

Turning Points of the American Civil War

In an article in the April 2011 issue of *Civil War Times*, Gary W. Gallagher discusses "The War's Overlooked Turning Points."¹ He concludes that, "Because of its striking reorientation of the strategic situation during the summer of 1862, as well as the long-term consequences of Lee's generalship regarding morale, the possibility of emancipation and the duration of the war, the Seven Days' Campaign belongs in the front rank of Civil War turning points."

Intrigued by Dr. Gallagher's article, it was decided to conduct a review of strategic battles. The analysis started with the National Park Service's listing of "A" ranked battles. These battles are considered as "having a decisive influence on a campaign and a direct impact on the course of the war." The list contains 45 battles from 33 campaigns.

The first issue to address is the definition of a turning point. According to the [Free Online Dictionary](#), a turning point is the point at which a very significant change occurs; a decisive moment, a moment when the course of events is changed a point at which there is a change in direction or motion.² Applying this definition to the Civil War suggests that there may be many turning points in a war where the trend in battle changes from one side to the other.

The initial approach was to find the single battle or campaign that changed the result of the entire war. For this analysis, a "turning point" was judged as an event that after which the outcome was inevitable. In sports parlance, it would be the play which changed the course of the game and allowed one team to win. With that definition, the turning point in the American Civil War would have to be a battle or campaign in which the outcome indicated that the Union would eventually win the war. In respect to military actions, this event would have to be a battle won by Union forces.

To begin the analysis, the list of Civil War battlefields compiled by the National Park Service were reviewed. The review started with the A ranked battles "having a decisive influence on a campaign and

¹ "The War's Overlooked Turning Points," by Gary W. Gallagher, *Civil War Times*, April 2011, pp. 21-23.

² Turning Point, <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/turning+point>

a direct impact on the course of the war."³ The 45 "A" battles were culled using several criteria. The obvious first cut on the "A" battles were those that the South won. This eliminates Confederate victories at Chancellorsville, Chickamauga, Fredericksburg, Cold Harbor, First Winchester, Fort Sumter, First and Second Manassas, Wilson's Creek, Gaines Mill, Mansfield, The Crater, and Second Petersburg. Not surprising, Union casualties in these engagements (99,717) outnumbered Confederate losses (61,597). Inconclusive battles, such as Spotsylvania Court House and The Wilderness, were also eliminated from the candidates. These edits reduced the list to 30 battles in 24 campaigns.

Several fascinating facts emerge from this new list. First, nine of the battles can be associated with General-in-Chief Winfield Scott's Anaconda Plan that emphasized the "blockade" of the Southern ports, and called for an advance down the Mississippi River to sever the South in two. These battles include Forts Jackson and Phillip (New Orleans & Mississippi River), New Madrid/Island No. 10 (Mississippi River), Vicksburg and Champion Hill (Mississippi River), Fort Fisher (Wilmington & Atlantic Coast), Mobile Bay and Fort Blakely (Mobile and Gulf of Mexico), and Fort Donelson and Shiloh (Cumberland and Tennessee Rivers). Secondly, the Confederate casualties in these victories were 32,223 greater than Union losses (156,216 vs. 123,993). In seven of these Federal triumphs, Union losses exceeded Confederate casualties. Two thirds of the difference occurred in three battles: Fort Donelson (12,736), Gettysburg (5,000) and Franklin II (3,935). The highest number of Confederate losses were at Gettysburg (28,000), Fort Donelson (15,067), Shiloh (10,699), Antietam (10,320), and Stones River (10,266). These five battles accounted for nearly half of the 156,216 Confederate casualties. Thirdly, of the thirty Union victories, seven battles list U.S. Grant as the Union commander and four list Sheridan or Sherman serving under Grant as the Union commander.

³ Civil War Sites Advisory Commission Report on the Nation's Civil War Battlefields, <http://www.nps.gov/hps/abpp/battles/tvii.htm>

Some battles, while significant were limited in impact to securing a state for the Union. In this category, would be Pea Ridge, Perryville and Glorieta Pass. Battles and campaigns that took place in 1865 can also be eliminated. The tide of battle was clearly in evidence by the beginning of the last four months of the war. Seven battles were Union victories in 1865 with three in the Appomattox Campaign and one in the Campaign of the Carolinas. This drops the number of candidates to 20.

