It was not so vulnerable to attack as the railroad. All navigable rivers within the area of operations were used for this purpose, and McClellan, Burnside, and Grant used the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries to carry their base of supplies close to Richmond. The operations of the Confederates, on the other hand, were greatly restricted by being confined to railroad lines.

Several natural features which were certain to influence events to a great extent are to be noticed. In Virginia, numerous rivers, running parallel to the direct line of advance, form good lines for defense and also obstacles to an advance. Several mountain valleys leading north at the eastern ranges of the Alleghanies gave opportunities for leading large forces safely into Pennsylvania from Virginia, or vice versa. Within the mountain district, a railroad from Lynchburg, Virginia, to Chattanooga, in Tennessee, about four hundred miles long, gave an opportunity for transferring troops from one section to the other, while the corresponding distance at the North was three times as great. In the western section, the Tennessee and Cumberland rivers are separated at one place by a narrow neck about two miles wide, thus somewhat simplifying the problem of controlling these two important streams. The strategic chess-board, then, gave great opportunities to skilful generalship. The Virginia rivers gave strength to long defensive lines, screened marches from east to west, and forced the Northern generals to seek the flank rather than the front attack. The Shenandoah valley afforded a safe approach to Washington from the rear. This was availed of by Lee, Jackson, and Early to keep many thousand men of the army of the North in idleness. In the West, the long line defended by scattered troops was weak at every point and was quite easily broken by Grant, particularly when the South was slow in grasping the situation there. The advantage of the Richmond-Chattanooga railroad was not used by the Confederates until too late for success.