

Strategic Synchronization of Political Objectives and Military Strategy: Grant, Lincoln, and Operations to End the Civil War

A Monograph

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Abstract

Strategic Synchronization of Political Objectives and Military Strategy: Grant, Lincoln, and Operations to End the Civil War, by MAJ Jeffrey A. Feser, 61 pages.

Historians have analyzed LTG Ulysses S. Grant's decisions, generalship, and styles of warfare for the past 150 years. Images and perceptions of Grant, and issues within the political, social, and economic domains, have evolved and coincided with revised social constructs throughout the years. While historians have examined Grant's Overland and Petersburg Campaigns through the lenses of three traditional, prevailing strategic arguments, their analysis is inconsistent and does not fully support Grant's operations as standalone strategies. These views fail to portray Grant's approach, inadequately exploring his efforts to continuously reframe the problem based on the operational and strategic environments. Instead, Grant's ability to understand, interact, and shape the operational environment was due to his capacity to grasp President Abraham Lincoln's political objectives. This appreciation ultimately enabled Grant to force Lee out of his defenses at Petersburg by altering his military strategy as circumstances dictated. He transitioned from an approach of persistent conflict to one of raiding and collective effects. Through these actions, Grant presented Lee with too many problems to address, ultimately compelling him to evacuate Petersburg after nearly ten months to finally break the rebellion and force the Army of Northern Virginia's surrender on 9 April 1865. Although unfamiliar to the American military during the Civil War, Grant's application of operational art provides numerous applicable lessons for today's military leaders, including the relationship between the executive and the military, the dynamic interaction between political and military objectives, and how to set conditions to end wars and achieve the objectives beyond it.

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Introduction

On 4 May 1864, LTG Ulysses S. Grant set off towards Richmond launching the Overland Campaign with the Army of the Potomac. This campaign began six weeks after his promotion to commander of all Federal forces. In under two months, Grant effectively established a strategic approach, relationships with President Abraham Lincoln and MG Henry Halleck, and a concept of operations.¹ Grant's objectives were to engage Confederate GEN Robert E. Lee's forces, break the rebellion's military power, end the Civil War, and reestablish the US as one union on Lincoln's terms.

Grant assumed command of an army that lost momentum in the Eastern theater following the victories at Gettysburg and Vicksburg in 1863. Lee's Army continued with a strategic defense, defeating all attacks from the North. Although the Confederacy no longer launched strategic attacks into Union territory, it effectively blocked all Union attempts to move South. Grant summarized the situation in the East, stating, "the opposing forces stood in substantially the same relations toward each other as three years before."²

Between 1861 and 1863, Confederate cavalry and guerrillas conducted frequent raids in the Western District, forcing Grant to dilute Union strength to protect his ever-lengthening lines of communications. Grant believed that the most effective way to counter these raids would be for the Union Army to shift its objective from occupying territory to deny the enemy land and resources to conducting persistent logistical raids to destroy enemy resources and lines of communications. This plan sapped the Confederacy's ability to fight by denying vital material. Grant maximized his operational options by reducing the security requirements required to maintain the smaller land area.

¹ Wayne Wei-Siang Hsieh and Murray Williamson, *A Savage War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 361.

² Ulysses S. Grant, *Memoirs and Selected Letters* (New York: The Literary Classics of the United States, Inc., 1990), 476.

Lincoln regularly conferred with Grant to finalize Union strategy in support of the President's strategic objectives. Before assuming his role as General-in-Chief, Grant initially assessed victory would result from exhaustion through persistent raids.³ This strategy would deplete Confederate abilities to continue the war while Union forces maintained options through tempo, freedom of movement, and leveraging opportunities. Previous experiences as commander of the Western District provided a useful framework for Grant to apply in the East.

Grant discarded this plan following discussions with Lincoln upon his arrival, who had one eye on the battlefields and the other on upcoming elections. The President considered the exhaustion strategy incompatible with the popular and political expectations thereby adversely impacting upcoming elections. Congress, the press, and the President remained concerned with the stalemate war in Virginia and its effects on the Northern public's will to continue the fight.⁴ In response to Lincoln's concerns, Grant shifted to a more conventional plan. The new plan would contemplate all five major armies (three armies in the East and two in the West), coordinating their operations to conduct and mutually support continuous attacks against Confederate forces. Grant's new strategy was geared towards forcing Lee into an open fight by disrupting Confederate operational choices.

Lee chose to withdraw rather than engage in an open battle. Grant pressed this advantage by having the Army of the Potomac continually maneuvering against Lee's army, ultimately affixing Lee at Petersburg. Tactically failing to defeat Lee's forces, Grant pinned Lee in the city. Grant was able to reframe the problem and adjust his operational approach to force Lee out of his battlefield entrenchments and caused Lee to fight the Union Army on Grant's terms. The result of this decision was twofold: Grant realized more opportunities to destroy Lee's forces while effectively eliminating Lee's options to counter or escape.

³ Archer Jones, *Civil War Command and Strategy: The Process of Victory and Defeat* (New York: Free Press, 1992), 184-185.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 192.

Through understanding, interaction, and shaping the operational environment, Grant strategically denied Lee support from other Confederate armies. He adjusted Union military strategy numerous times, moving from an approach of persistent conflict to one of raiding and combined effects, which forced Lee out of entrenchment and into a fight. Grant presented Lee with too many problems to address, ultimately compelling him to evacuate Petersburg after nearly ten months. Grant finally broke Lee's rebellion, forcing his surrender on 9 April 1865.

As a result, LTG Grant's ability to alter his strategy as circumstances dictated, which incorporated President Lincoln's political objectives and the strategic environment, enabled Grant to force Lee out of his defenses. Grant applied operational art to effectively incorporate means to achieve ends by arranging multiple tactical actions in time, space, and purpose to attain the President's strategic objectives.⁵

This paper uses three hypotheses to examine the author's thesis. First, Grant did not have a free hand in planning and conducting the 1864 and 1865 offensive. While readers may interpret Grant's memoirs to support a contrary position, Lincoln actually dictated aspects of Grant's operational planning and execution. Lincoln's political considerations routinely took precedence over Grant's military plans. Second, Grant clearly understood politics. As General-in-Chief he was required to be both a statesman and soldier. Grant calibrated operations according to the interplay of military and political matters to support the President. His comprehension of Lincoln's political objectives enabled him to correctly modify military strategy while reacting to Lee's actions and the changing strategic environment. Third, to subdue the Confederate rebellion, Grant based all actions on a clear end state determined by military means and political ends. He intended to destroy Lee's army. While Grant hoped to do so in an open battle, he would achieve this aim by whatever option was presented by Lee. Doctrinally, Grant's understanding of the

⁵ US Department of the Army, Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 3-0, *Operations* (Washington, DC: Government Publishing Office, 2019), 3-12.

military end state and necessary conditions to conclude the war enabled him to leverage operational tempo and simultaneous lines of operation contingent on opportunities. He sought to present Lee with an increasingly difficult problem set to limit options while supporting the President's strategic aims.⁶ As the strategic environment changed, Grant reframed the plan, creating a flexible strategy to achieve his intent.

This monograph is organized into four sections. The first section provides a historiography discussing the theoretical framework, existing beliefs, methodology, and historical discussions of Grant's strategy to defeat the Army of Northern Virginia. The second section analyzes the strategic environment, Grant's approach, and the commander's intent: how he originally envisioned the campaign's development compared to its ultimate execution. The author will examine the modifications of Grant's original plan compared to changes made after meeting with President Lincoln. Grant's operations from the Wilderness to Cold Harbor will be discussed as evidence of his operational and political understanding of the strategic environment and ability to create opportunities to defeat Lee. The third section reviews and analyzes Grant's continuous reframing of the problem, using the crossing at the James River to illustrate his response to Lee's affixing defense and lack of maneuverability.⁷ It illustrates Grant's flexibility in maintaining focus on the achievement of the political objectives laid out by the President. Finally, this monograph concludes with an analysis of the significance of Grant's operations for study by officers within the United States and a limited war framework.

⁶ US Department of Defense, Joint Staff, Joint Publication (JP) 5-0, *Joint Operation Planning* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2017), IV-20.

⁷ Throughout the monograph, reframing is defined as a growing understanding of the situation and problems that lead to a new perspective on problems or their resolution. This is taken from Army Tactical Publication (ATP) 5-0.1.

Historiography/Methodology

Historians have analyzed Grant's decisions, generalship, and styles of warfare for the past 150 years. Perceptions of Grant have been colored by political, social, and economic perspectives which may be prejudiced by bias for or against the factors counselling Grant to take the actions he did to bring the Civil War to an expedited conclusion. Similarly, the historical discussion of the relationship between Lincoln and Grant is generally focused on Lincoln's opinions of the general he selected to bring the Civil War to a termination. However, those historical discussions provide little insight into Grant's understanding of the President's political needs and the impact it had on the strategy he pursued. There is limited information available regarding Lincoln and Grant's meetings. This has caused historians to rely on the records of the perceptions and assessments of bystanders which are found in personal documents such as journal entries and official reports.

Publications in the 1950s and 1960s by Civil War scholars and authors, including Shelby Foote, Douglass Freeman, and William S. McFeely, historically emphasized the pervasive "Lost Cause Myth," created in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War.⁸ These publications reinforced and perpetuated the public opinion of Grant which characterized him as "a butcher whose only strategy was to overcome a smaller enemy force by attrition" and "in terms of generalship, gave Lee nothing to fear."⁹ He "absorb[ed] appalling casualties...threw his men in[to the fight] wastefully as if [only] their weight was certain to overrun any Confederates in

⁸ John A. Simpson, "The Cult of the 'Lost Cause'," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 34, no. 4, 1975: 350-61, accessed October 12, 2019, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42623867>. For many Southerners, the Civil War was a noble "Lost Cause." This idea was the authoritative interpretation in the South and influenced the historiography of the Civil War and its aftermath. At its heart, the Lost Cause was a mystique of chivalric Southern soldiers and Confederate leadership defending a way of life, the idea of states' rights, and even the original American Revolution, against an avaricious Northern industrial machine.

⁹ Edward H Bonekemper III, *Ulysses S. Grant: A Victor, Not a Butcher* (Washington, DC: Regnery History, 2004), xiv; Clifford Dowdey, *Lee* (Gettysburg: Stan Clark Military Books, 1991), 433.

their path.”¹⁰ This narrative shaped both scholarly and popular conversations about the Civil War, to include perceptions of Grant as a general.

As one of the first Civil War historians, Lee’s Adjutant-General Walter H. Taylor, stated:

[i]t is well to bear in mind that great inequality between the two contending armies, in order that one may have a proper appreciation of the difficulties which beset General Lee in the task of thwarting the designs of so formidable an adversary, and realize the extent to which his brilliant genius made amends for paucity of numbers, and proved more than a match for brute force, as illustrated in the hammering policy of General Grant.¹¹

Taylor’s description typified the denigration of Grant that accompanied the veneration of Lee and insinuated itself into most analyses of the campaign. Following the war, former Confederate LTG Jubal A. Early - whom Grant defeated in the Overland Campaign - chaired the Southern Historical Society. This organization often provided one-sided periodicals, becoming the primary vehicle for Confederate survivors to disseminate their widely accepted version of Civil War memories commemorating legends of the Lost Cause and Lee.¹²

American historian and political scientist William A. Dunning’s historiographical assessment continued attacking Grant’s abilities well into the mid-twentieth century. He linked inept Reconstruction efforts under President Grant to his generalship and the Lost Cause.¹³ Referred to as the Dunning School, this historiographical school of thought attacked Grant’s performance during Reconstruction and propelled the Lost Cause myth. It supplanted favorable visions of Grant, instead emphasizing his unimpressive actions as President, and influencing future assessments of the Overland Campaign - specifically, Petersburg. Even today, some

¹⁰ Dowdey, *Lee*, 433.

¹¹ Walter H. Taylor, *General Lee: His Campaigns in Virginia, 1861-1865* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1906), 230-231.

¹² William A. Blaire, “Grant’s Second Civil War: The Battle for Historical Memory,” in *The Spotsylvania Campaign*, ed. Gary W. Gallagher (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 398-402.

¹³ James J. Broomall, “Ulysses S. Grant,” in *A Companion to the Civil War, Vol. II*, edited by Aaron Sheehan-Dean (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 638.

historians perpetuate Southern mythology, idolizing the Confederacy's best general and his military genius, unwilling to concede a northern general out-strategized Lee.¹⁴

However, by the 1920s and opinions began to shift. British scholar J.F.C. Fuller and American authors Frederic Paxson and Christian Bach considered alternate perspectives. Fuller compared Grant to other great generals such as Alexander the Great and the Duke of Wellington. He argued Grant was just as, if not more, capable than Lee. Fuller states, “[t]he truth is, the more we inquire into the generalship of Lee, the more we discover that Lee, or rather the popular conception of him, is a myth.”¹⁵ Frederic Paxson and Christian Bach similarly praised Grant. They emphasized that he was the first Union general to successfully implement both an effective military vision and execution to defeat the Confederacy.¹⁶ Both authors broke with historical perspectives to provide alternative analysis.

By 1961 perspectives began shifting more with the simultaneous advent of the Civil War's centennial and the “Second Reconstruction,” or Civil Rights movement.¹⁷ Sociopolitical narratives altered historical interpretations of constructs and sources researched. Authors Bruce Catton, Kenneth P. Williams, and T. Harry Williams encouraged a paradigm shift in the historiography by separating Grant's military greatness from political follies.¹⁸ By separating

¹⁴ Ernest B. Furgurson, *Not War but Murder: Cold Harbor 1864* (New York: Random House, 2002), ix, 49. Furgurson still attributes Grant's operational success due to the incredible amount of “Yankee hordes” that rushed head-on against Confederate soldiers, showing that the anti-Grant mentality is still alive in publications today.

¹⁵ Maj. Gen. J.F.C. Fuller, *The Generalship of Ulysses S. Grant* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1977), 199, 375; Maj. Gen. J.F.C. Fuller, *Grant and Lee: A Study in Personality and Generalship* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 57-58, 93. Both books argue that Grant was a superior strategist and deserves credit for winning the war. Fuller claims that Lee sacrificed his troops in frontal assaults more often and continued to do so until he did not have enough to do so. This argument stands out, as many attributed this to Grant's actions during the campaign.