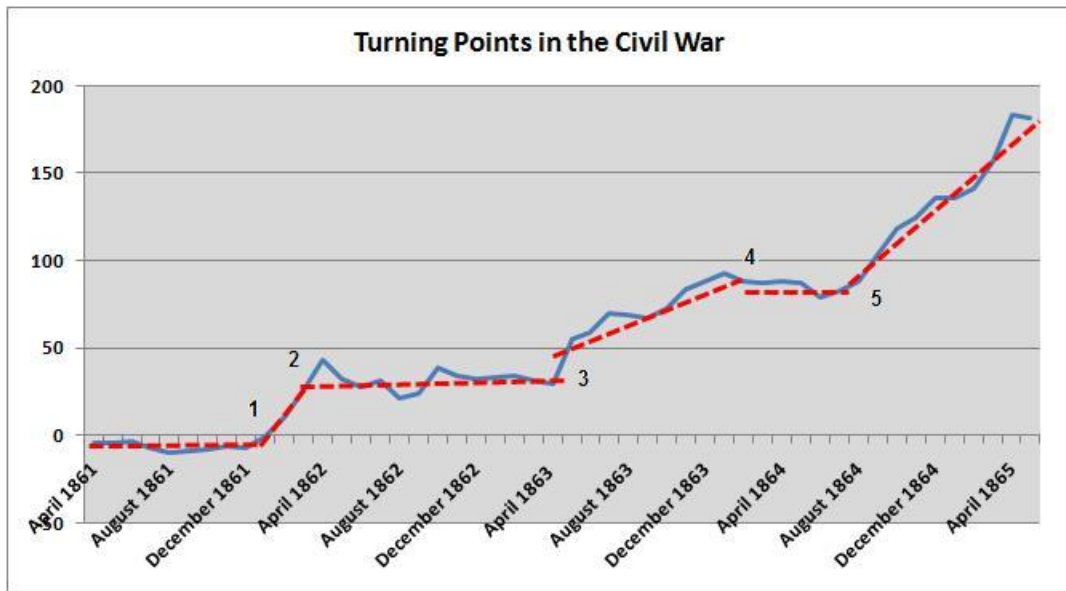
This left a roll of the usual "suspects:" Federal Penetration up the Cumberland and Tennessee Rivers [1862 - *Fort Donelson and Shiloh*], Expedition to, and Capture of, New Orleans [April-May 1862 - *Forts Jackson and Phillip*], Maryland Campaign [September 1862 - *Antietam*], Gettysburg Campaign [June-August 1863 - *Gettysburg*], Chattanooga-Ringgold Campaign [November 1863 - *Chattanooga*], Atlanta Campaign [May-September 1864 - *Jonesborough*], Sheridan's Valley Campaign [August-October 1864 - *Opequon and Cedar Creek*], and Franklin-Nashville Campaign [September-December 1864 - *Franklin and Nashville*]. The only campaign not identified is the Overland Campaign in which the two major battles Spotsylvania Court House and Wilderness are classified as inconclusive and a third, Cold Harbor, is a Confederate victory.

In order to analyze these turning points, a monthly accounting was developed of the Civil War battles using the National Park Service (NPS) classification.⁴ The NPS classifies battles from D to A.⁵ A battles were given a numeric value of 4, 3 for B, 2 for C, and 1 for D. The NPS determination of the outcome as either a Confederate or Union victory or inconclusive was used to define the result. The Confederate victory at Fort Sumter, an "A ranked" battle, would earn 4 points. This rating was calculated for the 382 battles identified by the NPS. The points for the Union and Confederate victories were added to produce a series of monthly totals. Then the monthly difference in the sum of points

⁴ Civil War Sites Advisory Commission Report on the Nation's Civil War Battlefields, <http://www.nps.gov/hps/abpp/battles/tvii.htm>

