

**Research Project**  
**Andersonville National Site POW Research Program**

**Comparison of ‘Analysis of Five Factors Impacting Confederates In Union Prisoner of War Camps During the Civil War (2017)’ and ‘Analysis of Five Factors Impacting Union Soldiers In Confederate Prisoner of War Camps During the Civil War (2018)’**

**By**  
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*“A prisoner of war is a man who tries to kill you and fails and then asks you not to kill him.”*

Winston Churchill  
*Observer, 1952*

## **Background and Introduction**

In his research for his book, *The Story of Camp Douglas, Chicago’s Forgotten Civil War Prison*, David L. Keller identified these five factors that significantly affected conditions at Camp Douglas.

1. The lack of a strategic plan for prison development and management before and in the early stages of the Civil War,
2. Inadequate plans for long-term incarceration of prisoners of war,
3. Poor selection, turnover, and lack of training of camp command,
4. Lack of training of camp guards, and
5. Failure to provide individual soldiers information on how to behave as POWs.

A 2017 Andersonville National Site POW Research Grant was awarded to Mr. Keller to further investigate and determine if the five factors were present at other Union prisons for Confederate prisoners during the Civil War, and, if so, to assess their impact.

The report of the findings of this investigation of the “significance” of the factors on conditions in other Union prison camps, was submitted in October 2017. In 2018, an Andersonville National Site POW Research Grant was awarded to Mr. Keller to conduct a similar study on the impact of these five factors on Union prisoners in Confederate prisons.

The 2018 study confirmed the significance of the factors considered on conditions in Confederate prison camps. Copies of each of these individual reports are available from Andersonville National Site POW Research Program or the author.

This report summarizes the results of the two studies. Note that the lack of information on Confederate camps affects the comparison. Individual camp census information, including total prisoners and death rates, is lacking. It is accepted that 431,400 (211,400 Union and 220,000 Confederate) were held as prisoners. The death rate in Union prisons was 12 percent and in Confederate prisons 15.1 percent. The highest death rate in Union prisons was 24 percent at Elmira and 29 percent at Andersonville for the Confederates.

## **The lack of a strategic plan for prison development and management before and in the early stages of the Civil War**

The extensive use of parole and exchange prior to and during the early period of the Civil War resulted in military and civilian authorities ignoring the possibility of holding larger numbers of captured combatants for longer periods of time. Robert C. Doyle in his book, *The Enemy in our Hands*, provides an outstanding summary of the historic development of prisoners of war and an analysis an explanation of this prisoners of war as a factor in the Civil War.

In ignoring the possibility of holding large numbers of prisoners instead of releasing or exchanging them to return to the battlefield, both Confederate and Union leadership also initially ignored the potential value of the railroad network in moving prisoners from the battlefield.

Once prisoners of war became a reality, the railroad, along with the river system, especially in the West, allowed commanders to remove prisoners from their responsibility quickly and efficiently. This allowed field commanders to avoid the distracting and time-consuming parole of large numbers of captives.

In the Union camps, lack of a plan ranked second in “significance” and “importance.” However, with Confederate camps, this factor ranked this factor first in “significance” and second in “importance.” Unlike the Union, the Confederacy had no standing army and was required to organize an army before anything else. Understandably, prisoners had a low priority in Confederate military planning.

The Confederacy’s necessity to use existing prisons and abandoned factories and warehouses to house prisoners captured at the first Battle of Bull Run in July 1861 reflected this lack of planning. Even as the Civil War progressed, only one Confederate prison camp was reported as specifically planned—Camp Sumpter at Andersonville. Other circumstances and the pressure from the Union military advances into the South mitigated the potential advantages of this planning.

Although, given the historical precedent of capture and release or prisoner swap, neither the Union or Confederacy should really be faulted for this oversight, prisoners on both sides paid a very high price.

### **Inadequate plans for long-term incarceration of prisoners of war**

This factor ranked second in “significance” and first in “importance” in Confederate prisons and can be attributed to the impact of the need to hastily organize camps to move prisoners away from Union military operations.

Other conditions contributed to the Confederacy’s lack of planning. General Winder, who held responsibility for prison camp management, lacked authority and control over all Confederate prisons. Additionally, the Confederacy assigned junior officers (lieutenants and captains) to command prisons. Unlike with some Union prison facilities, there is little evidence of attempts to improve the physical condition of Confederate prisons. Many Confederate prison camps were abandoned factories,

warehouses, and barren stockades. These factories and warehouses had minimum facilities for housing prisoners; water, toilet facilities, lighting, and ventilation were not adequate. Barren stockades were frequently provided tents in poor condition or even no shelter at all.

Union prisons ranked lack of planning for long-term incarceration second in “significance” and fourth in “importance.” The lower rating in “importance” can be attributed to extending the use of existing facilities for Union troops to Confederate prisoners. These barracks facilities were generally adequate for shelter. Although much in maintenance and improvements was deferred by Union commanders in charge, including Colonel Hoffman and General Meigs. After the termination of prisoner exchange by the Union, improvements were made, but it was too little too late.

