

Superior Leadership:  
Who had it During the American Civil War?

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## Superior Leadership: Who had it During the American Civil War?

### Introduction

April 9, 1865. A polished and well put together general, along with two of his staff officers, meet a group of thirteen war weary men who are look as though they have been out in the wilderness for weeks on end. They meet by a court house Appomattox, Virginia to discuss terms of an agreement that will end the American Civil War. These thirteen rag-tag men are actually the victorious leaders of the Northern forces, including Ulysses S. Grant, while the other is the defeated Robert E. Lee.<sup>1</sup> Going against logic, the group of men who themselves look almost homeless have won and the sparkling general with petty officers were there as losers. The North's leaders had been chasing down Lee's army into a surrender and have finally won their cause. The War is over and the North won. The leaders from the North prevailed over those in the South. However, were they really superior leaders? Many Historians and educators alike would agree that both sides during this War did in fact have great leadership, but which side had the best and superior leadership? Based on how they led as a servant and put others ahead of themselves, managed organizations, and managed innovations the North's leadership during the American Civil War was superior to that of the South's.

### Leadership Defined

Superior leadership is exemplified by two main aspects. In order to have great leadership, one must show the characteristics of a servant's attitude and be able to manage well. In one of his books regarding leadership, best-selling author and leadership consultant Simon Sinek argued that the greatest characteristic that sets a great leader apart from that of a good leader, is how they act around those they are leading. It comes down to the servant leadership. In *Leaders Eat*

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1. Bill O'Reilly and Martin Dugard, *Killing Lincoln: The Shocking Assassination that Changed America Forever* (New York: Henry Holt Publishers, 2011), 81.

*Last*, Sinek states that, “Great leaders prioritize the well-being of their people.”<sup>2</sup> In other words, the most important thing to a great leader, is those he serves. The great leaders show empathy towards those they lead. Just as the title of his book states, these great leaders eat and are served last. “A leader’s greatest asset (is) the empathy they have for the men on the ground.”<sup>3</sup>

The other main aspect of great leaders is their ability to manage. This argument mainly comes from Frank Arnold, the CEO of a leading management/leadership consultant firm. He argues that great leaders are great because they can manage organizations and innovation well.<sup>4</sup> So what does this look like? Managing organizations mainly deals with how one manages the organization and the central ideas behind it, along with the people that make up the organization. Managing an organization is done most effectively by keeping most people in the organization satisfied and thus helping the organization accomplish its goals. Managing innovation deals with change and setbacks along the journey towards a goal. How does one deal with new problems and strategies that arise within the organization and people? A superior leader manages these changes from the norm, both positive and negative, well and makes the organization benefit from them.

### **Leader as the Servant**

Abraham Lincoln best exemplifies this characteristic during the Civil War more than any other leader. He was a man of the people. He not only led them, but was with them. A great example of this is a photo found in Time Magazine’s archives (See Figure B).<sup>5</sup> In this photo Lincoln is out with his soldiers. He is not simply sitting back at the White House sipping tea.

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2. Simon Sinek, *Leaders Eat Last* (New York: Penguin Publishing Group, 2014), 8.

3. Ibid.

4. Frank Arnold, *What Makes Great Leaders Great* (New York: McGraw Hill Press, 2012), xix.

5. Time Magazine, “Abraham Lincoln Photo.” *Time Topics – Abraham Lincoln*, <http://img.timeinc.net/time/daily/2005/0506/tent0625.jpg> (accessed October 20, 2015).

Yes, he may have been close to the tent for security measures and may have been sipping his tea only moments ago in the tent, but there is still something to be seen here. He is being a man of the people and having conversations with his soldiers. Lincoln is making sure his soldiers know he truly cares about them and not only about the politics of the War. He is making sure, to the best of his ability, that their needs are met first by having conversations and interacting with them, while still remaining smart and safe. In his work that addresses how politicians affect the lives around themselves, political science expert Larry Arnhart states that, “Lincoln was a man of extraordinary ambition who, by his own testimony, wanted to carry out some great political deed that not only won him immortal glory, but made all around him benefit.”<sup>6</sup> Lincoln truly cared about all of those around him and that is what helps make him a superior leader.