⁵ A Rated - 45 - [having a decisive influence on a campaign and a direct impact on the course of the war] B Rated - 104 - [having a direct and decisive influence on their campaign] C Rated - 125 2 - [having observable influence on the outcome of a campaign] D Rated - 108 2 - [having a limited influence on the outcome of their campaign or operation but achieving or affecting important local objectives]

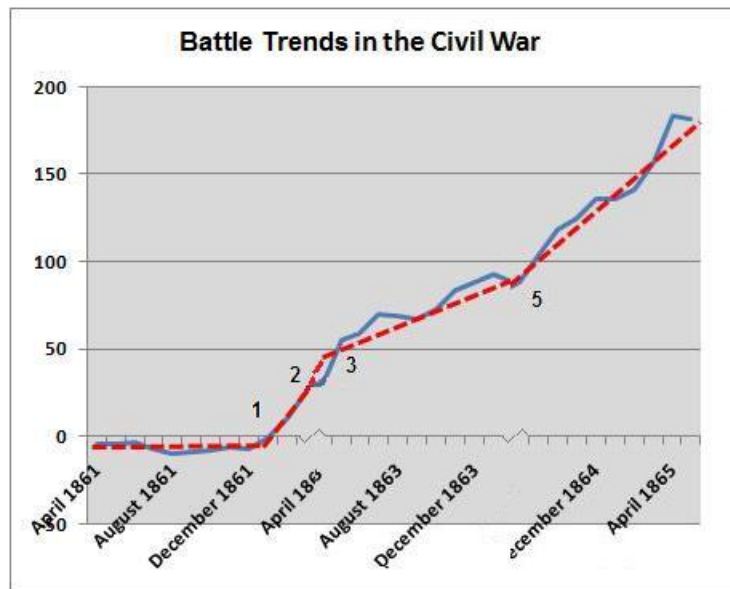
between Union and Confederate victories was determined. These monthly points were added to create a cumulative monthly total and plotted on the following graph.



The chart reveals five distinct turning points in the war. This explains why historians have championed those presented above. The reality is that there were many turning points in the war. The first turning point occurs in February 1862 with Grant's victories at Forts Henry and Donelson or the Federal Penetration up the Cumberland and Tennessee Rivers campaign (Fort Henry through Shiloh). The second turning point occurs in May 1862 with "Stonewall" Jackson's victories in the Shenandoah Valley and Lee's victories in the Peninsula Campaign (Seven Days). These two campaigns stopped the trend in Union victories (from points 1 to 2) and ushered in a period of intense fighting by both sides as the war settled in to a stalemate from May 1862 until May 1863. Both sides won significant battles and the outcome was in doubt. The third turning point occurs in May 1863 with Grant's victory at Champion Hill and subsequent siege and eventual capture of Vicksburg. The trend of Union victories continues with Lee's defeat at Gettysburg. The Confederacy compiles enough victories to force a stalemate from July 1863 to November 1863. The South wins at Chickamauga, but the Federals are successful at Chattanooga. Then in September 1864, Sherman's Atlanta (Jonesborough) and Sheridan's Valley (Opequon) campaigns turn the tide for the last time in the Union's favor.

General U. S. Grant is the common theme associated with these turning point battles and campaigns. He was commander at Fort Donelson and Shiloh (turning point 1) and Champion Hill and Vicksburg (turning point 2). Lincoln placed him in overall command on March 12, 1864, and Grant implemented the new strategy of destroying the Confederate armies composed of the Atlanta, Valley, and Overland campaigns. Interestingly, General Lee is only directly involved in the Peninsula campaign and Gettysburg.

If the stalemate periods are removed from the graph, the turning point becomes clear.



The course of the war was defined from Grant's victory at Fort Donelson making this THE turning point of the war. While Confederate victories and brilliant leadership by Lee and Jackson prolonged the war, the ultimate industrial might and population advantage of the North made the result inevitable. The analysis indicates the validity of Sherman's predictions, "You are rushing into war with one of the most powerful, ingeniously mechanical and determined people on earth – right at your doors. You are bound to fail" and "At first, you will make headway, but as your limited resources begin to fail, shut out from the markets of Europe as you will be, your cause will begin to wane."