

Food, Feed and Foreign Policy

An Essay by Ralph E. Baumheckel

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It was spring. Farmers in America were hard at work taking advantage of the good weather; but, many were very apprehensive because there was too much talk about the possibility of war. It was the spring of 1861. John Deere plows were turning the prairie sod. Cyrus McCormick's Company built 5,000 reapers for sale that year; but, they sold slowly; there was too much war talk.

If there is real concern about the prospect of war in the spring of 1861, why raise the subject of John Deere plows and McCormick reapers? There is good reason. According to the 1860 census, half of the 31½ million people in America at that time lived on farms. Half of all workers were on farms. One fourth of all farm families owned the land they tilled. Agriculture was a significant factor in America's domestic economy, social fabric and foreign policy. Two thirds of all United States exports were from agriculture and because of cotton, the South accounted for 59% of the export trade. By early April the South had most of their crops in ground and the North was not far behind. **Then on April 12, 1861 Fort Sumter was fired upon.** Everything changed, including agriculture.

It is not the purpose of this essay to discuss American politics before or after April 12, 1861 and definitely not to discuss the military battles and strategy of America's most bloody conflict, the War Between the States. This essay will be confined to the vital role agriculture had in the execution of the war and the timing of the final surrender at Appomattox Courthouse Virginia, April 9, 1865. Agriculture during the Civil War period in the North is covered first followed by the agricultural situation in the South during that disastrous period in American history.

Agriculture and Northern Diversity

One of the great strengths of agriculture in the North was diversity. There were large numbers of small farms that, for the times, were relatively, intensively developed and there was less waste and unused land on these farms than in the South. The South had four times as many slaves as the North had hired hands, but the North made greater use of labor saving machinery. The North had only a few bonanza farms as large as southern plantations, but they were not typical. Farm size in the states of New York, Pennsylvania and Ohio averaged around 110 acres while farms in the South, depending on the state, were three to five times larger than the average Northern farm. For the most part, Northeastern farmers practiced an even more diversified style of farming that resulted in a near subsistence style of farming with only a little surplus to sell.

On the eve of Civil War, the North had two and one half times more miles of rail road track than the South and much of this came close to many Northern farms. With the change in transportation, many Northern farmers began selling more produce off of the farm. Butter, even milk, fruit, vegetables and other commodities were shipped to distant cities. The change in market opportunities brought improved economics to many farm producers.

The following list of livestock and crop resources of the North illustrates the region's agricultural diversity and strengths:

Cattle Feeding: The practice of cattle feeding had developed in the North before the war because of improved transportation. Cattle were shipped from railheads like: Springfield, Peoria, Bloomington and Decatur, Illinois; Indianapolis and Lafayette, Indiana; Chillicothe and Columbus, Ohio.

Beef Cattle and Hog: Cattle and hog production in the North during the war increased to meet domestic demand and export. The export of ham and bacon increased 6 fold, lard and tallow increased 4 fold, but pork decreased by half. Hogs in 1860 sold for 6 cents/lb.; four years later, war inflation had increased hog prices 9 fold to 52 cents/lb. However, the North's supply of hogs and fed cattle was sharply reduced by the end of the war as feed became short. High hog cholera losses occurred within a 100 mile radius of Cincinnati, Ohio in 1861 and again in the winter of 1863-64 and impacted the supply of pork.

The following is a personal story about hog production in the North in the 1800's.

The writer's grandfather, Martin Baumheckel, left Germany, escaped into France, came to the United States and arrived in New Orleans in 1848. From there he took a steamboat up the Mississippi and Ohio rivers to Cincinnati, Ohio. The city was called Pork-o-polis because it was the pork-packing capital of the United States. He was age 18 and a cooper, a barrel maker, by trade; he made barrels to pack pork. When the Federals closed the Mississippi River, it stopped trade south of Cincinnati and Louisville and as a result, Chicago replaced Cincinnati as the great hog-packing center of the country.