### **Poor selection, turnover, and lack of training of camp command**

The structure to address camp leadership was significantly different between the Union and Confederacy. General Meigs and Colonel Hoffman were clearly identified as responsible for Union prisons. Both were named to their posts in early 1861. Colonel Hoffman’s duties as Commissary of Prisoners were provided to him in writing in June 1862. The U.S. General Order 100, spelling out treatment of prisoners in Union hands, was issued in April 1863.

General Winder, Provost of Richmond, had the additional responsibility of duty for Confederate prisons. As the Confederate prisons expanded beyond Richmond, General Winder was stretched very thin. It was not until November 1864 that he was appointed Commissary of Prisoners.

Except for the Dix-Hill Cartel in July 1862, which addressed only the parole and exchange of prisoners, the Confederacy had no central instructions on treatment of prisoners; treatment of prisoners was left to the discretion of camp commanders. Most Union camps were commanded by colonels or brigadier generals. Confederate camps were usually commanded by captains or other junior officers. Neither Union nor Confederate commanders were trained for their duties of managing prisoners or internment facilities.

Junior officers continued to command Confederate prisons through the end of the war. Union commanders (due to their higher ranks) had greater influence on activities and conditions. Most Union commanders, prior to 1863, were unit commanders who were organizing their units for movement into war. As a result, the turnover of Union commanders was greater than that of the Confederacy. This turnover resulted in confusion and delay in communicating camp needs. Beginning in 1863 the creation of the Veteran Reserve Corps provided more consistent leadership and guards for Union camps.

### **Lack of training of camp guards**

Union and Confederate guards were ill-equipped and untrained for their duties. Initially Union guards were from units mustering in at prison locations or local units. As the Veteran Reserve Corps was developed, these soldiers took a more active role in guarding prisons. This provided greater continuity to the guard forces.

Confederate guards were frequently local militia consisting of very young or very old individuals. None were very proficient in conducting their duties. Both officer selection and guard training ranked only above individual soldiers’ preparation in “significance” and “importance.” This is understandable as lack of planning was significantly more important to the Confederacy.

## **Failure to provide individual soldiers information on how to behave as POWs**

As the actions of Morgan's Raiders at Union facilities, Camp Douglas, and Camp Chase, reflects positively on prisoner behavior, the action of the "Raiders" at Andersonville and Belle Isle reflects negatively.

Both examples reflect how the failure to train combatants to behave as prisoners of war contributed to conditions and prisoner welfare in both Confederate and Union prisons. The average of 2.80 "significance" and 4.67 on "importance" for Union prisoners in Confederate prisons may be skewed by the significant amount of information from captured Union officers. For Confederate prisoners in Union prisons, 3.36 "significance" and 4.09 "importance" were recorded.

### **Conclusion**

Investigation in both studies indicates that the five factors studied were valid as affecting conditions in Civil War prisons in both the Union and the Confederacy.

1. The lack of a strategic plan for prison development and management before and in the early stages of the Civil War,
2. Inadequate plans for long-term incarceration of prisoners of war,
3. Poor selection, turnover, and lack of training of camp command,
4. Lack of training of camp guards, and
5. Failure to provide individual soldiers information on how to behave as POWs.

The Dix-Hill Cartel and the history of managing prisoners dictated no need for long term incarceration of prisoners. Based on this historical precedent, neither Union nor Confederate planners would be expected to provide a strategic plan for handling prisoners.

All the same, this lack of planning severely affected conditions in prison camps on both sides. The Confederate necessity to address prisoner issues early (July 1861) underscored the lack of and need for strategic planning.

The Union was better organized to address prisoner problems without a strategic plan. Use of existing military facilities was significantly superior to the Confederates who were forced to depend on existing jails, abandoned warehouses, and factories. The Confederate strategy appeared to be based on the desire to retain prisoners in or near Richmond with expansion beyond only as local jails were overwhelmed. The addition of abandoned factories and warehouses came eventually. Later Belle Isle was developed as a prison. Confederate reaction to long term incarceration was acerbated by pressure placed on their prison facilities by Union military operations and they took the war into Confederate territory.

When the sheer volume of prisoners and the suspension of prisoner exchange occurred, the Union was better organized than the Confederacy to react. That "hard" facilities were used by the Union resulted in more effective upgrade of facilities.

The establishment of well-defined central leadership and senior officers in command of Union prison camps was superior to the ill-defined prison structure of the Confederacy. The Union entered the Civil War with an army. The Confederacy had to build one before anything else.

In terms of POW behavior, anecdotal examples of positive and negative behavior by prisoners support the impact of soldiers' understanding of the responsibilities as a prisoner. Those who behaved in a manner similar to the U.S. Code of Conduct published in 1955 appeared to fare better than their comrades.

Submitted by  
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