There also needs to something said here about the Northern generals. Yes, Robert E. Lee was the best general throughout the entirety of the War, but the North’s generals as a whole had superior leadership due to how they acted as servants. They kept their soldiers first and even gave them the best clothing or equipment. Seen by the scene described in the introduction and in O’Reilly/Dugard’s book, the Northern generals did not always have the best equipment or uniforms, but made sure their soldiers were taken care of while they all worked hard. Lee did not always do this, as he tended to dress pretty and used special swords.<sup>7</sup> The best example of this servant leadership in the North was Ulysses S. Grant himself. He was always thinking of others and wanted the best for his soldiers, even to the point where he would give them better equipment that made his experience on the battlefield more difficult than it had to be. At the beginning of his military career, this fact hurt his chances on becoming a leading soldier. In her

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6. Larry Arnhart, “Biopolitical Science,” *Politics and Life Sciences* 29, no. 1 (March 2010): 34.

7. Bill O’Reilly and Martin Dugard, *Killing Lincoln: The Shocking Assassination that Changed America Forever* (New York: Henry Holt Publishers, 2011), 81-82.

article discussing Grant as American figure, Historian Sheila Cappel said, “He was sensitive to others and their needs. His superiors could not conceive of a successful career while he took the last of all given equipment.”<sup>8</sup> Grant went to the point of jeopardizing his whole militaristic career to be a servant leader. That truly shows it was simply part of who he was.

On the other side, Jefferson Davis may have cared about many around him, but still ignored the fact that some around him were human people. In a memoir he published after the Civil War, Davis stated, “Persons of the African race were not, and could be, acknowledged as part of the people or citizens.”<sup>9</sup> He clearly did not see African-Americans as an equal. If a leader does not even view everyone as equal humans, how can he serve them all? That is simply not possibly, and shows how Jefferson Davis did not show servant leadership towards all under his leadership. As seen by his famous debates with Stephen Douglas, Lincoln may not have been fighting this war solely based on the racial equality and also had some racist tendencies as well. However, he still cared about African-American people as humans. He went to the lengths of even making a large political statement, and signing into effect the Emancipation Proclamation. He knew that this document would not have an immediate and real impact, but he would not have said in it, “All persons...will recognize and maintain the freedoms of all”<sup>10</sup> if he was a racist. He truly cared about others and led by serving every single one of them.

### **Managing Organization Along with Innovation**

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8. Sheila Cappel. “Lessons in Leadership: Ulysses S. Grant” (master’s thesis, Rollins College, 2012), 6-18.

9. Jefferson Davis, *The Rise and Fall of the Confederate Government* (D. Appleton and Company, 1881), 70.

10. Milestone Documents, “Emancipation Proclamation,” *Milestone Documents*, <http://www.milestonedocuments.com/documents/view/emancipation-proclamation/text> (accessed October 20, 2015)

Organizations as a whole can be difficult to manage effectively. At war time, this is taken to whole new level. During the Civil War, the North managed their organization and innovation better than the South did. First off, the North had a much larger organization to manage, as they had about a two to one soldier advantage over the South. This can be seen as a great tactical advantage, but in leadership terms it is a greater difficulty. There are now twice as many people within the organization of the army to manage and keep happy while pushing on towards a main goal. The North's leadership however, did exactly that. Seen by the journal of a Union soldier, Elisha Hunt Rhodes. It states, "The nights are cold, the men spend a good deal of the night about huge campfires. But we do not complain, as it is all for the Union. The War will not end until the North wakes up" and "Tonight I am an officer and my men ask the same favor of me. It seems to me right that officers should rise from the ranks, for only such can sympathize with the private soldiers."<sup>11</sup> The Union troops remained optimistic during trials, as their leaders managed them well enough to get them to buy in to the main goal of keeping the Union together and helping the North win. The soldiers were so bought into the goal of victory, that they knew the leaders and those being picked for those positions were the correct ones. There was no doubt in Union soldiers mind that their leaders were for them and would lead them to victory. Some may call this brainwash, but this is simply a leadership managing the organization positively. The leaders were not acting as puppet masters doing whatever they pleased with their soldiers, but keeping their minds on the goal. They are kept all involved compliant/happy and their minds on the main goal of the organization, not the trials it faces at times..