Dairy: Dairy farmers in the North made butter and cheese and sold a little fluid milk locally. There were dairies in – I emphasize in - many cities. Example: New York City had 814 Breweries or Distilleries in 1865 and 13,000 cows. Slop or swill dairies fed the brewers spent grains. Bad conditions were wide spread and coupled with the use of this poor quality feed resulted in much unhealthy milk. When the railroads started to haul healthy country milk up to as far as 100 miles to the cities, they put the swill dairies out of business. Dairy farming was the salvation of farmers in the Northeast because it was suited to small farms, did not require a lot of farm equipment and much of the work could be done by women if the men went to war. Plus, many urban markets were nearby. In 1859 Gail Borden, Wassaic New York and Burrville Connecticut, established factories to produce pure, quality controlled, condensed milk. This development made it possible for the Federal Government to supply healthy, condensed milk for field rations and for hospitals.

Sheep: Production of sheep by 1860 in the North had declined and sheep production moved west. Because of this, the Union was heavenly dependent on wool and woolen goods imports.

Tobacco: If the border states remained loyal, 62% of the 1859 tobacco capacity would be in the North. Tobacco was a great cash income crop for Northern farmers and areas like the Connecticut River Valley had high yields and high quality. Improved income expanded Northern tobacco use and also increased export!

Sugar: Sources of sugar in the North were beet sugar, sorghum and maple sugar (Maple sugar was a minor factor because of too much labor). Sorghum production was heavenly promoted at the start of the war, but it was not successful.

Horses and Mules: Draft animals were vital to the war. The Northern War Department purchased ½ million horses and ¼ million mules which equaled 10% of the northern horse population and an even larger share of the Northern mule population. Farm machines required draft animals, not oxen, for power and major shortages of horses and mules became serious.

Corn and Wheat: The North had an enormous crop of corn in 1860. Ohio's corn crop was a third larger than the good corn crop of 1859. Another abundant crop was harvested in 1862; the North had corn for food and feed and for export. The increase in export of corn and cornmeal, however, did not make up for the loss of the Southern market when the Mississippi river was closed. The result was a big carryover and resulting low prices! The poor crop of 1863 was followed by a normal crop in 1864 and an excellent crop the following year. Between 1861 and 1865, northern railroads laid 1,800 miles of track in the Western States and all were major wheat producers; the North had wheat. I will discuss the important subject of wheat in another section of the essay.

Northern Substitution: As discussed above, the North was not totally self sufficient in agriculture. Actions by Northern institutions and the Federal Government attempted to deal with the problem. In 1862 Congress approved \$3,000 for cotton seed to encourage production; but, the idea was oversold and there was little success at first. As the war progressed; however, much cotton production did move north. The *LaCrosse Republican* of March 3, 1863 proclaimed, "Let Northern sorghum supersede New Orleans sugar, Northern flax take the place of Southern cotton and Northern tobacco drive out 'The Dixie Weed'."

Manpower: The five states of the "Old Northwest": Michigan, Wisconsin, Illinois, Indiana and Ohio had a population of 6.8 million. These states sent about 680,000 men, 10% of their population, to the Northern army and half of farm families in the North provided men to the military. There were about 90,000 immigrants each year in 1861 and 1862. By the end of the conflict, there were 800,000 immigrants in total. Many of the immigrants were farm laborers and a valuable labor reservoir that helped make up for the farm labor shortage caused by those who were in uniform. Mechanization was one of assets of the North that contributed to northern agricultural productivity during the war in spite of the loss of farm labor to the Northern Army.

Mechanization: Cyrus Hall McCormick of Virginia's Shenandoah Valley is generally accepted as the inventor of the reaper. He demonstrated his reaper in 1831 and received a patent in 1834. There were other inventor/manufacturers in that time period that included Hussey, Manny, Atkins and others. Long, hard-fought, patent fights eventually resulted in reaper firm mergers, acquisitions and bankruptcies. By 1862 McCormick was a wealthy, influential Chicago business leader who supported slavery but opposed the war. McCormick knew reapers were helping the Union Cause, but that fact did not change his position. According to William T. Hutchinson, the McCormick family sponsored Cyrus Hall McCormick biographer, "there were 125,000 reapers (all makes) in use in America by 1861; most of these machines had been purchased the previous 5 years." In 1860 there were 73 mower and reaper plants in America. Four years later there were over twice as many mower and reaper plants with a labor force of 60,000. The war had sparked a move to serious farm mechanization. Rapid expansion of farm machinery use led to larger farms that required fewer farm hands and partially made up for farmers and farm hands that went to war. A self-rake reaper could save 2 or 3 hands. In addition, many farm women took over work in the fields. If a woman could drive a team hitched to a buggy or wagon, she could drive a team hitched to reaper. Reapers were not well suited to the South because of stumps and post-harvest cotton stalks.

