Britain had veered sharply from its political tradition during, after, and, above all, because of the war. For example, political tradition had given way to un-British ideas based on the masses: democracy, liberalism, egalitarianism and statism. By contrast, he argued, British democracy “is far from attaining equality for its individual members. At the same time, it embodies ideas which go much further, and mean much more. . . . Our nation’s identity is based on individual freedom and volunteering.”

50. Liddell Hart, Sherman, 11.
52. An extract from the transcript of the BBC Radio show Questions in the Air, aired on April 18, 1939, LH 12/1939, LHCMA. For the roots of Liddell Hart’s liberal thought, see Gat, Fascist and Liberal Visions of Wars.
reproof was not unsubstantiated, since the Great War did intensify patriotic feelings, and to some degree the 1920s and 1930s did see the rise of mass democracy, British nationalism, and bureaucratic-statist ideas, the world war also affirmed traditional British perceptions of themselves, best expressed by the British people's voluntary sacrifice of their individual freedom for the common good in times of national emergency.53 Even conscription, which Liddell Hart severely criticized as a statist measure and thus un-British, involved much local and voluntary, “typically British” activity.54 However, in Liddell Hart’s mind—like in the minds of many in postwar Britain—the world war had created an awareness of the gap between the old, quiet, stable world and the chaotic, modern one.55 Unlike their Edwardian predecessors, who emphasized continuity in history and looked hopefully to the future for constant improvement rather than to the past with nostalgia, many interwar intellectuals believed they were no longer part of the continuation of their history but instead had been torn away from it.56 Bridging the gap between the old and new in British life, Liddell Hart’s choice was clear. He repeatedly called upon the British people to return to the tradition of freedom, inspiration, and creativity, because “this has been the source of our national vitality.”57 He considered himself the defender of British tradition in a changing world and, like Sherman as he portrayed the man, he thought he was losing the battle. In an open letter in 1932, for example, he movingly asked, “Why


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do you say that my book is running down everything British?"58 And in 1951 he confessed to Luvaas that after 1940 he felt as if he lived in a country that no longer understood him.59 The American Civil War was pregnant with meaning for him, because it had destroyed an old, orderly nation and on its ruins had constructed a new, chaotic, and decadent one.

Fuller’s view of the United States differed from Liddell Hart’s. On the one hand, he was unabashedly critical of the contemporary United States, arguably more so than Liddell Hart. Certainly he was clearer and more forthright about it. In his Empire Unity and Defence (1934), for example, he fulminated against the United States for undermining Britain’s naval power and decried its isolationist policy and protectionist economy.60 On the other hand, he regarded the United States as the great hope for Western civilization. He first presented his views of the United States outspokenly in Atlantis: America and the Future, an essay he published upon his return from his first visit there in 1924.61 This visit was the source of his interest in the American Civil War; therefore Atlantis, though largely forgotten today, is a key to understanding Fuller’s views on the United States and his interest in its Civil War and the connection between them.

In Atlantis, Fuller launched a multipronged assault on the contemporary United States, depicting the typical American as brutal, grotesque, and despicable. He argued, for example, that Americans were big people with big wallets but small brains, and that ethical conduct, values, and beauty were meaningless to the average American—who cared only for property, ownership, and material goods. All of America’s notorious characteristics, he contended, were by-products of nationalism and industrialisation, two evils of which the United States was both product of and generator. He wrote, “Her birth as a nation does not date from 1776, but from 1769, the date when James Watt produced his first pumping engine.”62 In a similar vein, he noted that the birth of the spirit of nationalism dated “even more truly from the signing of the Declaration of

59. Liddell Hart to Jay Luvaas, Sept. 3, 1951, LH 1/465 part 1, LCHMA.
Independence on July 4, 1776, than from the storming of the Bastille on July 14, thirteen years later.” Fuller viewed the United States through his idiosyncratic ideological lens. Influenced by trends of fascist thinking and a Hegelian interpretation of history, he perceived civilization as progressing dialectically from one stage to the next. Each phase of development was an improvement on the previous one but still largely defective and thus doomed to create forces that would ultimately undermine and destroy it. War, Fuller argued, was the principal means by which progress had been made throughout history. Observing his contemporary world, he claimed that the French and Industrial Revolutions were the major turning points in history because they had carried civilization from a pre-national stage to the current national stage. Accordingly, the ills of this stage were nationalism and its by-product, mass democracy. Fuller despised both and often regarded them as interchangeable. He eagerly anticipated the next phase in civilization’s development, which he saw as the international era. Thus, interwar America, as the embodiment of materialism, immorality, mob rule, and mediocrity or, in other words, as the generator and foremost emblem of the nationalistic era, held a despicable position in Fuller’s historical worldview.