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11. Milestone Documents, "Elisha Hunt Rhodes: Civil War Diary of a Union Soldier," *Milestone Documents*, <http://www.milestonedocuments.com/documents/view/elisha-hunt-rhodes-civil-war-diary-of-a-union-soldier/text> (accessed October 20, 2015)

The South however, did not manage its organization as well. In the letters of a Confederate officer, it states, “I am now just disengaged...I find that Soldiers have to be watched very closely and some of them have to be punished to make them do their duty.”<sup>12</sup> This shows the Southern soldiers were not always willing to take up tasks, as they need to be punished into doing their duties. The Southern leaders lacked the ability to manage them and keep their mind on the organization’s goal, even to the point that one of the officers himself felt disengaged. The Southern fighters seem to be more focused on themselves and their trials, and not the common goal, caused by leadership lacking management.

After the managing of the organization takes place, the superior leaders manage innovation, or the new items that are impacting the organization’s event for the first time. In the case of the American Civil War, the one of major innovations is the railroad. Many Historians argue that this is the key object that secured the Northern victory. They simply had more tracks and connections to carry items and people places (See Figure A).<sup>13</sup> This could mean that the North’s leaders were not better leaders, they simply had more of resources and innovation. Yet however, these leaders still had to manage that innovation. The South could have managed innovation better earlier on and built more tracks, but they did not. They lacked innovation to even manage, but did not manage what they had well, as Northern troops destroyed many of the South’s railways. Thus, the North had more innovation to manage, and did so more effectively as they used the railroad to their advantage and had a greater percentage of railway left after the War. In a publication by *American-Rails* it says “The North fully understood the importance of

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12. Milestone Documents, “James B. Griffin: Letters of a Confederate Soldier,” *Milestone Documents*, <http://www.milestonedocuments.com/documents/view/james-b.-griffin-letters-of-a-confederate-officer/text> (accessed October 20, 2015)

13. Humboldt State University’s Department of History, “1860 United States Railroads,” *Industrialization, Urbanization, and Immigration in the Gilded Age*, <http://users.humboldt.edu/ogayle/Hist%2011%20Images/RR1880.jpg> (accessed October 20, 2015)



railroads and the mobility they offered...while the South never effectively harnessed its railroads, although it being possible.”<sup>14</sup> The South had opportunities to have the railroad and use it for their advantage, but they simply did not manage the innovation like the North did. The North’s leaders figured out how to manage the new innovation and use it for their benefit. Thus, helping them be superior leaders.