¹⁶ Frederic Logan Paxson and Christian A. Bach, “Ulysses S. Grant,” in *Dictionary of American Biography* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1931), 492-501.

¹⁷ Broomall, “Ulysses S. Grant,” 642-643.

¹⁸ Thomas Harry Williams, *Lincoln and His Generals* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1952), 313. Williams contrasts as a centennial author that did not support the “Lost Cause Myth.” Like Fuller, Williams believes that Grant, judged by modern standards, was the greatest general of the Civil War. Historians often forget in their perspectives that Grant enacted a grand strategy that incorporating two

Grant as general from Grant as a politician, historians were free to develop a objective assessment of Grant's strategic methodologies.

Historians have also traditionally characterized Grant's operations in the context of two classical military strategies: annihilation and attrition. Annihilation proponents posit that Grant sought to immediately destroy and annihilate Lee's combat power through one massive, decisive battle. Attrition proponents assert that Grant leveraged overwhelming forces to destroy Lee's army through attrition, focusing on the erosion of Confederate combat power through constant engagements.

Harry T. Williams, Russell F. Weigley, J. F. C. Fuller, Frederick Trevor Hill, and Adam Badeau are representative of the annihilation camp and argue that Grant sought to achieve victory through the Napoleonic war tactics which resulted in annihilation which were in accord with Lincoln's political objectives. In *McClellan, Sherman, and Grant*, Williams argues Grant intended to force Lee into a showdown battle to end the war immediately. The continuation of the conflict created political uncertainty thereby stoking Lincoln's fears regarding political reelection.¹⁹ In Williams' manuscript, *Lincoln and His Generals*, he further asserts that Grant "preferred the quicker decision of battle," but was willing to destroy Lee by siegecraft if that was the only option.²⁰ In *The American Way of War*, Weigley emphasizes Grant's strategy of destruction to force the complete and quick overthrow of the enemy as akin to Carl von Clausewitz' ideas. Weigley based his argument on the fact that the war was not popular and its continuation could cost Lincoln the presidency. However, Weigley presents a more nuanced

theaters, whereas Lee only focused on Virginia. Williams articulates that within the theater, Lee "often demonstrated more brilliance and apparent originality than Grant, but this most audacious plans were as much the product of the Confederacy's inferior military position as his own fine mind...Fundamentally Grant was superior to Lee because in a modern total war, he had a modern mind, and Lee did not."

¹⁹ Thomas Harry Williams, *McClellan, Sherman and Grant* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1909), 107.

²⁰ Williams, *Lincoln and His Generals*, 300, 319.

image of Grant. He recognizes that while Grant was a practitioner of Napoleonic operational techniques, he also understood one battle would not suffice. Grant developed his approach for the “purpose of fighting and taking lives,” not trading casualties.²¹ Meanwhile, Fuller believed Grant’s campaign was an approach designed to either “annihilate [Lee] or hold through hitting, while Sherman was to advance” on Lee’s rear through a concentrated effort at a decisive point of all armies.²² Hill emphasizes Grant’s discussions with MG George Meade before the campaign, establishing a focus on quick closure without excessive sacrifice of Union forces to obtain peace.²³ These authors all assert that Grant’s primary objective was destroying Lee’s army. They judged that Grant understood Lee’s army represented the most significant power of the enemy and that a war of annihilation was Grant’s preferred approach.

Conversely, other scholars argue that Grant’s strategy relied solely on attrition. Edward Pollard, an editor with the *Richmond Examiner* and one of the earliest historians of the war, wrote in *The Lost Cause* that Grant possessed no strategic vision; instead, Grant relied on momentum and numbers to overwhelm Lee.²⁴ Pollard described Grant as an opponent that did not care about losses in trying to defeat Lee’s army. In “Vulcan’s Anvil,” James Schneider of the School of Advanced Military Studies examines Grant’s operational reports from the war, asserting that, “by mere attrition, if by no other way, there should be nothing left to him by an equal submission.”²⁵

²¹ Russell F. Weigley, *The American Way of War* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1977), 129, 144-145.

²² Fuller, *The Generalship of Ulysses S. Grant* (1977), 216-219, 362-365.

²³ Frederick Trevor Hill, *On the Trail of Grant and Lee* (New York: Appleton-Century, 1942), 219-221.

²⁴ Mark Grimsley, *And Keep Moving On: The Virginia Campaign, May-June 1864* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), 236.

²⁵ LTG Ulysses S. Grant, “Report of LTG Grant, US Army, Commanding Armies of the United States, including operations March 1864 - May 1865,” 22 July 1865, in *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (hereafter referred to as the *OR*), 70 vols in 128 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), Series I, Volume 46, Part 2, 11; James Schneider, “Vulcan’s Anvil: The American Civil War and the Foundations of Operational Art,” Ike Skelton Combined Arms Research Library Digital Library: General Military History, last modified June 16, 1992, 43, accessed October 21, 2019, <http://cgsc.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/ref/collection/p4013coll11/id/9>.

Similarly, in “The Loose Marble - and the Origins of Operational Art,” Schneider argues that Grant’s actions required an attritional methodology focused on spatial and temporal distribution of Union forces; ultimately, this prevented a decisive battle but eventually overwhelmed the Confederacy. Instead of maneuvering forces in a single mass, Grant arrayed a series of widely distributed operations executed across numerous engagements.²⁶ Similarly, Mark Grimsley argues that Grant aimed to pound the Confederates, hoping to drive them to peace. Grimsley maintains that the only difference between Grant and previous generals is that Grant pursued his strategy to the end.²⁷ Unable to outmaneuver Lee’s forces, Grimsley simplifies Grant’s actions down to a widespread practice of trading casualties from the Wilderness through Petersburg. Regardless of Grant’s actions, these scholars concur that Grant used combat power to affect a gradual erosion of Lee’s manpower through attrition.

With the advent of the theory of operational art, a third category recently developed: the strategy of exhaustion. Newer assessments of Grant’s military capabilities focus on Grant incorporating attacks of both enemy forces and logistic considerations, to include “hard-war tactics.” Authors argue that through exhaustion, Grant sought to attack both the Confederate Army and the population’s will to fight, directly and indirectly, rendering the South’s military

Of note, while I agree with Schneider’s ideas, as with most arguments of attrition that rely on this summary of operations prior to January 1, 1865, by LTG Grant, the phrase “if in no other way,” often is misread. This seems to be a last result clause to achieve the President’s objectives.

²⁶ James J. Schneider, “The Loose Marble—and the Origins of Operational Art,” *Parameters* 29, no. 1 (March 1989): 85–99, accessed September 18, 2009, https://books.google.com/books?id=TMhLAQAAMAAJ&pg=PA85&lpg=PA85&dq=James J. Schneider, “The Loose Marble—and the Origins of Operational Art&source=bl&ots=gVClrhDJ&sig=ACfU3U0sUGs2CdW_M1q3v6w97W5q15G93Q&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjtxZO11uPIAhUFba0KHdx4Dz8Q6AEwBHoECAgQAQ#v=onepage&q=James J. Schneider, “The Loose Marble—and the Origins of Operational Art&f=false.

²⁷ Grimsley, *And Keep Moving On*, 223-239. Grimsley compares Grant’s actions to those of the Prussians in World War I. Grant executed what is considered today a Falkenhayn strategy, named after the Prussian Chief of Staff Erich Georg Anton von Falkenhayn during World War I. Falkenhayn, by 1916, recognized that a decisive victory was no longer possible in the Eastern or Western theaters, and pursued a strategy to achieve peace by maintaining constant pressure on both France, specifically Verdun, and Russia to drain their limited strategic means. Like Falkenhayn, Grimsley insinuates that Grant sought to put pressure on the Confederacy’s most significant strategic vulnerability - its combat power.

incapable of victory. Relying on strategies developed in the West, Union leadership concentrated on attacking the enemy's will and means to resist. Within the operational environment, advocates of exhaustion argue that Grant aimed to attack anything which could enable Lee's fighting capabilities.²⁸ Both Edward Hagerman's *The American Civil War and the Origins of Modern Warfare*, and Herman Hattaway and Archer Jones' *How the North Won*, establish that Grant designed his campaign to exhaust Lee's capabilities. Hagerman emphasizes the logistical and tactical orientation of Grant's strategy. Each book argues Grant pursued a modern total-war strategy, consisting of attritional and logistical exhaustion to force Confederate defeat. Hattaway and Jones posit that "Grant based his plan on what has been called the strategy of exhaustion. This strategy differs from attrition in that it does not aim to decimate, much less destroy, the combat power of the enemy's armed forces, but rather seeks to destroy their logistical support."²⁹ According to Hattaway and Jones, the strategy emerged because of the Union's failure to defeat the Confederacy through traditional strategies of annihilation or exhaustion by territorial acquisition.³⁰ Similarly, in *Civil War Command and Strategy: The Process of Victory and Defeat*, Jones writes that Grant saw both Northern industrial and manpower dominance as insignificant to

²⁸ Brian Linn and Russell F. Weigley, "The American Way of War Revisited," *The Journal of Military History* 66, no. 2 (2002): 504, accessed October 5, 2019, *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/3093069. Linn and Weigley define a strategy of annihilation as seeking the complete and immediate destruction of the enemy's combat power; a strategy of attrition as seeking the gradual erosion of the combat power of the enemy's army; and a strategy of exhaustion as seeking the gradual erosion of the enemy nation's will or means to resist.

²⁹ Herman Hattaway and Archer Jones, *How the North Won: A Military History of the Civil War* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 489. Hattaway and Jones state that Grant sought to exhaust enemy forces to render them less potent as he sought to do in Vicksburg, Chattanooga, and Knoxville. Edward Hagerman, *The American Civil War and the Origins of Modern Warfare: Ideas, Organization, and Field Command* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 250, 293. Although Hagerman also examines the same evidence as Schneider, he emphasizes that Grant annotated this after conducting operations. Grant acknowledged the difficulty of maneuvering against Lee's forces, which rendered victory through annihilation impossible. Hagerman states that "[w]hether justification after the fact for his difficulty in defeating Lee by maneuver, Grant's proclamation certainly captured the reality of the war of attrition that he in part fought."

³⁰ Hattaway and Jones, *How the North Won*, 487-496; Mark Grimsley, *The Hard Hand of War: Union Military Policy toward Southern Civilians 1861-1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 162-163.

the realities of the battlefield: superiority of the defense, modern weaponry, and the control and conquest of expansive Southern territory required a different approach.³¹

Grant's former aide, Adam Badeau, offers a detailed account of Grant's tenure as Union general in *Military History of Ulysses S. Grant*. Notably, Grant himself was actively involved in its creation, lending a unique perspective to his frame of mind and strategic intent. Badeau published in response to Southern partisans such as Edward A. Pollard, who touted Lee's military genius. Badeau identified Grant's strategy as "hard-war tactics," illuminating the necessity to destroy the Confederate Army to protect the nation from disintegrating.³² Along these same lines, Grimsley states in *The Hard Hand of War* that "Grant's final plan for the great 1864 campaign called for offensive operations along the entire military frontier... While the main armies grappled with one another in Virginia and northern Georgia, smaller Union detachments chipped away at Confederate war resources" to exhaust the enemy.³³

Clausewitz' dictum explains that if the political objective is the goal, then war planning cannot be created in isolation when war is the means to achieve it.³⁴ This dictum is pertinent and evident in Grant's decisions to modify strategy per Lincoln's aims and in response to Lee's actions within the changing strategic environment. Existing literature focuses on the three aforementioned strategies. However, individually these strategies do not adequately explain Grant's success against the Confederacy. They fail to provide a unifying methodology.

This monograph will illustrate that the three traditional, prevailing strategic arguments are inconsistent and do not fully support Grant's operations as standalone strategies. These views do not accurately portray Grant's approach, failing to show his continuous reframing of the

³¹ Jones, *Civil War Command and Strategy*, 184-186, 197.

³² Adam Badeau, *Military History of Ulysses S. Grant, from April 1861 to April 1865* (New York: D. Appleton, 1885), 150-151.

³³ Grimsley, *The Hard Hand of War*, 166.

³⁴ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. by Peter Paret and Michael Howard (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 87.

problem based on an understanding of the operational environment. Grant was a highly competent strategist who readjusted available military means to achieve ends supportive of Lincoln's political objectives. Grant's actions varied as the strategic environment dictated, but his objectives and end state remained constant throughout the campaign.

Research will focus on archival material, historiography, and theoretical frameworks to answer the proposed argument. An analytical comparison of Grant's initial strategy to ultimate execution will show his strategic understanding of Lincoln's objectives, as well as a skilled ability to reframe the problem to achieve a desirable military end state. Grant's operational orders, correspondence with senior members of the Union military and political leaders, biographies, and news articles during the dates of significant operations will show that Grant did not follow one type of strategy, but instead adapted as the strategic environment dictated.

Strategic Context and Alignment

Overview

This section analyzes the strategic environment in which Grant operated during his tenure as General-in-Chief of Union forces. The author will first examine Grant's initial strategy to defeat the Confederacy strategically before assuming the role of General-in-Chief. Grant's understanding of the strategic and operational environment will include a comparison between his initial approach and the changes in methodology after being advised of Lincoln's political objectives. Second, it examines Grant's actions from the Rapidan River to Cold Harbor through the lens of operational art. Army Doctrinal Publication 3-0: *Operations* defines operational art as "the pursuit of strategic objectives, in whole or in part, through the arrangement of tactical actions in time, space, and purpose" through the integration of ends, ways, and means.³⁵ Grant understood the necessity of operational art as a means of uniting strategy and political objectives. His campaign plan reflects a recognition of both objectives. Grant's continuous reassessment of the strategic and operational environment supported a synchronized military strategy which advanced Lincoln's political objectives and aims.