Based on his dialectic interpretation of history, however, Fuller also saw America as a source of hope for Western civilization and concluded Atlantis by noting, “what Rome did produce was a great heroic race. Today I believe that the germs of such race lie embedded in the materialism of America.” He believed that out of American materialism, anarchy, and lawlessness a great and united people might emerge dialectically that would constitute a new global empire. Empowered by the forces of youth and discontent, which...
he admired, Fuller envisioned in 1924 that the “Atlantides will vanish and become true Americans” in the near future.\(^6^8\) That is, he hoped to see the United States evolve into a world power that would champion universal unity and global integration. For him, this was the essence of the American spirit, and by the 1920s, he believed that the United States was already sufficiently powerful to fulfill its destiny.

Fuller’s optimism was based on his assessment that the Civil War, owing to the Union’s victory, had transferred the United States from its premodern stage to the modern stage of development. Unlike Liddell Hart, he was fascinated by the future American republic rather than by the republic of the past. And unlike Liddell Hart, he loathed the pre–Civil War United States. For example, Fuller wrote scornfully of Lee, who “belonged to the eighteenth century—to the agricultural age of history.”\(^6^9\) What Liddell Hart saw as the romantic era of the Declaration of Independence, the idealized era of Sherman’s ancestors, Fuller saw as an age destined to be relegated to history’s junkyard. Therefore, contrary to Liddell Hart, he endorsed northern generals without challenging the view that they were symbols of modernism, brutality, and democracy. In fact, it was precisely for this reason that Fuller admired them. He, too, regarded Sherman as the face of the United States, not, however, because the northern general represented America’s past, but because he was “out-and-out typical of the new America at this time emerging from out of the chrysalis of the old. This, as we shall see, is true, because he broke away from all the conventions of nineteenth-century warfare, took the public into his confidence, at heart despised the people, and, above all, the popular press, and with steel waged war as ruthless as Calvin had done with word.”\(^7^0\) It should be noted that while Fuller rejected the romantic views of the American past à la Liddell Hart, he also reviled the nation that emerged from the Civil War and anticipated its dialectic demise. This is what distinguishes Fuller from the pre-1914 generation of military thinkers, who generally admired the contemporary United States. In contrast to such views, Fuller perceived the Civil War as epitomizing the same spirit that would

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68. Ibid., 84. On Fuller’s admiration of the youthful and revolutionary spirit, see Brian Holden Reid, “You Don’t, or Not So Young?” The Frustrated Quest of Major General J. F. C. Fuller and Captain B. H. Liddell Hart,” *Journal of Military History* 73, no. 1 (2009): 149.
build the future America out of the ruins of his contemporary one, as it did between 1861 and 1865.

Liddell Hart and Fuller’s interpretations of the United States and the Civil War as a prism through which to understand America’s past, present, and future shaped the lessons they learned from war in general as the agent of social and political change. Although professionally the two historians had much in common, and drew similar tactical and strategic lessons from war, their opposing views on wars’ role in history, the United States, and the Civil War’s impact on American society led them to conflicting sociopolitical conclusions.

Professionally, Liddell Hart found Sherman and the Civil War conducive to lesson-learning because the northern general had superbly demonstrated the effects of modern warfare in the world’s first modern war. “The army which marched with Sherman from Atlanta to the Atlantic,” he wrote, “was probably the finest army . . . the modern world has seen.”71 Sherman proved the need for mobility, flexibility, self-reliance, and speed. Liddell Hart noted, for example, how Sherman, prior to leaving Atlanta on his march to the Atlantic, had kept the load carried by his troops to the barest minimum, thus rendering his force mobile and flexible.72 “Economy of force,” he argued, “was his [Sherman’s] ruling law.” Other lessons included the role of economic and psychological warfare, which Liddell Hart saw as crucial in defeating an enemy army, especially in a modern democratic country. Accordingly, he contended that Sherman’s march through the Carolinas was aimed primarily at spreading despair in the local population. Following Atlanta and Savannah, “it only remained to carry that impression into South Carolina and the fate of the Confederacy would be sealed.”73 All of the above were the foundations of Liddell Hart’s most cherished trademark—the strategy of the indirect approach.74 Simply put, this theory stressed that a general