Clement Eaton writes in *A History of the Old South*, "During the Civil War the McCormick reaper was an important factor in the victory of the North."

Wheat: A second great strength of agriculture in the North was wheat production. In 1860 the North had the best wheat crop ever, a 66% production increase over the prior year.

The following year, production was sufficient to meet all domestic needs of the North and to provide for significant export as well. The North exported over 16 million bu. of wheat in 1860 and over 50 million bu. in 1861; at the end of the year, the North still had a surplus. Wheat prices went from \$0.98 /bu. in 1860 to \$1.23 in 1861 and by July 1864, wheat in Chicago sold for \$2.25/bu. Wheat income in the North helped finance the war for the Union. England, France and Russia had poor crops in 1861 and they bought the Union surplus. Some historians maintain that dependence on American wheat and flour accounts for England and France refusing to recognize the Confederacy. Two supporting statements for this position follow:

1) W. H. Seward, US ambassador to France, wrote in 1861, "The cotton of the South is doubtless very important to the Districts referred to in M. Thourenel's dispatch, but the bread of the North and West (United States) is an absolute necessity. Cut off from it just now and a month would not pass without the danger of a terrible revolution in France." It is significant that the need of England and France for foreign wheat was greatest in the early years of the war when the North had the most reason to fear that these countries would intervene on the side of the Confederacy.

2) *Scientific American*, "Russia suffered from poor harvests for several years during the Civil War period. French crops were very light in 1861 and those of the Danube Valley were equally so in 1863 and 1865."

Southern Failed Foreign Policy and the Impact of Shortages and Hunger

Farm and Plantation Size: Turning to the South, agricultural units varied greatly in size from small family farms to plantations of thousands of acres.

The census of 1850 recorded:

74,000	Cotton plantations	(over 5 bales)
2,600	Sugar plantations	(including the smallest)
15,750	Tobacco farms	(3,000 lbs. or over)
8,300	Hemp farms	
500	Rice farms	(20,000 lbs. or over)

The large plantation owners held most of the slaves, produced most of the South's staples and possessed most of the wealth. Small farmers usually owned and farmed their own land and may have had a family or two of slaves. These small farmers constituted a considerable portion of the cotton and tobacco produced in the South. Farm families that worked poor land achieved mostly low yields and had difficulty providing for their basic needs.

Livestock Advantage: Southern livestock production numbers show an advantage over the North. Based on the 1860 census and data for the 1859 crop year, the South had a 2 to 1 advantage for hog production based on per head of population. However, the absolute numbers are misleading because of the poor quality and low carcass yield of the south's hogs and cattle. Southern hogs in many cases ran loose in the woods or forests and lived on nuts, grass and roots; little corn was fed. Northern style corn feeding in fenced areas was not common. F. L. Olmsted wrote that southern hogs were, "bony, snake-headed, hairy wild beasts, Piney Woods Rooters." The South had a 2 to 1 advantage for cattle production based on per head of population. Cattle judge Solon Robinson said, "The cattle of Virginia, North Carolina and Georgia are 'scrubby' and small in a day of fat cattle and are called 'Pony Cattle'. Georgia dairy cattle produce only 1/3 as much milk as the National average. Texas steers are second in number only to Georgia, but they are light weight, thin and not easy to fatten. They are 'Poor even by Southern Standards', semi-wild, worth only half as much as cattle in other Southern states."

The North produced more potatoes, wheat and grain per capita than the South. Lincoln kept the border states in the Union and these four states produced wheat equal to all of the Confederate states except Virginia. The South produced more corn, peas and beans per capita than the North in 1859 but that changed as the war progressed.