Grant's Initial Approach

Lincoln believed that the Union should seek the destruction of the Confederate Armies rather than the occupation of southern territory. In the Eastern theater, the Army of Northern Virginia, not Richmond, represented the Confederacy's ideals. Its destruction would cause the state and the Confederacy to fall. As such, the President's wanted "to destroy enemy forces, wherever they were, whenever opportunities arose to do so: in short, and above all else, to

³⁵ ADP 3-0, *Operations*, 2-1. The complete definition states *Operational art* is "the cognitive approach by commanders and staff—supported by their skill, knowledge, experience, creativity, and judgment—to develop strategies, campaigns, and operations to organize and employ military forces by integrating ends, ways, and means."

fight.”³⁶ Lincoln trusted that “bloodshed would compel [the Confederacy to] surrender, and that would kill the rebellious state.”³⁷ He argued that if the Confederate Army could reconquer captured territory, no other policy would win the war.³⁸

Before appointment to the commander of all Union forces in March 1864, Grant sent Halleck a proposal in January of that year for future campaigns. This exchange of ideas was the first time Grant offered strategic level options. His plan was drastically different from strategies executed the preceding three years and had a lasting effect on Lincoln. Grant proposed a concept based on his operational experiences and the strategic environment of the Mississippi River Valley. He suggested a persistent infantry-based raiding strategy to destroy Confederate logistical and transportation systems.³⁹ Grant’s idea of synchronization and cooperation between military elements was key to preventing the Confederate Army from massing and redistributing forces against Union operations.

Grant understood that the various campaigns implemented the previous three years could have been more effective if conducted in cooperation with each other. This position is consistent with Lincoln’s idea of concentration in time, or using all forces concurrently against enemy forces.⁴⁰ Grant’s vision was atypical in that it did not solely define victory as Union forces on

³⁶ John Lewis Gaddis, *On Grand Strategy* (London: Penguin Press, 2018), 237.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 237.

³⁸ Matthew Moten, *Presidents and Their Generals: An American History of Command in War*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 156; Harry Williams, *Lincoln and His Generals* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1952), 7; James M. McPherson, “Lincoln as Commander in Chief,” *Smithsonian.com*, last modified January 1, 2009, accessed November 12, 2019, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/lincoln-as-commander-in-chief-131322819/>. Lincoln attempted to motivate MG Joseph Hooker to destroy Lee’s Southern forces that invaded the North towards Gettysburg. Nevertheless, Hooker recommended instead that the Army of the Potomac should attack Richmond. Lincoln not only rejected this but also relieved him shortly after.

³⁹ Jones, *Civil War Command and Strategy*, 184-185; Edward Hagerman, *The American Civil War and the Origins of Modern Warfare: Ideas, Organization, and Field Command* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 244; Fuller, *The Generalship of Ulysses S. Grant* (1977), 216-219, 47. Grant believed that the current strategy of fighting, destroying, occupying Confederate territory, and attempting to seize Richmond was a failing strategy. This strategy was prevalent until 1864, where the objective of ending the war was the seizure of either Richmond or Washington.

⁴⁰ Moten, *Presidents and Their Generals*, 158.

destroying the Confederacy directly in battle. Rather, it included an option of utilizing an indirect approach. Grant sought to “starve Lee’s army and force him to abandon Virginia, follow the Union Army, and fight on [Union] terms to meet Grant’s threat.”⁴¹ Grant proposed a war of maneuver, repeating his Vicksburg concept of dividing the Confederacy into smaller slices.

The plan exhibited Grant’s understanding of one of the Federal Army’s most significant strategic deficiencies: a general lack of cooperation, cohesion, and synchronization on the battlefield between different armies. Grant recommended simultaneous operations by three independent armies. One element using men from the Army of the Potomac would sail to Norfolk and attack towards Raleigh to force Lee out of Richmond, protecting Union lines of communication. Simultaneously, Sherman would capture Atlanta from Chattanooga while destroying the southern east-west railroad network that linked Atlanta to greater Georgia and Mississippi. A third raiding force led by MG Nathaniel Banks would concurrently raid inland from Mobile, Alabama.⁴²

Lincoln rejected Grant’s initially proposed plan fearing a Confederate attack on Washington while the Army of the Potomac attacked North Carolina. In that event, Washington’s defensive force might be too weak to defend the city while supporting Grant’s plan. Lincoln was not willing to accept the risk and offer Lee the chance to attack the city.⁴³ Based upon input from Halleck, the President rejected Grant’s plan. Although Lincoln did not approve Grant’s plan, he appreciated Grant’s thought process and holistic approach to winning the war.

⁴¹ Matthew Moten, *Presidents and Their Generals*, 157.

⁴² MG Ulysses S. Grant to MG H.W. Halleck, 19 January, 1864, *OR*, Ser. I, Pt. 1, Vol. 33, 394-395.

⁴³ Williams, *Lincoln and His Generals*, 295-297; Joseph T. Glatthaar, *Partners in Command: The Relationships Between Leaders in the Civil War* (New York: Macmillan, Inc., 1994), 201.

The Strategic Environment

On 8 March 1864, Grant arrived in Washington to take command of Union forces. He encountered a radically different strategic environment. He had spent the previous three years of the war in the West. He had been insulated from the politics, leaders, and cultural underpinnings that shaped the attitudes of the rest of the Union. By 1864, the Union controlled the Mississippi River from St. Louis to New Orleans, splitting the Confederacy in two. West Virginia, Tennessee, and parts of Northern Virginia and Louisiana were Union-controlled, as well as posts along the coast.⁴⁴ Conversely, the East was stuck in a three-year stalemate. While the risk of defeat had long passed, the war continued to drain the life, blood, and resources out of the nation. However, unless the stalemate could be broken the war did not have an end in sight.⁴⁵ Although the North had achieved a few strategic territorial gains, the ongoing stalemate was a victory for the South. Moving into the 1864 political campaign season, the North still feared that a potential Confederate attack similar to those of 1862 and 1863. The political environment was problematic. Factors included the upcoming presidential election, expiration of enlistments, and declining political support for the war as reflected by a growing peace movement. The status quo heightened feelings of anxiety and uncertainty thereby diminishing Union resolve to fight for victory. The effect would be a recognition of Confederate independence.

⁴⁴ Ulysses S. Grant, *Memoirs and Selected Letters*, 475. Grant's understanding of the military situation at his assumption of command of the Union Army was the following: "[t]he Mississippi River was guarded from St. Louis to its mouth; the line of the Arkansas was held, thus giving us all the North-west north of that river. A few points in Louisiana not remote from the river were held by the Federal troops, as was also the mouth of the Rio Grande. East of the Mississippi we held substantially all north of the Memphis and the Charleston Railroad as far east as Chattanooga, thence along the line of the Tennessee and Holston rivers, taking in nearly all of the State of Tennessee. West Virginia was in our hands; and the parts of old Virginia north of the Rapidan and east of the Blue Ridge we also held. On the sea coast we had Fortress Monroe and Norfolk in Virginia.... Key West and Pensacola in Florida. The balance of the Southern Territory, an empire in extent, was still in the hands of the enemy."

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 512. Grant writes in his memoirs that by 1864, after three years of fighting, there had been no progress in ending the war and achieving the political objectives. Yet both the Confederate and Union Armies in the East suffered great losses from death by sickness, capture, and killed in battle with little to show for the efforts.

By spring 1864, the North balanced precariously as support for the war decreased and the desire for peace grew. In 1863, the Emancipation Proclamation formally changed Union policy from one of conciliation to an unconditional surrender. This proclamation directly impacted political objectives and resource requirements to conclude the war. The pursuit of unconditional surrender required more manpower; however, the government's premature closure of recruitment stations in 1862 and subsequent attempts at recruitment revival failed. As such, Congress passed the unpopular National Conscription Act in March 1863, igniting draft riots in New York City, Boston, and other Northern cities. The riots caused over \$2,000,000 in damage. The growing civil unrest also mandated a diversion of military resources to quell uprisings and enforce the law.⁴⁶ Meanwhile, congressional and gubernatorial candidates from Pennsylvania, New York, and Ohio campaigned on platforms of conciliation and peaceful resolution. Pennsylvania state Supreme Court judge George W. Woodward, running for governor of Pennsylvania, wrote that national conscription was "unconstitutional and inoperative in Pennsylvania."⁴⁷ If elected, he promised to recall all Pennsylvanian troops from fighting, believing reunion was unachievable by military means.⁴⁸ His sentiments were widely shared amongst would-be politicians running for office.

President Lincoln's re-nomination also grew increasingly insecure for the upcoming election of 1864. Prolonging the war was increasingly unpopular with voters.⁴⁹ Despite continued Union success against the Confederacy in the West, President Lincoln understood that voters determined his political future based on the stalemated Eastern front. Lincoln realized he needed a strategic-minded military leader to secure both his political future and a Union victory.

⁴⁶ Fuller, *The Generalship of Ulysses S. Grant* (1977), 216-219, 45.

⁴⁷ James McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 685.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 685.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 713.

Southern leaders also understood Lincoln's fragility. They planned an attritional strategy hoping war-weary voters would elect someone other than Lincoln. If a Peace Democrat won the next election, they hoped to negotiate Confederate independence and end the war. One Georgia newspaper asserted, "[i]f the tyrant at Washington be defeated, his infamous policy will be defeated with him," bringing peace.⁵⁰ Both sides assessed that the strategic environment hinged on the relationship between Grant's performance, Lincoln's reelection, and Confederate war aims before the upcoming 1864 campaign.

By June 1864, the threat of diminishing Northern numerical superiority and combat effectiveness complicated Lincoln's dilemma. The three-year 1861 enlistments of Union soldiers were set to expire three months after Grant's arrival in the East. Upon expiration, the Union stood to lose over 236,000 experienced soldiers.⁵¹ There was also a fear that remaining Federal forces were shirking duty, risk-averse, and morally weakened. Battle-hardened veterans comprised the current army, but newly conscripted recruits lacked the experience to secure victory. According to official records, Grant complained that for every five conscripted soldiers, "we don't get more than one effective" fighter.⁵² Union leadership worried that the campaigning Potomac Army would become hollowed out and ineffective. As such, Lincoln and Union leaders faced further constraints in ending the conflict.

Understanding Lincoln's Objectives

Before Grant's arrival in Washington, Lincoln had never met the man to whom he entrusted all Union forces. However, Lincoln believed he finally found a commander who

⁵⁰ Larry E. Nelson, *Bullets, Ballots, and Rhetoric: Confederate Policy for the United States Presidential Contest of 1864* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1980), 14. Grant, aware of Southern hopes, planned to defeat the rebel armies and end the war by November.

⁵¹ McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 720. The Army of Potomac only achieved a 50% reenlistment rate.

⁵² LTG Ulysses S. Grant, "Report of LTG Grant to Honorable E. M. Stanton, Secretary of War," 11 September 1864, in *OR*, Ser. I, Vol. 57, pt. 2, 783.

understood that “military leaders must subordinate themselves to political authorities,” something previous Generals-in-Chief lacked.⁵³ Unlike his predecessors, Grant was determined to support government policy. Evidence of this recognition is found in a letter to his congressional sponsor and nominator for Lieutenant General, Representative Elihu B. Washburn, Grant stated, “[w]hatever may be the orders of my superiors, and law, I will execute. No man can be efficient as a commander who sets his own notions above the law and those whom he is sworn to obey.”⁵⁴

Research provides little information on Grant and Lincoln’s meetings; however, an assessment of Grant’s Overland Campaign exhibits his understanding of Lincoln’s political objectives. Grant’s altered plan for 1864 reflected the political and psychological conditions within the Union.⁵⁵ Grant undoubtedly modified the upcoming campaign so that it encompassed Lincoln’s ideas of destroying Lee’s forces directly while “work[ing] all parts of the army together and somewhat towards a common center.”⁵⁶

Grant’s objective as identified by Lincoln was Lee. The shift in objective as mandated by Lincoln caused Grant to reassess Union military aims. Grant was the first commander to orient operations around Lee’s destruction. In his memoirs, Grant stated, “[t]o get possession of Lee’s Army was the first great object. With the capture of his Army, Richmond would necessarily

⁵³ Joseph T. Glatthaar, *Partners in Command*, 196. Glatthaar further articulates his perspective on political views. Grant acknowledges that regardless of his political opinions, his only sentiment as a Federal officer is to support the government, its laws, and flag, ensuring their sustainment.

⁵⁴ Ulysses S. Grant to the Honorable E.B. Washburn, 22 March 1862, in *The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant: Volume 4 January 8-March 31, 1862*, ed. John Y. Simon, and Roger D. Bridges, Vol. 4, (London: Southern Illinois University Press, 1972), 408; Everett Carl Dolman, *Pure Strategy: Power and Principles in the Space and Information Age* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 17. Dolman argues that based on Clausewitz’ subordination of war to politics, like Grant portrays, there should be a synergistic and subordinate relationship between military and political leaders.

⁵⁵ Brooks. D. Simpson, *Let Us Have Peace: Ulysses S. Grant and the Politics of War and Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 55.

⁵⁶ Ronald C. White, *American Ulysses: A Life of Ulysses S. Grant* (New York: Random House, 2017), 329; Grant, *Memoirs and Selected Letters*, 673; LTG Ulysses S. Grant to MG George G. Meade, April 9, 1864, in *OR*, Ser. I, Vol. 33, Pt. 1, 827-829; Brooks. D. Simpson, *Let Us Have Peace*, 55.

follow.”⁵⁷ Grant’s actions reflected the premise that war is an act of policy.⁵⁸ For Lincoln and Grant, the driving political aim was the reunification of the Union. Lincoln viewed the destruction of the Army of Northern Virginia as a condition precedent to the realization of this goal. Ultimately, Grant crafted campaign orders to support the military end state and conditions to win the war, while honoring Lincoln’s intent.

Grant Adjusts His Plan

Grant’s plan incorporated Lincoln’s strategic aim of destroying the Confederate Army and ending the war under the President’s terms.⁵⁹ However, Grant’s ability to achieve Lincoln’s aims was limited by the reality of the strategic environment. He worked within the imposed constraints to devise operations supportive of the President’s bid in the upcoming presidential election. Reelection would evidence continued public support which would allow Lincoln to preserve the Union.