71. Liddell Hart, Sherman, 344.
73. Liddell Hart, Sherman, 111, 359.
must avoid concentrating his strength and initiating attacks on the principal front against his enemy’s main force. Instead, he should look for alternative routes to the enemy’s most vulnerable points. Liddell Hart deduced from the American conflict that in the modern era “a frontal attack on an enemy in position became an almost hopeless venture.”

Fuller, too, drew lessons from the Civil War that he considered relevant to modern warfare. In line with his passion for technological innovation, he viewed the Civil War primarily as a lesson on the effect of new technology on the battlefield. He argued that the technologies that debuted in the Civil War had revolutionized the battlefield in a way that remained significant. Above all, he emphasized the introduction of modern ordnance and argued that “in 1861–1865 the rifle bullet was the lord of the battlefield as was the machine gun bullet in 1914–1918.” Fuller acknowledged that technological means frequently underwent modification, but argued that their tactical impact remained generally constant. Accordingly, the main lesson from the Civil War was that “the rifle had rendered the defence the stronger form of war.” Thus, frontal assaults had become futile, while indirect methods were all the more necessary. In his *Lectures on the Field Service Regulations II* (1931) he stressed, “Once a front can neither be turned nor broken . . . the true battle is shifted to the industrial areas; here lie the reserve forces which will ultimately win the war.” As for the tank’s contribution, one of Fuller’s main concerns, it was “a psychological, more so than a material weapon.”

Throughout his work, Fuller seems to echo Liddell Hart’s strategy of the indirect approach. Liddell Hart himself, reviewing Fuller’s *Lectures on the Field Service Regulations III* (1932), found the latter’s contentions “similar to

my 1928 argument on the strategy of indirect approach” and added, “Fuller’s adoption of it is a most valuable reinforcement.”81 This approach, however, should have put Fuller in a problematic position when choosing Grant as model and hero. Largely owing to Liddell Hart’s influence in 1930s Britain, Grant’s generalship became notoriously associated with bloody and fruitless frontal assaults, which contrasted with Sherman’s economical conduct. Assessing Fuller’s Grant and Lee (1933) in the English Review, Liddell Hart was pleased with the author’s criticism of Lee but disappointedly concluded, “If only he could analyse Grant in the same way.”82 In his Lectures on the Field Service Regulations II, Fuller seems to have endorsed Liddell Hart’s views: “The Germans were of opinion that numerical superiority was the decisive factor. . . . The German plan nearly succeeded not because it was a sound plan, it was not, for the entire forces of the empire were put into the front line, and all flexibility was lost. . . . In spite of the then recent lessons of the Russo-Japanese War, its controlling idea was the frontal attack of all armies on the battle of Cold Harbor pattern tried out by General Grant with disastrous results in 1864!”83 How, then, can Fuller’s inconsistency be understood? And why did Fuller choose Grant as a protagonist if the American general embodied a strategy he did not endorse? Fuller was interested not solely in Grant’s tactics but also in his political cause.

According to Fuller, because they failed to grasp the significance of the new technological developments, all the Civil War generals—including Grant—executed futile frontal attacks; however, Grant alone internalized Clausewitz’s maxim that war is the continuation of politics by other means, and Fuller argued that Grant’s conduct during the war was always guided by a higher policy.84 “Few generals,” Fuller wrote in his study of the events in Cold Harbor, “better understood the influence of politics on war than Grant.” He exempted Grant from being a “callous butcher” by emphasizing that political