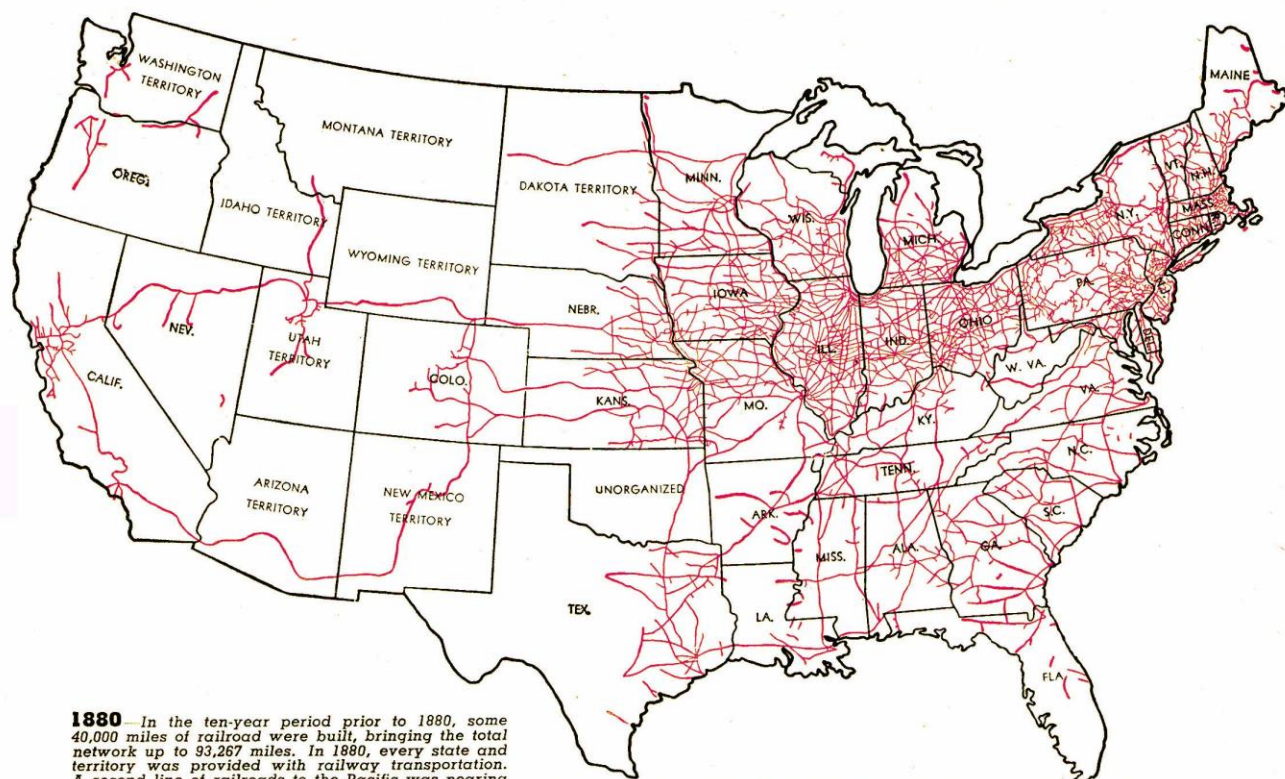
### **Conclusion**

Ultimately, the North had superior leadership over the South during the American Civil War based on how they managed innovation, managed their organization, and acted as servant leaders. Although the South’s leaders were good and exemplified some these characteristics, the North’s leaders did them more effectively and showed them throughout all of their ranks. The North’s leaders as a whole managed the innovation of the railroad well by using for their militaristic and organizational advantage. They effectively managed their organization, or army, by keeping morale high and soldier’s minds on the goal of victory, not the pain/suffering of war. They also then displayed servant leadership through figures like Grant and Lincoln, who were concerned with the needs of other before themselves. The South and its leaders did some of these, but no to the extent of the North, as they got a little too caught up in themselves at times and did not manage their innovation and organizations as well as they could have. Overall, the North had the superior leadership during the American Civil War and that helped them gain victory. Thus in turn, preserving the Union and helping form the world as we know it today.

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14. American-Rails, “Railroads in the Civil War,” *Railroad History*. <http://www.american-rails.com/railroads-in-the-civil-war.html> (accessed November 27, 2015)

Figure A



**1880**—In the ten-year period prior to 1880, some 40,000 miles of railroad were built, bringing the total network up to 93,267 miles. In 1880, every state and territory was provided with railway transportation. A second line of railroads to the Pacific was nearing completion, and other transcontinental railroads were under construction. Railway development was exerting a powerful influence upon immigration and agricultural and industrial growth throughout the country.

**Figure B**

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