Grant was tasked with developing a plan that would result in continued support of the war. He had to do so while recognizing that timelines imposed by pending enlistment contract expiration would alter the readiness of his armies. Grant needed experienced veterans and superior Union manpower to maintain numerical advantages over the Confederacy. Lastly, he understood he must protect Washington from invasion by Lee’s forces.⁶⁰ With all these factors in

⁵⁷ Grant, *Memoirs and Selected Letters*, 485.

⁵⁸ Clausewitz, *On War*, 87. Clausewitz stated, “[i]f we keep in mind that war springs from some political purpose, it is natural that the prime cause of its existence will remain the supreme consideration in conducting it...[P]olitical aims remain the first consideration.” John Fabian Witt, *Lincoln’s Code: The Laws of War in American History* (New York: Free Press, 2012), 185. While Grant’s actions supported Clausewitz’ dictum, the first English edition was not published until ten years after the Civil War in England.

⁵⁹ Eliot A. Cohen, *Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen and Leadership in Wartime* (New York: Anchor Books, 2003), 30-31.

⁶⁰ Fuller, *The Generalship of Ulysses S. Grant* (1991), 215. In 1862 and 1863, Lee launched two invasions North which affected Northerners’ support for the war.

mind, Grant opted for an overland approach that worked within the limitations of the strategic environment and Lincoln's goals.

Grant intended to fight Lee between Richmond and Washington. He pursued the strategic objective through distributed maneuver, or the arrangement of tactical actions in time, space, and purpose to "maneuver opponents out of position through the depths of a theater of operations."⁶¹

The main blow would be struck by the Army of the Potomac (commanded by General Meade) against the Army of the Northern Virginia (commanded by General R.E. Lee), while simultaneous subsidiary offensives would be launched in other theaters: by Sherman in Georgia (against General Joseph E. Johnston); by Sigel in the Shenandoah Valley in combination with Crook in West Virginia; by Butler from the mouth of the James River; and by Banks from new Orleans against Mobile.⁶²

Grant designated Meade as the decisive operation, providing him the most amount of combat power: approximately 120,000 soldiers, including IX Corps. Butler and the Army of the James would join Meade near Richmond to support his attack against Lee with 30,000 soldiers. Sigel would invade the Shenandoah Valley with 9,000 men along with BG George Crook's 8,500 men to disrupt Lee's lead mines, saltworks, and supply lines while attempting to draw Confederate forces away from Grant.⁶³ Meade, Butler, and Sigel and their 170,000 soldiers would remain

⁶¹ Schneider "The Loose Marble - and the Origins of Operational Art." Schneider articulates distributive maneuver as one of the principles of modern operational art where the decisive battle was not always the "crown" result, but to create a situation which enabled a military force to annihilate the enemy by choosing to engage at their choosing. This maneuver requires aggressive maneuvering, which if failing, can lead to attritional warfare, as seen by Meade's actions at the battles of the Wilderness, Cold Harbor, and initially at Petersburg.

⁶² Alfred H. Burne, *Lee, Grant, and Sherman: A Study in Leadership in the 1864-65 Campaign* (Aldershot, GB: Gale and Polden, 1938), 6; Ulysses S. Grant, *The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant*, V10, edited by David L. Wilson (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1982), 237-238, 331-332. Grant was deliberate when dictating his end state and operational objectives, yet, he did not provide details beyond initial actions to subordinates. This is because Grant, as experienced in the Western theater, was comfortable with altering means and directing subordinates as the situation dictated. Only twice did Grant dictate subsequent actions by military leaders: once to Butler regarding possible responses to Lee's actions and another to Sherman, pertaining to Johnson if he moved north attempting to support Lee. Everett Carl Dolman, *Pure Strategy*, 12. This is similar to Dolman's example of strategy, which generally is the process of matching ends with means to achieve an objective.

⁶³ David W. Hogan Jr., *The Overland Campaign, 4 May-15 June 1864* (Washington, DC: US Army Center of Military History, 2014), 12.

under Grant's supervision.⁶⁴ Facing LTG Joseph E. Johnston in Georgia, Sherman maintained approximately 110,000 soldiers.⁶⁵ His objectives were to destroy Johnston's forces in Georgia and inflict damage on Confederate war resources. Grant focused his actions, ensuring the two main Union Armies would have a two to one numerical advantage over Lee and Johnston. With each facing imminent Union threat, they would not be able to reinforce the other.⁶⁶

Lincoln was enthusiastic upon hearing Grant's new plan. Moreover, he was thrilled to have a commander whose concept of war mirrored his own.⁶⁷ Grant organized Union forces to support his objectives, planning on "sound calculation and co-ordination of the end and the means."⁶⁸ He understood how to distribute the Union Army's resources, specifically its manpower, proportionately to the value of the objectives. As such, Grant oriented the most substantial element against the Army of Northern Virginia.

Grant's plan also changed in a contemporary Jominian sense.⁶⁹ He adjusted prevailing Northern strategies and operational objectives, ending the era of Union commanders attempting

⁶⁴ Simpson, *Let Us Have Peace*, 56. Part of the calculations into Grant's approach was an understanding that both Sigel and Butler were political generals whom the President maintained due to political support in the upcoming election. Grant originally wished to change both commanders; however, the strategic environment did not support the decision.

⁶⁵ Hill, *On the Trail of Grant and Lee*, 224; Burne, *Lee, Grant, and Sherman*, 74.

⁶⁶ Hill, *On the Trail of Grant and Lee*, 225.

⁶⁷ Moten, *Presidents and Their Generals*, 159; Cohen, *Supreme Command*, 208.

⁶⁸ B.H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy: Second Revised Edition* (New York: Meridian, 1991), 322.

⁶⁹ See Baron De Jomini, *The Art of War*, translated by G. H. Mendell and W.P. Craighill, (Radford: Wilder Publications, 2008), 66-68. Grant change Union actions from attacking what Jomini considered geographical objective points to maneuver objective points. Previous Union strategies focused on Richmond, or a geographical objective point, as it was the seat of power of the enemy government. geographical objective points represent the Napoleonic style of warfare. Alternatively, Grant focused on points related to the destruction of enemy forces. Like Lincoln, he understood that the best means to destroy the Confederacy was to destroy the Confederate Army. Grant assessed that as armies fall, countries fall with no organized force to protect the capitol. William B. Feis, *Grant's Secret Service: The Intelligence War from Belmont to Appomattox* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), 207. Feis argues that Grant could achieve this in one of two ways. He sought to fight Lee on open ground but would fight wherever provided the opportunity, such as the Wilderness. Even if Lee withdrew, Feis argues that Grant knew that it would only delay the inevitable based on Grant's approach. Both authors stress that to achieve Lincoln's objectives, Grant must destroy the Confederacy's military strength. At some point, Grant would have to engage and destroy Lee's forces in battle, as this was the only way to guarantee the death of the rebellion.

to destroy the Confederacy by taking its capital and territory. The goal shifted to become the destruction of the two Confederate Armies. This goal would drive Grant's decisions during the entirety of his command. Though unable to unite the Union Armies into one cohesive force, Grant skillfully coordinated and concentrated their effects, simultaneously moving into the Confederate interior.⁷⁰ In response, Lincoln said, "[t]hose not skinning can hold the leg" upon hearing Grant's strategy.⁷¹

Grant's actions exhibit an adept reframing of the problem, incorporating the strategic environment as well as Lincoln's aims to achieve strategic alignment. Grant understood that to execute military operations without understanding the President's objectives is illogical. Strategically, Grant's response was tailored to the problems posed by the strategic environment, Lincoln's aims, and the character of the Confederacy.⁷² As described by the President's secretaries, John George Nicolay and John M. Hay, Grant understood that "[e]very war is begun, dominated, and ended by political considerations;" war and politics are undividable and interdependent.⁷³ On the eve of the spring campaign, Lincoln wrote to Grant of his "satisfaction with what [Grant] had done... You are vigilant and self-reliant; and, pleased with this, I wish not to obtrude any constraints or restraints upon you."⁷⁴ It is clear that time spent together in Washington enabled Grant to successfully incorporate the President's concerns, into an effective plan.

⁷⁰ Grant, *Memoirs and Selected Letters*, 781-786.

⁷¹ Donald Stoker, *The Grand Strategy: Strategy and the U.S. Civil War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 353.

⁷² Stoker, *The Grand Strategy*, 418.

⁷³ Cohen, *Supreme Command*, 51; William Roscoe Thayer, *The Life and Letters of John Hay* (London: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1915), 112; Simpson, *Let Us Have Peace*, 57. Simpson demonstrates that Grant did not have the luxury of executing a campaign separate of political considerations. Grant was against a timeline ending with the upcoming presidential elections.

⁷⁴ Abraham Lincoln, "President Abraham Lincoln to LTG Ulysses S. Grant," April 30, 1864, in *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, Vol. 7, ed. Roy P. Basler, Marion Dolores Pratt, and Lloyd A. Dunlap (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 324.

Grant's Attack South

Grant's plan centered around establishing a unified "strategic direction and to end the war in the shortest possible time, as...the political condition of the North brooked no delay."⁷⁵ The Presidential election would take place in November 1864, and Lincoln's reelection was the lynchpin of restoring the Union and defeating the Confederacy. Grant realized that this was his primary objective causing him to readjust the concentration and distribution of Union forces as needed. He maintained strategic flexibility and never wavered from the objective which was the destruction of Lee's army.⁷⁶

On the evening of 3 May, Grant crossed the Rapidan River with Meade and the Army of the Potomac. Grant set out to finally destroy Lee's army, a task that had broken "[Irwin] McDowell, McClellan, [John] Pope, [Ambrose] Burnside, and [Joseph] Hooker, and which had halted Meade."⁷⁷ He concentrated the Union corps into five powerful elements, "distribut[ing] them according to the demands of strategy."⁷⁸ Grant viewed the Army of the Potomac as the decisive operation. Butler, with the Army of the James, served as a supporting operation along Grant's left-wing.⁷⁹ Sherman simultaneously attacked Johnson's army from Chattanooga, Tennessee, attempting to destroy the other significant Confederate Army.

Operationally, Grant first needed to decide on attacking above or below Lee's position along the Rapidan River. Grant made the calculated move to strike below and east at Lee's right flank. This choice afforded him flexibility, presented maneuverable terrain, and secured the

⁷⁵ Fuller, *The Generalship of Ulysses S. Grant* (1991), 359.

⁷⁶ Gaddis, *On Grand Strategy*, 24.

⁷⁷ Fuller, *The Generalship of Ulysses S. Grant* (1991), 210.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 209.

⁷⁹ Earl Schenck Miers, *The Last Campaign: Grant Saves the Union* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1972), 40.

Union Army's communication lines against attack.⁸⁰ Grant determined this facilitated "a strategic situation so advantageous that if [the size of the force did] not of itself produce [a] decision, its continuation by a battle" was sure to force Lee into a calamitous battle.⁸¹

Grant's decision to congruently incorporate three commands in northern Virginia aimed at dislocating Lee's entrenched disposition. The simultaneous attacks overwhelmed the ability of the Confederate force to respond in a meaningful way. Grant sought to dislocate Lee from prepared defenses. By doing so, he created opportunities to control the direction and momentum of the campaign. By seizing the initiative, he deprived Lee of operational and temporal control. Lee was required to separate forces into reactive elements that could not support one another. Grant's attack would force Lee to fight multiple, independent, and simultaneous engagements without localized internal support lines. Finally, Grant's actions would compel Lee to fight both engaged in combat and maintaining the protection of Richmond and his supplies.⁸² Grant's strategy overwhelmed Lee's ability to meet his conflicting objectives."⁸³

The Wilderness

Grant moved southwest from Chancellorsville, directing Meade to seize all road networks, affording him multiple opportunities in countering Lee's possible reactions. However, the Potomac Army stumbled into Confederate infantry along the Orange Turnpike. Grant and Meade broke with their maneuver plan, instead improvising to attain the objective: engaging

⁸⁰ Union operations always considered the risk to lines of communication, especially the threats from both the Confederate cavalry commander Jeb Stuart and John Singleton Mosby's guerrilla band.

⁸¹ Dolman, *Pure Strategy*, 12. According to Dolman's definition of a good strategy, Grant's decision best led to a strong probability of recurring or continuing advantage. Hart, *Strategy*, 325. As discussed by Hart, the purpose of Grant's strategy was to diminish Confederate resistance.

⁸² Hart, *Strategy*, 326.

⁸³ Richard K. Betts, "Is Strategy an Illusion?," *International Security* 25, no. 2 (2000): 5–50, accessed October 15 2019, doi:10.1162/016228800560444, 21. Richard Betts' discussion in "Is Strategy and Illusion" further supports Hart's approach.

Lee.⁸⁴ Critics of Grant assert that he lost the battle tactically. In two days of heavy fighting the Union was unable to annihilate Lee's forces, with the Union and Confederate Armies suffering nearly 18,000 and 11,000 casualties respectively. However, despite losses, Grant ultimately achieved strategic superiority. He succeeded in engaging Lee's army, forcing him to reposition, and denying Confederate operational initiative. Grant was able to direct operational tempo for the duration of the campaign.⁸⁵

Grant understood he could not decisively defeat Lee in the tangled woodlands, so he adjusted his approach, forcing Lee to fight on Grant's terms. Grant broke the Potomac Army's paradigm of retreating across the Rapidan and Rappahannock Rivers following heavy fighting. Neither the strategic environment nor Lincoln's objectives would support a retreat. Instead, Grant ordered Union soldiers to advance around Lee's right flank.⁸⁶ In May 1864, Grant delivered a report to Lincoln, stating: "Whatever happens, there is to be no turning back."⁸⁷ In response, Lincoln was exuberant - Grant confirmed Lincoln's choice in a general who supported the Union's strategic aims. By Grant's continued attack following the Wilderness, Lee lost the operational offensive. J.F.C. Fuller articulates that though Lee could still maneuver forces, Confederate losses were significant enough that Lee lost control of the operational tempo.

⁸⁴ Brooks D. Simpson, *The Civil War in the East: Struggle, Stalemate, Victory* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2013), 103; Stephen W. Sears, *Lincoln's Lieutenants: The High Command of the Army of the Potomac* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018), 628-645. Sears provides a detailed account of the tactical actions during the Wilderness, emphasizing the mistakes and slow responses made by the Union Army.