84. Fuller, Generalship of Ulysses S. Grant, 359. On Fuller’s view of war as political instrument, see, for example, Fuller, Conduct of War, 63.
constraints had left him with little choice: “In reviewing Grant’s generalship during the last year of the war, it is all important to keep his object clearly in mind, and especially so because those who criticize his strategy and tactics frequently overlook it. It was to establish unity of strategical direction and to end the war in the shortest possible time, because, as we have seen, the political condition of the North brooked no delay.” With the approaching 1864 election and Lincoln’s reelection still far from certain, Fuller argued that Grant had no choice but to act directly and forcefully to provide the president with military achievements that could be leveraged into political capital. Furthermore, leading the effort to compel “the South to re-enter the Union,” Grant, more than any other Civil War general, brought unity and modernity to the United States by way of warfare. Fuller’s assessment of Sherman was as positive as could be expected. Sherman, of course, served the cause Fuller supported. Grant, however, was the general directly subordinate to the president and the latter’s executive agent in the battlefield, so he embodied Fuller’s ideal relationship between the political and military spheres as well as his vision of unity and modernity. Thus, Fuller perceived Grant as the embodiment of the American spirit that he so admired. “Each epoch,” he cited Sherman in his account of Grant, “creates its own agents, and General Grant more nearly than any other man impersonated the American character of 1861–65. He will stand, therefore, as the typical hero of the great Civil War.” If Grant made tactical blunders—as Fuller acknowledged—it mattered little; he turned to the general primarily for ideological reasons. Ultimately, Liddell Hart and Fuller drew opposing conclusions on the Civil War itself and on war in general as the agent of social and political change. Liddell Hart perceived that the Civil War brought chaos and a sociopolitical revolution to the United States through an unnecessary and tragic conflict. Sherman’s story taught that order alone brings the sought-after change, and wars should preserve, rather than alter, the status quo. Sherman’s “hatred of anarchy was not inspired by an abstract motive, but by the essentially practical one that only in a state of order are prosperity and progress possible,” Liddell Hart wrote. Contemporary America was Liddell Hart’s negative example. By comparison, Fuller held that the Civil War had been necessary

85. Fuller, Generalship of Ulysses S. Grant, 278, 362, 29.
86. Fuller, front matter, Generalship of Ulysses S. Grant, unpaginated.
87. Liddell Hart, Sherman, 440.
and beneficial. It proved “as nothing else could have, that South and North were interdependent.” By creating a basis for a “more perfect peace,” the war ensured that “within a generation of the reunion of the North and South . . . not only were the entire ravages of the war made good, but a prosperity was experienced totally undreamt of by the wildest visionary in 1861.” By making progress through war, Fuller concluded, the Americans “proved their war to have been a legitimate one.” Furthermore, in stark opposition to Liddell Hart, Fuller contended that the demise of the old American society was one of the war’s greatest accomplishments, and he hoped that the Great War would play the same role in the development of Europe. It was in this sense that Fuller found the Civil War a relevant source for lessons to contemporary Britons, indeed to Western civilization. “What this war was to America,” he said in 1929, “the World War will one day be to Europe. Both were creative impulses shattering what was obsolete and releasing things new . . . . Such are the two great stepping-stones of our age, and unless we set our feet firmly on the one we may slip on the other as we step forward to the conquest of destiny—the unity of the world.”

For Fuller, the Union’s victory demonstrated how wars enhance national unity, lead to modernity, and create the basis for prosperity and international power. Unlike Liddell Hart, he used the Civil War to advance a lesson about war’s role as an agent of progress and the United States as a positive example of this.

To sum up, unless the war’s impact on the United States is taken into consideration, it is hard to fully fathom its continuous appeal across the Atlantic. In his introduction to Wood and Edmonds’s famous 1905 account, Spencer Wilkinson wrote,

**The higher plane on which the history of a war ought to be and can be treated assumes as its material the completed work of the technical military historian, and upon that basis examines a war as an act in the historical sequence of the world’s life. It asks the questions: How did this war come about? What were the causes at stake? And what is the nature of the settlement produced? It is an exercise not of the military, but of the political or historical judgment. . . . It is because I am convinced that the true nature of war and its relation to national life can be learned from a study of the**

American Civil War as a whole, that I venture to commend to English readers [this work].

The Civil War’s place as a turning point in American history made it a hub that connected the lessons about the United States to war’s role in human activity and to tactics and strategy. British military intellectuals thus found it a wellspring of material because it integrated the basic elements of their contemporary world as well as their profession.
