

## The Costs of the Civil War- An Accounting

As the 150<sup>th</sup> commemoration of the Civil War draws to a close, let's review what 4 years of war cost in casualties and national treasure. In nearly 10,500 recorded military actions with 2,154, occurring in Virginia, casualties are estimated to have totaled a minimum of 1.1 million dead, wounded or missing. According to the War Department known deaths totaled about 360,222 for the Union and an estimated 262,804 for the Confederacy. Known wounded from both sides totaled 471,427. More recent research and analyses place the total number of dead much higher, at up to 800,000.

Although the costs to the Confederate government for financing the war are difficult to determine, but the funded debt for the war exceeded \$712 million. Modern economists estimate the direct costs, including expenditures by the state governments, casualty losses of men on the field and destruction of property came to \$3.3 billion in 1860 dollars. Slave owners lost an estimated \$2 million when their slaves were freed. Federal expenditures also exceeded \$3 billion, but does not include postwar pensions, interest and other costs that add to the final sum. In 2014 the federal government was still paying a pension to the elderly daughter of a Union veteran.<sup>1</sup>

But the Civil War also had an environmental impact that only now a rising school of historians is chronicling how the war not only degraded the land, but how it altered nature itself with ramifications that persist to this very day, as written in the article, "The Civil War's Environmental Impact", by Ted Widmer, the editor of the series, "The New York Times Disunion: Modern Historians Revisit and Reconsider the Civil War from Lincoln's Election to the Emancipation Proclamation".<sup>2</sup>

The most obvious effects on the environment took place in the theaters of the war, where the armies scoured the land for food, shelter and materials or destroyed what could aid the enemy, as Sherman's March to the Sea or Sheridan's Shenandoah Campaign. It is estimated that over the course of the war 2,000,000 trees were cut down for the wood needed to cook, for communication, build roads, bridges and railroads and to warm themselves. This in itself had a consequence that the soldiers were not even aware of, as insects thrived in the camps. Because the armies had destroyed the forest habitats of birds, bats and other predators that kept the pest population down, as a result more than 1.3 million Union soldiers alone were affected by mosquito-borne illnesses as malaria and yellow fever. The unsanitary camps as designed with fetid latrines and impure water attracted them even more, helping to weaken the ranks more than the fighting.

Less obvious changes to the environment that are still being felt were the effects of surge in the use of fossil fuels as oil and coal to fuel the production of factories and railroad needs to provide the great amount of arms and other military needs of a Union mobilizing the war effort and fighting the war itself. The surge in the use of fossil fuels altered the American economy

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1 America's Civil War, Vol. 28, No. 2, pgs. 32-37, "War's Bitter End", Winston Broom

2 New York Times, Disunion series, November 15, 2014

permanently, more so in the North than the South. The overwhelming need to win the war far outweighed any thought or even known aftereffects of such heavy reliance and use on future generations. Although in 1859 John Tyndall, an Irish scientist, first tried to explain the effects of heat trapping gasses in the Earth's atmosphere caused by the use of fossil fuels.

The use of railroads to transport supplies and troops played a major role for the Union's victory. Railroads, especially, the completion of the transcontinental railroad also played a major role in impacting the environment in supplying demand of goods and transporting people across a vast unified country. Although more than a million horses and mules were casualties of the war, the losses in their species was not sustained. But thousands of veterans returned home with their arms or were easily supplied by the arms industry strengthened by the war effort. The National Rifle Association was founded by two Union veterans in 1871 to encourage shooting competitions and a culture of game shooting that spread quickly during the years when supply and demand was quickly met by an infra-structure of railroads that connected the entire country. Passenger pigeons were a particular delicacy in demand. One hunt in Wisconsin in 1871 alone killed 1.5 million pigeons. The last known passenger pigeon died on September 1, 1914 just before WWI began.

In order to meet the demand for building materials for rebuilding after the war and to need the demand caused by westward migration. Between the years 1859- 1879 the consumption of wood doubled with the loss of roughly 300,000 acres of forest cut down each year. When the forests of the upper Mid-West were exhausted, the northern industry interests turned to the South to meet the demand, reducing its woodlands by 40 percent over the next generation.

But the scars left upon the landscape because of the war, also planted the seeds for a movement to preserve what was left. Henry David Thoreau wrote passionately about the "war on the wilderness" that he saw all around him. Lincoln's minister to Italy, George Perkins Marsh, himself a business man in the lumber industry, wrote, "Man and Nature" that extolled nature's life-giving properties, from soil improvement to species diversification to flood prevention. He worried about a consumerist mentality conducting its own "war" against nature with no thought to its consequences, "Man has too long forgotten that the earth was given to him for usufruct (the right to use or enjoy something) alone, not for consumption, still less for profligate waste"

The government finally, though ever so slowly, heard these voices. On June 30, 1864 President Lincoln signed a bill to set aside land that would become Yosemite National Park that began the movement to set aside federal land for such purposes. In 2016 the National Park Service will celebrate its 100 year anniversary. Even the Union veterans of the war had a hand in this movement when they spearheaded efforts to preserve the battlegrounds on which they fought to commemorate their heroic deeds and in memory of fallen comrades. It is ironic that the desolate fields of battle are now preserved where nature can be best seen and savored. These battlefields promote a reverence for the land as well as the history that have become shrines to conservation.

Widmer ends his essay with an intriguing challenge to those who teach the history of the Civil War, to do so as when we would walk the battlefields, being also conscious of the environment and great relevance of nature to the Civil War. “As Lincoln said, government of the people did not perish from the earth. Let’s hope that the earth does not perish from the people”...or caused by the people.

Your Obedient Servant,

*Irving Moy*