⁸⁵ Sears, *Lincoln's Lieutenants*, 645; Hogan, *The Overland Campaign, 4 May–15 June 1864*, 26. Hogan prescribes that the battle was a draw, with Grant inflicting significant damage on Lee. Hogan believes Grant did not see the battle as an end in itself, but as a series of engagements to destroy Lee's Army, causing Grant to continue Union movement Southeast.

⁸⁶ Theodore Lyman, *Meade's Headquarters, 1863-1865: Letters of Colonel Theodore Lyman from the Wilderness to Appomattox*, ed. George R. Agassiz (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2007), 102. Lyman served under Meade from 2 September 1863 to 20 April 1865, as aide de camp and headquarters archivist. According to Lyman, Grant remarked that Joe Johnston would have retreated after such punishment, acknowledging the differences between the two campaigns.

⁸⁷ Sears, *Lincoln's Lieutenants*, 646; Henry E. Wing, *When Lincoln Kissed Me: A Story of the Wilderness Campaign* (New York: The Abington Press, 1913), 38.

Consequently, Lee was never able to launch another large-scale attack like those of 1862 and 1863.⁸⁸

Spotsylvania

Following the Wilderness, Grant recognized that controlling the crossroads of Spotsylvania would place the Union Army between Lee and Richmond.⁸⁹ Lee would face the “unpalatable alternatives of either attacking Grant in relatively open terrain, where Union artillery would dominate, or withdrawing without a battle to Richmond against an opponent who would have access to better roads and the inside track.”⁹⁰ Spotsylvania also enabled three different routes to threaten Lee and Richmond, as well as access to northern Virginia if Lee would not fight immediately. Unfortunately, the Union Army’s inability to react quickly allowed the Confederates arrive first. As a result, these forces clashed between 8-21 May. On 11 May, Grant reiterated his conviction to support Lincoln’s objectives in destroying the Army of Northern Virginia in a letter to Halleck, stating, “I propose to fight it out on this line if it takes all summer.”⁹¹ Despite being out of the woods and on better terrain, Union inaction failed to overwhelm and solidify tactical successes, leading to a draw.

By the end of the fighting, casualties represented approximately 18,000 Union men and 13,000 Confederates.⁹² Despite tactical shortfalls like the Wilderness, Spotsylvania represented a

⁸⁸ Fuller, *The Generalship of Ulysses S. Grant* (1991), 239, 272; Gordon C. Rhea, *On to Petersburg: Grant and Lee, June 4-15, 1864* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2017), 10. Lee acted boldly, discovering Grant and Meade’s forces maneuvering through the Wilderness. He seized the initiative fighting the Union to a stalemate unexpected Grant’s continuous offensives in the weeks to follow.

⁸⁹ LTG Ulysses S. Grant to MG Meade, 7 May 1864, *OR*, Ser 1, Vol. 36, Pt. 2, 481.

⁹⁰ Hsieh Williamson, *A Savage War*, 274.

⁹¹ LTG Ulysses S. Grant to MG H.W. Halleck, 11 May 1864, *OR*, Ser. I, Vol. 36, Pt. 2, 627. Grant believed that after six heavy days of fighting, although his losses were heavy, the Confederacy suffered equally, if not more, leading to the pursuit of his current strategy.

⁹² Fuller, *The Generalship of Ulysses S. Grant* (1991), 255; Sears, *Lincoln’s Lieutenants*, 646. Sears provides a detailed casualty report by corps following the two days of the Wilderness.

strategic success for Grant. It demonstrated the Confederacy's shift to a reactive operational and strategic defensive posture. Grant also realized that the approach of attacking fortified positions would not succeed. This recognition supported Grant's commitment to maneuvering around Lee: "It is a rule that, when the rebels halt, the first day gives them a good rifle-pit; the second, a regular infantry parapet with artillery in position; and the third a parapet with an abatis in front and entrenched batteries behind."⁹³

Butler, Sigel & Sheridan: Simultaneous & Sequential Operations

During the Wilderness and Spotsylvania battles, Grant executed simultaneous and sequentially staged operations. Butler and Sigel attacked Southern forces at the same time to engage other elements of Confederate forces. Sheridan then attacked the Confederate rear. All three operations sought to destroy Confederate materials and supplies, while denying them the ability to reinforce or support the Army of Northern Virginia. Grant hoped to force Lee to fight alone, the main army weakened and unsupported by Johnson to leave Lee isolated.

On 5 May, Butler and the Army of the James landed at Bermuda Hundred. This position was seven miles from the Richmond and Petersburg Railroad, ten miles from Petersburg, and fifteen miles from Richmond. This location was strategically important because Butler could menace two major southern cities and four railroads which were significant components to the logistics of the Confederacy south of Petersburg. Butler's landing mandated that Lee divert troops and supplies from the Army of Northern Virginia to address this emerging rearguard threat. The physical proximity to Grant made it feasible for Grant to join Butler in the pursuit of Lee in the event that Lee retrograded to Richmond instead of fighting.⁹⁴

On 12 May Butler elected to advance on Richmond which was defended by Confederate GEN Pierre G.T. Beauregard. The soundness of Grant's strategy appears to have been validated

⁹³ Lyman, *Meade's Headquarters*, 100.

⁹⁴ Grimsley, *The Hard Hand of War*, 123-124.

by the fact that Beauregard requested 15,000 troops to reinforce his position.⁹⁵ Moreover, as of 13 May, the Confederate defensive positions in Petersburg were lacking. However, Butler failed to press his advantage and did not attack the inadequately defended city. In fact his timidity allowed a Confederate force of 10,000 to trap him between the James and Appomattox Rivers.⁹⁶ Grant could not fathom Butler's inability to occupy 10,000 Confederates. Butler's inept leadership caused Grant to transfer MG Baldy Smith's Eighteenth Corps away from Butler to the Army of the Potomac to make better use of these resources.⁹⁷

The goal of Sigel's invasion of the Shenandoah Valley was to isolate components of the Confederate Army by depriving it of access to the resources and communications with the western theater.⁹⁸ Grant's plan was conceptually sound. However, Confederate GEN John C. Breckinridge quickly defeated Union forces at New Market on 15 May.⁹⁹ Moreover, with Sigel's defeat, the Valley was now securely under Southern control. Lee was able to maintain Confederate communications and supply lines. The failure of Butler and Sigel to realize their strategic objectives allowed Beauregard and Breckenridge to supply Lee with 2,500 and 7,000 troop reinforcements from the Valley and Richmond.

Grant utilized Sheridan's cavalry to strike a significant blow to Lee's operational effectiveness. Grant dispatched Sheridan's seven brigades to attack Confederate communication

⁹⁵ Sears, *Lincoln's Lieutenants*, 671.

⁹⁶ Simpson, *The Civil War in the East*, 105-106; Hogan, *The Overland Campaign*, 44; LTG Ulysses S. Grant, "Report of LTG Grant, US Army, Commanding Armies of the United States, including operations March 1864 - May 1865," 22 July, 1865, *OR*, Ser. I, Vol. 46, Pt. 1, 19. In Grant's words, Butler's army had "hermetically sealed itself up at Bermuda Hundred." It was "completely shut off from further operations directly against Richmond as if it had been in a bottle strongly corked."

⁹⁷ Sears, *Lincoln's Lieutenants*, 678.

⁹⁸ Witt, *Lincoln's Code*, 173. Sigel's operations to invade the Shenandoah Valley are reminiscent of Grant's actions at Fort Henry and Fort Donaldson. The Shenandoah Valley is also referred to as the "Valley" throughout Civil War literature.

⁹⁹ Edward H. Bonekemper III, *Lincoln and Grant: The Westerners Who Won the Civil War* (Washington, DC: Regnery History, 2015), 156-157.

lines, destroy Confederate cavalry commander GEN Jeb Stuart's forces, create confusion within the ranks, and weaken Lee's forces. Sheridan maneuvered around Lee, destroying elements of the Virginia Central and Fredericksburg Railroads towards Richmond. At the battle of Yellow Tavern, the Union cavalry earned their first decisive victory, killing Stuart and defeating three of the seven Confederate cavalry brigades two miles outside Richmond's outer defenses.¹⁰⁰

By detaching his cavalry from his primary force, Grant accepted the operational risk of incorporating non-linear engagements to achieve the strategic aim. This decision illustrates Grant's ability to leverage means asymmetrically across a greater space and time, despite the inability to effectively assail the enemy's flanks or rear during battle. Grant also exhibited an ability to transform the President's objectives into a military defined goal with a flexible operational plan, allowing him to react and deviate the means from the initial strategy. From tactical failures, Grant managed to "hew to the original objective because of...operational flexibility."¹⁰¹

North Anna

Grant hoped to capitalize on the devastating blow he had inflicted on Lee through the loss of Stuart. He sought to lure Lee into a battle by placing the Potomac Army between Lee and Richmond. On 23 May, Grant met Lee along the North Anna River. Over the next three days Grant attempted to overcome Lee's flank. The goal was to block Lee's access to the Virginia Central Railroad which was Lee's supply line and gave access to the Shenandoah Valley. If he was able to do so, he would ameliorate the effects of Sigel's failure and make it more difficult for Lee to utilize the valley's resources. However, by 25 May, Lee blocked Grant, fighting a series of

¹⁰⁰ Stephen W. Sears, *Lincoln's Lieutenants*, 666-67. During the raid, Sheridan's forces destroyed warehouses containing 915,000 rations of bacon, 504,000 rations of bread, medical stores, and a reported ten miles of track, while also liberating 378 Federal captives.

¹⁰¹ James J. Schneider, "Theoretical Implications of Operational Art," in *On Operational Art*, ed. Michael D. Krause and Clayton R. Newell (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 1994), 20. Schneider offers twelve characteristics of distributed free maneuvers of operational art. Of the twelve, Grant incorporates multiple elements as he develops approaches to destroy the Army of Virginia.

small actions defending the rail junction. Lee, “again having the shorter line and being in possession of the main roads, was enabled to reach the North Anna in advance of us, and took position behind it.”¹⁰²

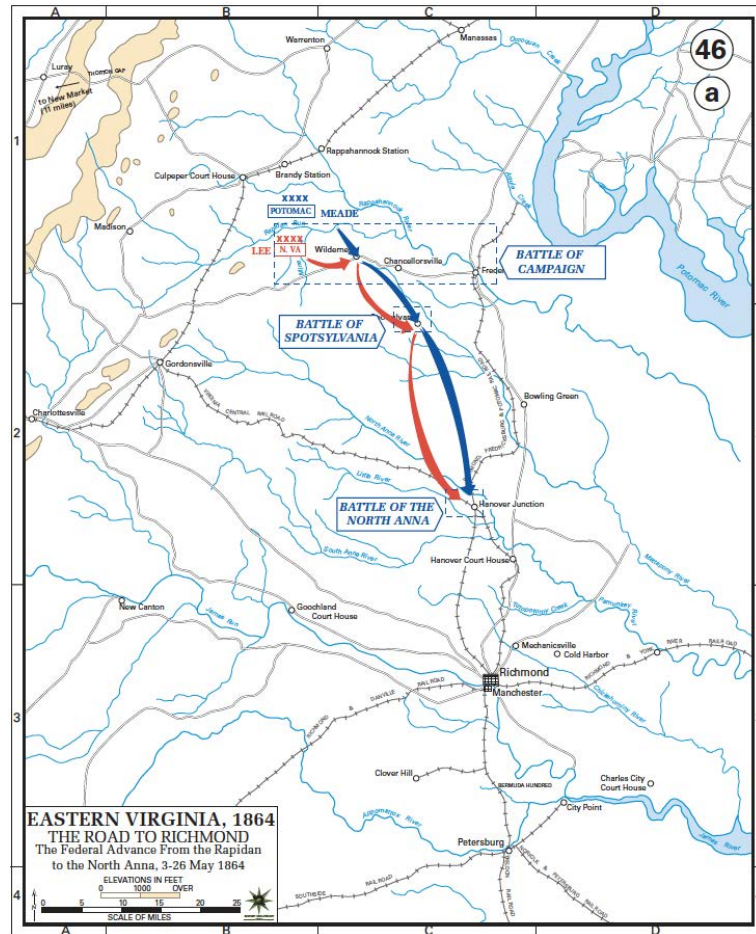


Figure 1: Grant’s Attack South: 3-26 May 1864. *The Road to Richmond, Federal Advance*, US Military Academy West Point, accessed January 27, 2020, https://www.westpoint.edu/sites/default/files/inline-images/academics/academic_departments/history/AmCivilWar/ACW46a.pdf.

Cold Harbor

Lee’s success at North Anna caused Grant to resume movement deeper into central Virginia. Grant ordered the cavalry to destroy the Richmond, Fredericksburg, and Petersburg railroads. This action severed these supply lines because eight miles of track north of the river

¹⁰² LTG Ulysses S. Grant, “Report of LTG Grant, US Army, Commanding Armies of the United States, including operations March 1864 - May 1865,” 22 July 1865, *OR*, Ser. I, Vol. 34, Pt. 1, 15.

was completely destroyed and incapable of being readily repaired. Control of the five-intersection road at Cold Harbor would theoretically enable Grant to position his forces between Lee and Richmond. However, Union commanders were again unable to maneuver quickly to capitalize on their numerical advantage by effectively combining their forces in the offensive against Lee. Frustrated and unable to move around the Army of Northern Virginia's defensive entrenchments, Grant attempted a last chance frontal assault to break Confederate lines on 3 June. This action resulted in approximately 3,500 casualties and realized no operational benefits. With both sides established in defensive positions, Lee decidedly would not leave "his fortifications for a battle royal."¹⁰³

Summary

Grant focused his efforts on Lee rather than Richmond because he understood that seizing Richmond meant nothing with Confederate armies still in the field. His operational objective remained unchanged: namely, the destruction of the Confederate Army in Virginia. Destruction of the Confederate Army would allow Grant to realize Union's strategic objective of forcing the Confederacy's unconditional surrender. Taking Richmond would be a victory, but it would do little to degrade the South's ability to wage war. Moreover, it would have an inverse impact on Lincoln's political priorities of bringing the war to a swift conclusion. Capturing territory would not extend enlistments, quell the calls for reconciliation, or guarantee Lincoln's reelection.