Army Rations: The Union Army received regular rations of pork, bacon, salt or fresh beef, hard tack and corn meal in addition to vegetables. By comparison, the Confederate Army received rations of cornbread, salted or pickled beef or pork and few or no vegetables. Anti-scorbutic foods like fresh vegetables, fruit, tomatoes and sauerkraut were desperately needed; but, such rations were seldom available. The South had land for production of the staple crops of tobacco, cotton, rice and sugar. Some of these acres should have, could have, been switched to corn production for food and animal feed; but, major shifts never took place.

Southern Cotton Strategy: Some southern leaders thought that withholding cotton from England and France would force these nations to support the Confederacy. The result, England encouraged more production in India to limit dependence on southern cotton production and to relieve political pressure to abandon the nation's neutral position and recognize the Confederacy; recognition never occurred.

The *London Economist*, "Southern US cotton has superior quality to India but the South will regain the market after hostilities are over." American cotton was longer staple, up to an inch and 9/16, stronger, silkier, and cleaner. Another reason that holding back cotton from England and France did not force their recognition of the Confederacy is that Europe needed wheat and flour from North America. The foreign policy strategy of the South to withhold cotton and force recognition failed.

Conscription: Conscription for the Confederate army contained rules for the exemption of one white man for every twenty slaves in order to keep the plantation system operating. This provision created more resentment than any other feature of conscription. Exemptions were granted for one person per 500 cattle or 250 horse or mules owned as well as by appointment to a Confederate or state post. Small farmers were frequently called, mudsill, cracker, Cajun, sandhill tackey, Piney Woodsman. These farmers had no grounds for exemption and the bitterness was deep. The cry was, "A rich man's war but a poor man's fight." With so many men in the Confederate Army, wives, sisters, older children, elderly men, paroled and wounded or maimed soldiers did much of the work on southern farms.

Food Shortages: Food shortages developed as early as 1862. Southern Newspapers cried: Plant Corn! The *Columbus Georgia Sun*, "Plant corn and be free or plant cotton and be whipped." The *Lynchburg Republican* in the heart of tobacco country, "Concentrate on corn and oats instead of tobacco until independence is established."

Confederate General Braxton Bragg offered three proposals to increase corn production:

1. A Presidential proclamation prohibiting planting cotton or tobacco or using labor to clear new land.
2. A certain amount of each planter's land required to be planted in corn or other grains.
3. State grants should operate the plantations.

The radical nature of these proposals indicates the severity of the food situation faced by the South.

Salt: The South imported most of its needs for salt from England and with this source of salt no longer available, prices went sky high. The shortage caused meat to spoil. Army horses, domestic livestock, and humans suffered severely. The shortage of salt led to hoof and mouth disease among the cavalry horses; pork, beef, and hides spoiled; saltless butter would not keep sweet and cattle suffered intensely and did not put on weight normally.

Food Riots: Food riots were mostly small until April 1863. The *Richmond Enquirer* reported, "60 women started a food riot." The *North Carolina Standard* stated, "600 women which increased to 2000 men, women and boys rioted of the food situation. The ringleaders were severely punished. There were efforts to suppress the news." A second food riot in Petersburg came soon after. In January 1863, butter was \$1.25/lb. in Richmond, Virginia. By March 1864, butter was \$6.25/lb. for a five-fold increase. In the same period, flour went from \$20/barrel to the unheard price of \$250/barrel for an amazing twelve-fold increase. Wheat and flour had become critical commodities and high prices coupled with shortages triggered widespread unrest. This internal stress led to the bread riots of 1863. Planters and farmers were criticized severely for what consumers considered exorbitant prices; farmers responded to the charges: Agricultural supply prices are up more than food prices.

Alcohol: Privations of camp life brought men and officers to use whisky in large amounts. The Confederate government needed whisky for hospitals (this was before the development of anesthetics) and two million gallons were budgeted for 1864. Efforts were made to control whisky consumption and use the grain for food products; but, demand for whisky was too strong.

