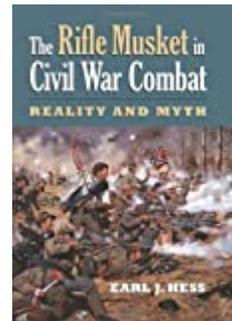




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## A Reevaluation of the Rifle Musket's Influence in Civil War Combat

Since the guns of the Civil War fell silent in the spring of 1865, veterans and historians have debated the war's modernity. This debate frequently centers on the influence of the rifle musket. The often cited traditionalist interpretation holds that the rifle musket revolutionized warfare because its range and accuracy were superior to those of the smoothbore musket. Supposedly, the rifle musket minimized the role of artillery and cavalry, contributed to the war's high casualty rate, and generally rendered most battles indecisive, thereby prolonging the war. In *The Rifle Musket in Civil War Combat*, Earl J. Hess challenges this entrenched traditionalist interpretation, arguing that the influence of the rifle has been greatly exaggerated. Instead of revolutionizing Civil War combat, Hess argues that the rifle had only an incremental, limited effect on the nature of warfare (p. 4). Popular perception of the rifle musket transforming combat is a myth; Hess presents the reality of its influence.

Hess's conclusions are based on several arguments. The basic premise of the rifle musket revolutionizing warfare is that the weapon provided an increased range of ap-

proximately five hundred yards. Hess argues, however, that the Minie ball's arched trajectory virtually negated any advantages the rifle musket may have offered on the battlefield. This parabolic trajectory produced two killing zones, one within the first hundred yards of the shot and another as the bullet descended. In between the two killing zones was a relatively safe zone of nearly three hundred yards, where bullets passed over the approaching enemy. The smoothbore musket, in contrast, offered clear advantages as a weapon that was easier to aim and produced a relatively flat trajectory. To compensate for the rifle musket's trajectory, soldiers needed proper instruction, sight estimation, and plenty of target practice, none of which they received in adequate measure. Consequently, advantages the rifle musket may have offered on the battle line were never attained.

The second argument challenging the effectiveness of the rifle musket is based on the range at which soldiers opened fire. Paddy Griffith's *Battle Tactics of the Civil War* (1989) was among the first to challenge traditional notions about the range of Civil War small arms. He con-

cluded that soldiers tended to open fire at ranges consistent with smoothbore muskets. Since then, several other works, including Mark Grimsley's essay "Surviving Military Revolution: The U.S. Civil War" in *The Dynamics of Military Revolution, 1350-2050* (2001) and Brent Nosworthy's *Bloody Crucible of Courage* (2005), have supported Griffith's conclusions. Hess agrees and explains that the short range of Civil War combat resulted from several factors, including the rifle's arched trajectory and the wooded, dense terrain of many of the war's battlefields. Moreover, there was the natural tendency for the soldier to wait until he could see his target before opening fire, and commanders generally ordered their men not to shoot until the enemy was within close range.

One of the strengths of Hess's work is that he places Civil War battles and weaponry within the larger context of military history. Fundamental to the traditionalist interpretation is the belief that the increased casualty rate, proliferation of entrenchments, and seeming indecisiveness of Civil War battles resulted from the widespread acquisition of the rifle musket. By analyzing the nature of American and European combat before and after the Civil War, Hess further supports the conclusion that the weapon's influence has been overstated. Examining a sampling of battles fought before the Civil War with smoothbore muskets, Hess finds that the loss ratios are nearly consistent with Civil War battles. A casualty rate of 30 percent was not uncommon in smoothbore musket engagements. At Blenheim (August 13, 1704), for example, the French suffered 33 percent losses, while the Duke of Marlborough's alliance forces sustained 23 percent casualties (p. 200). Napoleonic battles witnessed similarly heavy casualty rates; at Austerlitz (December 2, 1805), Napoleon's army inflicted 31 percent casualties and a year later at Jena (October 14, 1806) inflicted another 54 percent losses (p. 200). Hess concludes that the Civil War rifle musket did not increase the casualty rate when compared to other American or European conflicts. Hess also disputes the traditional argument that the rifle musket negated the decisive victory by arguing that there were a few decisive victories in the Civil War, including Richmond (Kentucky), Chickamauga, Missionary Ridge, and Nashville. Though these battles may have been militarily

decisive they failed to achieve any major political victory. The indecisive nature of the Civil War stemmed from the Union and Confederate governments' (as well as their people's) determination to see the war to its conclusion—not the rifle musket. Consistent with his earlier studies on trench warfare, *Field Armies and Fortifications in the Civil War: The Eastern Campaigns, 1861-1864* (2005) and *Trench Warfare under Grant & Lee: Field Fortifications in the Overland Campaign* (2007), Hess finds no correlation between the use of the rifle musket and the development of fortifications. In Virginia's Overland Campaign, the utilization of entrenchments developed, not because of the firepower of the rifle musket, but from the continuous contact between the two armies. And again, examples from other conflicts provide strength to this argument. Citing events from the Franco-Prussian War and World War I, Hess concludes that the primary reasons entrenchments were used was the proximity of the two opposing armies to each other regardless of whether that enemy was armed with a smoothbore musket or an M-16 (p. 215).

Where Hess finds that the rifle musket made a significant impact was in skirmishing and sharpshooting, both of which required individual skill. The new weapon gave skirmishers the opportunity not only to harass the enemy but also to inflict considerable casualties. Equipped with a telescopic site, the rifle musket created an ideal environment for sharpshooting, though Hess argues that sharpshooting was a highly technical craft and resulted in minimal change to Civil War combat.

The rifle musket's influence continues to dictate our perception of Civil War battles, tactics, and operations. The traditional interpretation of its dominating effect continues to influence Civil War history, and few scholars have dared to challenge this argument. Griffith, Grimsley, Nosworthy, and now Hess have effectively re-examined this prevailing view. Equipped with careful research, a plethora of examples and statistics, and commendable contextual research on warfare, Hess's work will reshape the debate on the modernity of the Civil War and is an essential read not only for Civil War scholars but also for military historians.

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