Grant was unsuccessful in his efforts to position the Potomac Army between Lee and Richmond north of the James River. The battles discussed above reflect the incorporation of three strategies to achieve Confederate defeat: strategic isolation of Lee's forces, operational

¹⁰³ Sears, *Lincoln's Lieutenants*, 696; LTG Ulysses S. Grant to General R.E. Lee, 5 June 1864, *OR*, Ser. I, Vol. 36, Pt. 3, 600. Recognizing efforts to break Lee's lines were futile, Grant sent Lee a request for a truce in order to pick up the dead and wounded suffering on the battlefield. This signifies Grant's recognition that attacks at this location would not secure his military aim.

deprivation of resources, and tactical destruction of the Army of Northern Virginia. However, Grant could not determine how to defeat an enemy army that knew “every stream, every road, every obstacle to the movement of troops and every natural defense... [and which] [t]he citizens were all friendly to him and his cause.”¹⁰⁴

Grant’s failure at Cold Harbor prevented Grant from maneuvering the “Army of Northern Virginia into the open, where the Union Army could destroy it.”¹⁰⁵ Although Grant was not able to realize his ultimate goal of vanquishing the Confederate Army, his efforts were still strategically advantageous because Grant’s continuous engagements prevented Lee from seizing the initiative. Lee remained on the defensive and was unable to launch attacks that would enable him to regain strategic balance and operational control. As a result, on 5 June Grant informed Halleck he was changing strategy.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ Grant, *Memoirs and Selected Letters*, 598.

¹⁰⁵ Hogan, *The Overland Campaign*, 67; Sears, *Lincoln’s Lieutenants*, 696. Of note, Grant requested the pontoon train from Washington sent to Fort Monroe on 26 May.

¹⁰⁶ LTG Ulysses S. Grant to MG George Meade, 5 June 1864, *OR* Ser. I, Vol. 36, Pt. 3, 599; LTG Ulysses S. Grant to MG H.W. Halleck, 5 June 1864, *OR*, Ser. I, Vol. 36, Pt. 3, 598. Grant states to Halleck that “[m]y idea from the start has been to beat Lee’s army...north of Richmond, then, after destroying his lines of communication north of the James River, to transfer the army to the southside...[and] follow him south if he should retreat.”

Petersburg

Overview

Grant's reassessment of the problem following the Federal Army's affixation at Cold Harbor culminated on 2 April 1865; Grant made Lee's position in Petersburg untenable, forcing an evacuation of the city and an abandonment of entrenchments.¹⁰⁷ The section first examines Grant's attempt to regain operational freedom following Cold Harbor. Grant sought to compel Lee into battle by seizing Petersburg and Lee's communications. Lee would have to concede Petersburg or engage Grant, and create a fait accompli of Confederate surrender by seizing Petersburg. Second, the section surveys Grant's strategic rapprochement, focusing on the successful incorporation of raiding and exhaustion strategies following two failed attempts to seize Petersburg directly.¹⁰⁸ The foci of the Petersburg study illustrates that Grant understood, interacted, and shaped the environment to destroy the Army of Northern Virginia and end the Civil War.

Grant's New Strategic Reality

Grant had hoped to defeat Lee by November 1864 to provide Lincoln momentum to win the presidential election. The assistant to the Secretary of War reported the situation to Washington during a visit to Cold Harbor: "[a]ll of [Lee's] railroads have been broken up [north of Richmond], all of northwest Virginia is destitute, deprived not only of supplies, but of laborers, so that the harvest which have been...[planted] cannot be harvested."¹⁰⁹ Lee's forces remained

¹⁰⁷ A. Wilson Greene, *Breaking the Backbone of the Rebellion: The Final Battle of the Petersburg Campaign* (Mason City: Savas Publishing Company, 2000), ii.

¹⁰⁸ Brian Matthew Jordan, "The Petersburg Campaign," in *The Blackwell Companion to the American Civil War*, ed. Aaron Sheehan-Dean (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2014), 521-539. Grant altered strategy based on the changing realities on the ground, testing different venues to the objective throughout the entirety of the campaign; he expanded focus beyond capturing large segments of breastworks.

¹⁰⁹ Benjamin P. Thomas and Harold M. Hyman, *Stanton: The Life and Times of Lincoln's Secretary of War* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1980), 304-305.

intact but Union efforts had severely weakened Lee's Army.¹¹⁰ In spite of these conditions, Grant was plagued by the fact that his generals failed to execute his strategic plan, and Lee refused to engage. Grant confirmed this reality to Washington, stating he could no longer expect "a battle [with Lee]...outside of entrenchments."¹¹¹

Grant failed to achieve a meaningful victory that would stymie the Peace Party's rising threat to Lincoln. Northerners also increasingly became cognizant of the war's human costs, witnessing its effects firsthand throughout the capital. Returning casualties from the front overwhelmed Washington. Hospitals sprang up all over the city and residents regularly viewed "torches of...ambulances lined up to receive [casualties and their] glittering reflections on the surface of the darkened Potomac."¹¹² Newspapers also published casualty lists, further decreasing public support.¹¹³ The presence of numerous wounded veterans in Washington was a constant reminder that the war was leaving a lasting mark on many of its citizens. Northern support and morale dwindled, amplifying the public demand for a swift victory or cessation of hostilities. Lincoln's reelection appeared lost - and with it the likelihood of failure in reuniting the country because the cost of maintaining the Union was too high.¹¹⁴

The continuous fighting through Cold Harbor left the ranks of the Potomac Army depleted. Moreover, the upcoming expiration of enlistment contracts for more than thirty

¹¹⁰ Alan T. Noland, *Lee Considered: General Robert E. Lee and Civil War History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 85.

¹¹¹ Ulysses S. Grant, *Memoirs and Selected Letters*, 433-434; LTG Ulysses S. Grant to MG H.W. Halleck, 5 June 1864, *OR*, Ser. I, Vol. 36, Pt. 3, 598. Grant informed Halleck that Lee was acting purely defensive accepting little risk with his remaining army. Grant felt that the Rebels could only continue their cause and protect themselves with strong entrenchments, and were unwilling to engage the Union without protection.

¹¹² Rhea, *On to Petersburg*, 91.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 122-123. Rhea cites the *Washington Chronicle*, which published a list of 18,000 missing soldiers and prisoners during operations on 21 May alone.

¹¹⁴ Clausewitz, *On War*, 92. Clausewitz states that once the expenditure of the effort exceeds the value of the political objective, it must be renounced and peace followed.

regiments, would deprive the Union Army of its most experienced veterans.¹¹⁵ Though Grant's forces were just shy of original strength - with Lincoln prepared to request more draftees - they were fresh recruits leaving their quality questionable.¹¹⁶

Grant needed a swift and decisive victory, but Lee blocked the path to Richmond, too well entrenched at Cold Harbor to dislodge him. He could neither maneuver nor withdraw; retrograding was perceived as abandoning the campaign - and another disaster for the Union. After suffering 40,000 casualties, Grant confessed to Halleck that continuous front assaults of Lee's fortifications would require too great a "sacrifice of human life than I am willing to make."¹¹⁷ Unable to coax Lee into an open fight, Grant informed Halleck he was altering his strategy and attacking Petersburg.¹¹⁸ Grant anticipated that this strategy would require Lee to abandon Cold Harbor to defend Petersburg. He had to balance the fact that withdrawing might suggest a Confederate victory against the political problems associated with continuing to take heavy casualties in what was in fact a stalemate that favored the South.

¹¹⁵ Rhea, *On to Petersburg*, 17-18.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 10, 13, 90. Lee only received approximately 8,000 reinforcements from forces returning from North Carolina and two brigades which recently fought Sigel's forces in the Shenandoah Valley. Lincoln requested an additional 500,000 draftees, exceeding Grant's requested 300,000.

¹¹⁷ LTG Ulysses S. Grant to MG H.W. Halleck, *OR*, Ser. I, Vol. 36, Pt. 3, 598-599; Ronald C. White, *American Ulysses*, 363. Grant altered his prepared plans to attack Richmond from the north. Alfred C. Young, "Numbers and Losses in the Armies of Northern Virginia [May-June, 1864]," *North and South Magazine*, no. 3, March 2000: 26-27; Donald Stoker, *The Grand Strategy*, 372. Stoker and Young assess Union casualties at 60,000, however, Grant's memoirs assess his total casualties at 39,259, citing a statement of losses compiled in the Adjutant-General's office. Grant's memoirs attribute 13,948 killed, wounded, and missing at the Wilderness from 5 May to 7 May; 13,601 casualties at Spotsylvania from 8 May to 21 May; 1,143 at North Anna from 23 May to 27 May; and 10,058 at Cold Harbor from 31 May to 12 June 1864. However, this does not include the subsidiary operations executed in conjunction with the Potomac Army.

¹¹⁸ Grant, *Memoirs and Selected Letters*, 597.

Reframing an Approach

First and Second Offensives

After Cold Harbor, Grant had few options: continue the current assault, stay at Cold Harbor, maneuver back northwest around Lee's left flank, or move south around the right flank across the James River.¹¹⁹ Grant realized crossing the James River, and capturing Petersburg would improve his chances of drawing Lee into open conflict.¹²⁰ Sitting along the Appomattox and James Rivers, Petersburg represented the transportation hub of the Confederate East.¹²¹ Protecting Petersburg was essential to protecting Richmond; its capture would compromise both Confederate communications and Richmond itself.¹²²

¹¹⁹ LTG Ulysses S. Grant to MG H.W. Halleck, OR, Ser. I, Vol. 36, Pt. 3, 598; LTG Ulysses S. Grant to MG H.W. Halleck, OR, Ser. I, Vol. 36, Pt. 2, 11. Grant describes his folly to Halleck on 5 June, stating, "A full survey of all the ground satisfies me that it would not be practicable to hold a line northeast of Richmond." Besides fighting in the same terrain he had already tactically failed, Grant believed he could not secure his supply lines from Fredericksburg to Cold Harbor. Similarly, maneuvering north of the James towards Richmond was also impossible due to Lee's nearness to the city and the impeding terrain around the Chickahominy River. This left Grant the option to strategically move around Lee's right flank south of the James River. This option also enabled Grant to use Union gunboats while ensuring secure communications while attempting to force Lee out of his entrenchments.

¹²⁰ Historians depict Grant's Petersburg actions as nine offensives. The first offensive includes Grant's action from the crossing of the James River (June 12-16, 1864) through the assault on Petersburg, or Second Battle of Petersburg (June 15-18, 1864). Grant's second offensive began shortly after the first, resulting in the Battle of Jerusalem Plank Road and the First Battle of the Weldon Railroad. It includes the Wilson-Kautz cavalry raid of late June 1864. Following these attempts, Grant admitted that the strategy of active campaigning directly against Petersburg would not succeed and issued orders to transition the campaign into a partial siege. These actions show Grant's reframing of his approach.

¹²¹ John Horn, *The Petersburg Campaign: June 1864-April 1865* (Conshohocken: Combined Books, 1993), 11-12. Five railroads connect Richmond and Petersburg to the entirety of the Confederacy. The Richmond-Petersburg Railroad linked the two cities. The Weldon Railroad joined Petersburg with the coastal regions of the Carolinas and Georgia. Petersburg also tied Virginia with Tennessee and the remaining forces in the west via the South Side Railroad. Petersburg connected to the deep-water port at City Point by the City Point branch of the South Side Railroad. Finally, the Norfolk and Petersburg Railroad tied the capital to the agriculture region west of the Blackwater River. At Burke's Station, the Richmond and Danville Railroad connected to the South Side Railroad also, connecting both Richmond and Petersburg with the Deep South.

¹²² Richard J. Sommers, *Challenges of Command in the Civil War: Generalship, Leadership, and Strategy at Gettysburg, Petersburg, and Beyond* (El Dorado Hills: Savas Beatie, 2018), 63.

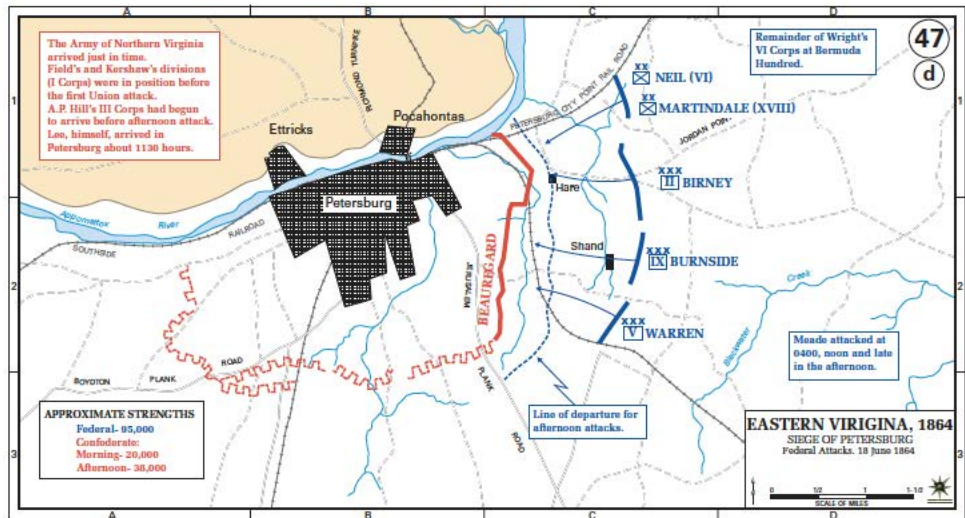


Figure 2: Petersburg, the Communication Hub of Virginia. *The Siege of Petersburg, 18 June 1864*, US Military Academy West Point, accessed February 3, 2020, https://www.westpoint.edu/sites/default/files/inline-images/academics/academic_departments/history/AmCivilWar/ACW47d.pdf.