Impressment: Impressment was the practice of commandeering material and supplies needed by the Confederate Army and paying for it with Confederate currency. Because of its questionable worth, there was great reluctance to accept this form of payment, especially near Northern positions. Because of inflation, the Confederate Congress passed an act in March 1863 to regulate impressment and determine prices to be paid for goods taken by the Army and the Government. By June 3, 1862, Mississippi authorized impressment of slaves for noncombatant military use. Slaves received the same rations and clothing as a private, but the slave owner received the payment of \$11/month a private would have received. Slaves longed to return to their plantations and many fled to Federal armies. The planter economy was built on field hands; slaves were the most valuable property planters owned and they were the principal means of agricultural production. The impressment of slaves reduced the amount of food available to the South. The final blow was impressment of agricultural tools.

Cotton Production: Cotton Production in the South was four and a half million bales in 1861; production was one fifteenth of that number of bales after four years of war. The cotton price of \$0.13/lb. at the start of the war experienced almost an eight-fold inflation during the same time period. Even before the war was over, the high price of cotton in the North had proven irresistible to southern planters. Many millions of acres of land which had been in food crops in 1864 were planted to cotton in 1865, mostly before the war had actually stopped. This was in spite of the fact that during the latter part of the war, the South was barely able to feed itself. This essay could have had another word in the title beginning with the letter "F", F for fiber because cotton was such a critical part of the southern planter agricultural economy and led to such a major foreign policy miscalculation.

Wood: The scarcity of wood for fuel was critical. All southern railroads burned wood and woodcutters and small farmers supplied the most of it and that source disappeared rapidly as the

war progressed. In October 1862, the *Charleston Mercury* stated, "Next to food, the cities greatest problem is fuel (meaning wood) at reasonable prices." The pilfering of fencing was one of the most damaging blows the South received. Fences were used to fence out livestock and predators that roamed free; fences were not used primarily to keep in the owners animals. In the Shenandoah Valley fences were gone by 1862; Murfreesboro and Chattanooga Tennessee fences were gone by 1863. As a result, agriculture suffered greatly. In December 1862, The Confederate adjutant and inspector general issued an order condemning "reckless destruction of fencing, wood and other property." President Davis issued special instructions against pillage. All of these pronouncements were useless.

This essay could have had another word in the title beginning with the letter "F", F for fire wood or fuel because it was such a critical commodity in rail transportation, the life of Southern civilians and maintenance of the Confederate Army.

Northern Raiders made the Southern agricultural situation even worse. Granville Dodge's raid into Alabama in 1863 captured 1,000 horses and mules, quantities of grain, cattle, sheep and hogs. Destroyed 15,000 bushels of corn, 500,000 pounds of bacon, 3 tanyards, 5 mills, 60 flatboats and took away 1,500 slaves. It rendered desolate one of the best granaries of the South and prevented the area from raising another crop. Generally, by 1863-64 Union troops were making a clean sweep of wheat, corn, hogs, sheep and poultry from Murfreesboro to Chattanooga. In addition, Southern Unionists disrupted agricultural production by marauding and pillaging. Sherman's March to the sea and the resulting belt of desolation, which included agriculture, coupled with poor corn yields and drought, impacted southern agriculture and brought great hardship to both the general population of the South and the Confederate Army.

SUMMARY

The Confederate States of America, by E. Merton Coulter, "In the beginning the South had no fear that they would be unable to defeat all armies that might march against them; it was the specter of hunger and starvation that was their greatest enemy."

Whereby We Thrive by John T. Schlebecker has a quote in the frontispiece by J. H. Fabre that reads, "History celebrates the battlefields whereon we meet our death, but scorns to speak of the plowed fields whereby we thrive. It knows the names of the king's bastards but cannot tell us the origin of wheat. This is the way of human folly."

Conclusions

The conclusions of the essayist are: The agricultural products of Food, Feed, Fuel and Fiber coupled with the South's failed foreign policy strategy of withholding cotton from the export market combined to have a significant impact on the events of the American Civil War. The agricultural diversity and mechanization of the North coupled with the hunger and privation experienced in the South may have hastened the war's conclusion.

An example of the importance of agriculture in the Civil War is immortalized in the Rudolf Schwarz limestone statue on the west side of the Indianapolis Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument titled: The Return Home. It depicts a mother embracing her Civil War soldier son as he returns to the farm while the father sits on the beam of a single-bottom, walking plow.