Halleck recommended that Grant maintain the Army between the Confederate Army and Washington.¹²³ Instead, Grant developed an innovative and bold approach that also worked within the aims and limitations of the strategic environment.¹²⁴ From there, he could attack Petersburg, threaten Confederate communications, possibly compel Lee to forsake his fortifications, and force Lee to fight and defend logistic support of Richmond outside of defenses.¹²⁵

On 12 June, Grant maneuvered the Potomac Army across the James River intending to flush Lee into the open once again.¹²⁶ Lee did not anticipate Grant's southern movement to Richmond's backdoor. He was expecting another frontal assault against entrenched Confederate

¹²³ MG H.W. Halleck to LTG Ulysses S. Grant, 5 June 1864, *OR*, Ser. I, Vol. 36, Pt. 1, 11.

¹²⁴ Noah Andre Trudeau, *The Last Citadel: Petersburg June 1864-April 1865* (El Dorado Hills: Savas Beatie, 1991), 14.

¹²⁵ Greene, *A Campaign of Giants*, 42; Williams, *Lincoln and His Generals*, 318; MG H.W. Halleck to LTG Ulysses S. Grant, 5 June 1864, *OR*, Ser. I, Vol. 36, Pt. 3, 598. All but two of the railroads feeding Richmond from remaining Confederate territory funneled through Petersburg.

¹²⁶ Allan R. Millet and Peter Maslowski, *For the Common Defense: A Military History of the United States of America* (New York: The Free Press, 1984), 223.

positions. On 13 June, Lee dispatched MG Early from the Army of the Northern Virginia in an effort to relieve pressure by threatening Washington. However, Grant surprised Lee, who was perplexed as to Grant's destination and purpose - and it would take four days for Lee to understand Grant's intentions.¹²⁷ To distract Lee, Grant initiated simultaneous operations with Sheridan and MG Wade Hampton northwest of Richmond.¹²⁸ On 14 June, Grant advised Lincoln of his plan: "Our forces will commence crossing the James...The enemy shows no signs... of having brought troops to the south side of Richmond. I will have Petersburg secured, if possible, before they get there in much force."¹²⁹ In response, Lincoln replied, "I begin to see it. You will succeed. God bless you all."¹³⁰

On 15 June the battle for Petersburg commenced. Unfortunately, after overrunning the city's outer defenses, Butler and MG Winfield Scott Hancock failed to capture the city. By 16 June, Lee redistributed his forces, reinforcing Petersburg and repulsing the Potomac Army's efforts. On 18 June, Grant aborted the offensive, culminating his attempt to seize Petersburg after losing operational surprise, with time no longer on his side.¹³¹

Grant should have captured Petersburg and Richmond, along with their essential railroad centers. He believed that "Lee's army [was] really whipped," and articulated to Halleck that actions on the battlefield and demeanor of Confederate Army prisoners showed Lee had little fight left.¹³² Despite outmaneuvering and surprising Lee, Grant's first offensive failed; Lee was

¹²⁷ Millet and Maslowski, *For the Common Defense*, 222.

¹²⁸ Horn, *The Petersburg Campaign*, 37-46.

¹²⁹ LTG Ulysses S. Grant to MG H.W. Halleck, June 14, 1864, *OR*, Ser. I, Vol. 40, Pt. 2, 18-19. Lincoln often read all dispatches sent back to Washington regardless of whom they were addressed to as Command-in-Chief in order to remain afloat in the current situation.

¹³⁰ Abraham Lincoln, "President Abraham Lincoln to LTG Ulysses S. Grant, 15 June 1864," in *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Roy P. Basler, Marion Dolores Pratt, and Lloyd A. Dunlap (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1953), vol. 7, 548.

¹³¹ White, *American Ulysses*, 362-369.

¹³² Greene, *A Campaign of Giants*, 24. Grant emphasized Lee's dependence on only fighting in entrenchments. Similarly, Meade informed his wife that compared to Union forces, Southern morale was

once again entrenched in the city. Smith and Hancock did not sustain the initiative and undertake a night attack to capitalize on initial successes.¹³³

A week later, Grant launched a second offensive attempting to envelop the city and seize control of the two remaining rail lines south of the James River. Union forces already controlled both the Norfolk and Petersburg and the City Point Railroads. Grant hoped to trap Confederate forces against the river, destroying all railroad support for Richmond. Through three simultaneous operations, Grant established a pontoon bridge to the peninsula north of the James, attempted to secure the South Side Railroad, and launched cavalry raids against operational choke points. Grant threatened Richmond and Petersburg simultaneously, forcing Lee to reposition Confederate forces North. Meanwhile, Grant attempted to encircle Petersburg from the east, south, and west.

Lee effectively lost his remaining capacity to maneuver. Grant tied Lee to Richmond and Petersburg for the duration of the war, further isolating him from all other Confederate forces. Grant's attack solidified control of the strategic initiative and operational tempo, forcing Lee to react to Grant's moves even as his resources dwindled. Unfortunately, Lee routed the attack, halting attacks at the Battle of Weldon Railroad, and the Wilson-Kautz Raid. Both Union failures continued to represent a reoccurring theme: tactical failures of peripheral strategies.¹³⁴

Third & Fourth Offensives, and Peripheral Strategies

Again frustrated, Grant accepted that directly attacking Lee's forces in Petersburg would not force a surrender. Following the second failed assault, he forbid frontal assaults on Petersburg: "I would not permit any attack against the enemy in an intrenched position," directing

low and expected them to retreat to Richmond instead of fighting the Potomac Army. These judgments ended up being premature.

¹³³ Horn, *The Petersburg Campaign*, 72-73.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 78, 88, 93. Even if unsuccessfully investing Petersburg, Grant hoped to destroy two important bridges with the cavalry raid - the High Bridge and Staunton River. Their destruction would eliminate Confederate utilization of both the South Side and the Richmond and Danville railroads, straining Lee to justify holding the city. The raid did, however, destroy sixty miles of railroads, but ultimately failed to achieve either of its objectives.

Meade on 13 July to determine approaches not directed at Confederate positions.¹³⁵ The transformation of Grant's approach becomes evident during the third and fourth offensives in which he targeted Confederate logistical support within the framework of a quasi-siege.¹³⁶ Grant sought to isolate the city from the rest of the Confederacy, setting the seizure of railroads as Potomac Army military objectives. From July through October, Grant altered Union troop formations and instituted a thirteen-week initiative of dual-pronged attacks on both sides of the James River.¹³⁷

The third offensive's Battle of the Crater illustrates Grant's incorporation of previous methodologies utilized on the Western front.¹³⁸ Striking northwest from Deep Bottom to destroy portions of the Virginia Central Railroad, Grant hoped to destroy Confederate logistics. However, Confederate forces repelled the attack after Union troops secured a position north of the James. Although halted, Grant's action drew Confederate forces permanently north of the James for the remainder of the siege.¹³⁹ However, once the raid proved unsuccessful, Grant observed a chance to break the siege of Petersburg due to Lee's reaction to Union movements. He hoped to utilize a

¹³⁵ LTG Ulysses S. Grant to MG George Meade, *OR*, Ser. I, Vol. 40, Pt. 3, 180. Grant would reemphasize this to Butler on 24 October 1864 and again as late as 3 March 1865 to his subordinates. The third offensive began with the First Battle of Deep Bottom north of the James River (July 27-29, 1864) and ended with the Battle of the Crater 30 July. This is the last time Grant attacked Petersburg directly until the ninth, and final, offensive.

¹³⁶ Richard J. Sommers, *Challenges of Command in the Civil War*, 25. Sommers articulates that instead of containing Rebel forces in the cities, Grant's operations differed from the definition of a tactical siege. Grant never surrounded enemy forces but sought ways to extract Lee from Confederate positions. This becomes more evident following the second offensive, where Grant forbids direct assaults against Petersburg's defensive works.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 61.

¹³⁸ Operations began undertaking previous operations like Grant's actions following the seizure of Vicksburg. One prime example is the Meridian Campaign. For more information, see Archer Jones, *Civil War Command and Strategy: The Process of Victory and Defeat* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

¹³⁹ Trudeau, *The Last Citadel*, 142-143. Lee's reactions show his sensitivity to Union forces acting North of the James River. Grant continues to conduct diversionary maneuvers while attacking Lee's resources south of Petersburg and securing the Shenandoah Valley.

forgotten mining crater to penetrate enemy defensive lines, striking the rear and seizing the city while Lee was preoccupied with defense of Richmond.¹⁴⁰

Grant continued a strategy of two-pronged attacks on Petersburg and Richmond during the fourth offensive. Grant again attacked Lee's positions around Richmond, followed by an attack south of Petersburg. As the fighting at Richmond weakened, Union troops swung south, attempting to sever the critical Weldon Railroad. By the end of the fourth offensive, dual-pronged attacks proved able to temporarily cut Lee's supply lines, but not break them.

Following Early's burning of Chambersburg, Grant also closed the Shenandoah Valley as a commissary and means for the Confederacy to invade northern territories. MG David Hunter's continued failures facilitated Grant to place Sheridan in command; Grant tasked him to defeat Early and clear the Valley.¹⁴¹ Shifting to a simultaneous dual-pronged threat, Grant threatened Lee's forces north of the James while concurrently extending Union lines west of Petersburg. Grant's actions affixed Lee's forces, enabling Sheridan to pursue Early without substantial Confederate interference or reinforcements through September 1864. Ultimately Sheridan nearly destroyed Early's 18,000-man army.¹⁴² Sheridan left the "Valley, from Winchester up to Staunton, ninety-two miles, [with] little in it."¹⁴³

¹⁴⁰ Greene, *A Campaign of Giants*, 399, 418-419. Green argues that Sheridan and Hancock's actions north of the James 26-20 July were not just a diversion, but the "strategic priority" of the third offensive. The operation was assigned a clear objective, the destruction of the railroad north of Richmond and the Appomattox. Only after Hancock's failure on 27 July and Sheridan's failure to turn the Confederate flank on 28 July did Grant begin focusing on Burnside's contingency mine.

¹⁴¹ Bonekemper III, *A Victor, Not a Butcher*, 209.

¹⁴² Abraham Lincoln, "President Abraham Lincoln to LTG Ulysses S. Grant, 12 September 1864," in *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, vol. 7, ed. Roy P. Basler, Marion Dolores Pratt, and Lloyd A. Dunlap (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 548. Worried about Sheridan fighting Early and the continued threat to Washington, Lincoln made a recommendation to Grant to provide additional regiments, around 10,000 men, to support Sheridan's operations and strike Early to end the threat in the Valley.

¹⁴³ MG P.H. Sheridan to LTG Ulysses S. Grant, 3 October 1864, *OR*, Ser. I, Vol. 43, Pt. 2, 307-308.

Union victories at Fort Morgan, Fort Gains, Mobile Bay - and the subsequent seizure of Atlanta by Sherman - rejuvenated Northern support for the war to secure Lincoln's reelection in November. Grant's successes were sufficient to at least temporarily abate the public's weariness of war: "The great public, like a spoiled child, refuses to be comforted, because Richmond is not taken forthwith, and because we do not meet with an unbroken success at every point."¹⁴⁴ Grant's successful capture of the Weldon Railroad during the fourth offensive required Lee to shift his mentality from one of defense to that of survival. Lee's Army relied on regular resourcing and the ability to communicate. While enough supplies existed throughout the deep South to sustain the Confederacy, Grant's raids delayed or halted deliveries.¹⁴⁵

Adjusting to a Shifting Strategic Environment

Following Lincoln's reelection in November 1864, the strategic environment shifted and northern morale proved unshakable. The Union controlled the Valley and had destroyed one of the Confederacy's two major field armies outside Atlanta. Like Vicksburg, Grant bisected the Confederacy yet again, further isolating individual Confederate armies.¹⁴⁶ South of the Potomac Army, the Confederacy lost Fort Fisher, its last blockade-running port. Lee and Confederate President Jefferson Davis realized that loss of supply and communication abilities was the beginning of the end; their strategic plan failed, with Lincoln maintaining control of Federal policy. Further exacerbating Lee's predicament was the subsequent increasing desertion of Rebel soldiers throughout the winter of 1864-1865.

After reelection, Lincoln recommitted to his political aims, emphasizing the Emancipation Proclamation with the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment. Lincoln stressed the Union's refusal to exchange prisoners with the South, further taxing already limited

¹⁴⁴ Stoker, *The Grand Design*, 372.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 373, 384. Lee lost control of the Weldon Railroad during the Battle of Globe Tavern.

¹⁴⁶ Millet and Maslowski, *For the Common Defense*, 225-226.

Confederate resources. The Confederacy became increasingly desperate for resources and soldiers.¹⁴⁷ By 3 February 1865, Confederate commissioners even sued for peace, hoping to maintain some semblance of southern independence and save its capital. Meanwhile, Grant shifted to fully embraced a strategy of operational exhaustion to annihilate Lee's resources and ability to fight. Grant was no longer constrained by condensed timelines requiring him to destroy Lee's army hastily, but could instead embark on the systematic isolation and destabilization of the Confederacy. In February 1865, Grant initiated attacks in North Carolina to further sever the trickle of resources flowing in to Petersburg. These operations increasingly strained Lee's manpower; desertion increased as soldiers abandoned the Confederate effort to return to their families and homes.¹⁴⁸ Grant also seized Lynchburg, finally destroying the Virginia Central Railroad making northern Virginia inaccessible to remaining Confederate forces.

Sixth through Eighth Offensives

Grant's adaptability becomes more evident during the sixth, seventh, and eighth offensives. Grant systematically penetrated weak Confederate positions. He continued the dual-pronged strategy to affix Lee around Richmond with minimal forces. However, he transitioned to incorporate massive assaults with his left flank. Grant realized that with the last remaining major Confederate Army in Georgia destroyed, he could isolate Lee from the rest of the Confederacy. He extended Union lines west, thinning Lee's remaining forces. These actions turned Lee's right flank, further straining Lee's forces while preventing any reunion of Confederate elements in the south.¹⁴⁹

During these offensives, Grant again proved to be an insightful and forward-thinking strategist. He anticipated the enemy's moves, directing operations to ensure that Lee could not

¹⁴⁷ Trudeau, *The Last Citadel*, xiii.

¹⁴⁸ Stoker, *The Grand Design*, 392, 389.

¹⁴⁹ Grant maintained his effort to turn Lee's right flank, forcing Confederate forces away from the south once Sheridan seized control of the territory between Lynchburg and Richmond.

join Johnson's forces retreating north. With the last lines of Confederate communication in danger, Grant realized that Lee must react. Writing to Sherman, Grant detailed expected strategic Union actions in response to Lee's potential maneuvers. If Lee reacted and detached forces in response to Sheridan's operations pushing west of Petersburg, he would "take advantage of anything that turns up...if he comes out of his lines I will endeavor to repulse him and follow it up to best advantage."¹⁵⁰ Grant "established a plan that was eminently responsive to tactical and strategic developments," not relying on singular victories from any specific battle to succeed.¹⁵¹

The Ninth and Final Offensive

On 28 March 1865, Grant launched the ninth and final offensive following a failed breakout attempt by Lee. With the offensive, Grant cut the final rail lines to Petersburg and turned the Confederate extreme right ten miles southwest of Petersburg. Grant followed this success with attacks on Petersburg, recognizing Lee could no longer reinforce the city's defenses.¹⁵² Grant again altered his strategy to meet operational requirements transitioning from logistical attacks back to frontal assaults. Grant overwhelmed the last Southern reserves at Five Forks on 2 April, capturing 5,000 Rebel prisoners.¹⁵³ His strategy to isolate Petersburg south of the Appomattox succeeded.

Grant launched an attack on the center of Petersburg's lines overwhelming the thin Confederate ranks at Boisseau's Farm. During the ninth offensive, Grant recognized that Lee could not reinforce against Sheridan's attack while maintaining the defensive perimeter. Grant finally created a gap in the Confederate lines opening the city, and ultimately the path to Richmond. On 3 April, Grant's forces occupied both cities, forcing Lee to abandon defenses. Grant finally had Lee where he wanted him: out from behind his defenses, in the open, weakened,

¹⁵⁰ H.W. Brands, *The Man Who Saved the Union: Ulysses Grant in War and Peace* (New York: Doubleday, 2012), 354-355.

¹⁵¹ Dolman, *Pure Strategy*, 22.

¹⁵² Sommers, *Challenges of Command in the Civil War*, 35.

¹⁵³ Brands, *The Man Who Saved the Union*, 357.

and vulnerable. However, Grant did not pursue but sought to intercept and destroy the remnants of Lee's Army as it moved towards his last remaining supplies at Danville.¹⁵⁴

Summary

After 292 days, Grant forced Lee to evacuate Petersburg with the ninth offensive forcing him to abandon his entrenched positions.¹⁵⁵ Historians often reduce Petersburg to a lengthy siege involving little maneuver strategy. However, Petersburg was never the center of gravity; it served as a calculated strategy to force Lee out of his defenses and fight the Federal Army. The Petersburg siege is arguably one of the Civil War's most complex campaigns, with the direct result of unconditional Confederate surrender and reunion with the nation.

The entirety of the campaign from 3 May 1864 until its conclusion cost Grant approximately 123,000 casualties.¹⁵⁶ Despite this, Grant remained focused on his objective: Lee's army, directing operations throughout Petersburg. Unlike his predecessors, Grant focused less on territory and remained steadfast to Lincoln's objectives. He embraced strategic flexibility, learned from experiences, and adapted his plan accordingly - all to coerce Lee's abandonment of entrenchments. Before taking command, Grant recommended "starv[ing] Lee's army and force him to abandon Virginia" to fight on the Union's terms.¹⁵⁷ Ultimately, Grant accomplished this throughout the Petersburg campaign, forcing Lee to engage the Federal Army repeatedly.

Grant achieved this without a singular Napoleonic or Jominian grand battle - or traditional siege. Through continuous short, multi-pronged attacks north and south of the James River, Grant isolated and exhausted the enemy. He developed a strategy that "set in motion a

¹⁵⁴ Brands, *The Man Who Saved the Union*, 361-362.

¹⁵⁵ Sommers, *Challenges of Command in the Civil War*, 67-68.

¹⁵⁶ Approximately 53,000 casualties are attributed to the nine offensives at Petersburg.

¹⁵⁷ Moten, *Presidents and Their Generals*, 157.

series of actions...that lead...toward a desired condition” in support of a policy.¹⁵⁸ From the third to the sixth offensive, Grant executed multi-pronged attacks, recognizing Lee’s inability to mass forces along his elongated perimeter after failing to seize the city directly. He shifted from sequential to simultaneous assaults after the third offensive to further stress Lee’s system. With the sixth offensive, unable to seize objectives around the Richmond perimeter, Grant changed his strategy again, focusing on concerted attacks south of Petersburg to destroy Confederate logistics to enable him to assault the city.

Tactically, Grant attempted to annihilate Lee. Operationally, Grant transitioned to exhaustion and attritional strategies destroying the enemy’s will to continue fighting. However, at the strategic level, Grant affixed Lee in Petersburg and Richmond isolating him from the rest of the Confederacy. This enabled Sherman, Sheridan, and other Union generals to destroy the remaining Confederate Armies through the incorporation of all three strategies to achieve the President’s aims.

¹⁵⁸ Dolman, *Pure Strategy*, 11. Grant understood how to manipulate the restrictions and limitations of available actions to determine the ends and means to destroy Lee.

Significance

Why Is It Important To Revisit The Lessons Of History?

Military leaders study theory and strategy to learn from the lessons imparted by forebears on the battlefield. Today, Clausewitz is still considered one of the premier experts on military strategy, with many of his treatises maintaining validity 200 years later. Indeed, as the Petersburg campaign illustrates, Clausewitz' dictums that "war is a mere continuation of policy by other means," and "the strategist must...define an aim for the entire operational side of the war that will be in accordance with its purpose"¹⁵⁹ show his importance. Grant knew neither of these maxims in 1864, yet both were fundamental and guiding principles for his actions and planning efforts. Indeed, the Petersburg campaign serves as an accurate case study with appropriate lessons for today's planners and leaders. Today, these ideas are a central policy guiding the US Army's approach to military operations. The US Army capstone doctrine, Field Manual (FM) 3-0, *Operations*, models the levels of warfare and their relationships in support of each other to achieve political aims. FM 3-0 states, "operational art links the tactical employment of forces to national and military strategic objectives."¹⁶⁰ Success in battles and campaigns, if not supporting a strategic aim, are pointless; therefore, commanders must integrate ends, ways, and means to support the achievement of political objectives. The higher the echelon, the more paramount Clausewitz' statement becomes.

Lessons learned from yesterday's campaigns can be applied to contemporary warfare. History's battles serve as illustrative case studies, providing context and real-world applicability amidst complex and nuanced strategic contexts. While the achievement of military objectives guaranteed the realization of the President's political goals during total war, today's military aims

¹⁵⁹ Clausewitz, *On War*, 87, 177.

¹⁶⁰ US Department of the Army, Field Manual (FM) 3-0, *Operations* (Washington, DC: Government Publishing Office, 2017), I-5.

no longer assure victory.¹⁶¹ However, although military victory no longer guarantees a political resolution, the military and political aim must always move in the same direction while adjusting to the strategic environment to achieve success. The limited war paradigm makes it even more important for military commanders to fundamentally understand and support political objectives today. Military actions are still - if more complex and restrained - acting within the stated policy, constraints, and the strategic environment to provide temporal and spatial requirements necessary for politicians to negotiate a victory.

The character of war has undoubtedly changed over the past 155 years, yet Grant's actions during the Petersburg Campaign exhibit multiple themes still applicable to fighting contemporary limited wars. First and foremost, Grant's actions in the planning and execution of the campaign illustrate the importance of the relationship between key leaders in the military and the executive branch. Secondly, the campaign underscores the necessity of military leaders' dynamic interaction with the strategic environment: working within political and military requirements, despite their respective constraints. Grant provides a strong historical example of how to translate this understanding into a battlefield strategy. Finally, the Overland Campaign provides a case study on how military leaders should anticipate requirements for peace, setting conditions accordingly to achieve objectives following the completion of hostilities.

The Executive and the Military

Upon becoming General-in-Chief, Grant assumed a position historically fraught with contention between the President and subordinate commanders. As the Commander-in-Chief, Lincoln exercised oversight of the war effort, often providing operational and strategic military

¹⁶¹ G. Stephen Lauer, "Blue Whales and Tiger Sharks," *Real Clear Defense*, last modified 20 February 2018, accessed 3 December 2019, https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2018/02/20/blue_whales_and_tiger_sharks_113084.html.

recommendations to the dismay of his generals.¹⁶² Differences in perceived objectives often led Lincoln to educate generals regarding war's fundamental political characteristics and purpose.¹⁶³ However, Grant provides an example of how the relationship between the executive and the operational artist can be optimized for success on the battlefield. Grant understood that military commanders are subordinate to policymakers, never challenging Lincoln's position. There were no divides between Lincoln and Grant, where Lincoln presided and set policy while Grant executed operations independently. Instead, there was mutual trust between the two and full recognition of the fact that the actions of each were interdependent and affected the other.¹⁶⁴ Furthermore, Grant altered the traditional paradigms of military commanders during the war. He did not attempt to make policy himself, stating, "[w]hatever may be the orders of my superiors, and law, I will execute. No man can be efficient as a commander who sets his own notions above the law and those whom he is sworn to obey."¹⁶⁵

The example of Lincoln and Grant's relationship remains an essential lesson for today's military leaders. Like Grant, the military must remember that political leaders determine the political aims which drive the creation of military strategy. There should and will be deliberate discussions before establishing policy between the two levels, but ultimately the President

¹⁶² Cohen, *Supreme Command*, 17; Moten, *Presidents and Their Generals*, 7-8. Moten explores the transforming relationship between the President and their generals over three distinct periods. The first period, between the American Revolution through the first half of the Civil War, established the standard of military subordination to the elected government. The second period, from the latter half of the Civil War through World War II, represents the high point of political-military relationships, emphasizing non-partisanship. The third period begins with the advent of the Cold War. This period shows mistrust between the two parties, with Presidents mistrusting military leaders providing examples of nonpartisan counsel.

¹⁶³ Cohen, *Supreme Command*, 50; General Collin R. Ballard, *The Military Genius of Abraham Lincoln: An Essay by Brigadier-General Colin R. Ballard* (New York: The World Publishing Company, 1952), 158.

¹⁶⁴ Harold Holzer, *Lincoln on War* (Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books, 2011), 246. Even throughout the campaign, Lincoln interjected, reminding Grant to destroy the enemy force through telegrams.

¹⁶⁵ Ulysses S. Grant to the Honorable E.B. Washburn, 22 March 1862. In *The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant: 4 January 8-March 31, 1862*. Vol. 4, John Y. Simon, and Roger D. Bridges, eds. (London: Southern Illinois University Press, 1972), 408.

determines national policy and strategic aims.¹⁶⁶ Trust, mutual respect, and shared confidence remain essential for a successful partnership. The stronger the relationship, the more likely leaders will operate with conviction and fidelity in achieving political aims, enabling political leaders to achieve their perception of victory. Without this relationship, effective national security within the current paradigm of war becomes exponentially challenged due to the increasingly chaotic strategic context.¹⁶⁷

Dynamic Interaction

The Overland and Petersburg Campaign also shows the interdependence of political and military objectives, as well as constraints and limitations of the strategic environment, in creating military strategy. Grant clearly understood Lincoln's aim before assuming command, as evident through his initial recommendation to Halleck. However, based on the strategic environment, Lincoln did not approve Grant's recommended approach.¹⁶⁸ Upon arriving in Washington, Grant learned that his initial methodology conflicted with the variables relating to the strategic environment.¹⁶⁹ The possibility of a third Confederate attack into the North and Lincoln's acceptance of political risk overrode Grant's ideas for victory. As such, Grant adapted to the new context and the internal and external constraints imposed by the strategic environment.

Grant's actions provide an example of how commanders must gauge the relative impacts of strategy and balance military objectives while supporting the political framework. The

¹⁶⁶ For more information on this relationship, refer to Eliot A. Cohen's discussion on the unequal dialogue in *Supreme Command*.

¹⁶⁷ For more information, see Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relation* (Dehradun: Natraj Publishers, 2005); Peter D. Feaver, *Armed Servants: Agency Oversight, and Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005); Eliot A. Cohen, *Supreme Command*. All three authors disagree over the interactions between the two elements but agree that military leaders are subordinate to the President and support political objectives.

¹⁶⁸ The strategic context, to include internal and external constraints, includes Lincoln's acceptable levels of political risk, the complexities of maintaining Northern coalition support for the war, expiration of enlistment contracts during the summer of 1864, and the upcoming Presidential elections, all shaped the President's risk levels and decision making.

¹⁶⁹ Dietrich Dörner, *The Logic of Failure* (New York: Basic Books, 1996), 57.

strategic environment determines the dynamic relationship between strategy, goals, and constraints. Amidst reelection fears threatening the administration's policies, Grant supported preserving Lincoln's northern coalition, always operating within the preferences of political leadership. As in the 1864 campaign, politics still remains a significant driving factor in military strategy making. Military actions continue to support presidential concerns. Indeed, these actions are even more critical today, as limited wars must incorporate political and policy risk while supporting both the administration's and coalition's preferences. Similarly, it must maintain legitimacy and support the political narrative while executing operations.

Grant also illustrates how military leaders make decisions based on political considerations, sometimes accepting "military sacrifices in the name of a larger goal."¹⁷⁰ In one example, Grant's initial attack sought to force Lee to fight quickly, concerting three different Union Armies converging around Richmond. In a second example, Grant decided to abandon the strategy to fight Lee "out on this line if it takes all summer," recognizing that the expected casualties would hinder Lincoln's chances for reelection.¹⁷¹ Accordingly, unable to find a way to defeat Lee, Grant accepted risk to attempt to catch Lee off guard by daringly crossing the James River - leaving Butler unsupported - hoping to seize Petersburg and force the Confederates to fight outside of their entrenchments. Finally, Grant halted all frontal and entrenchment attacks against Confederate forces at Petersburg. While always maintaining the potential to overwhelm the Confederates, the political repercussions outweighed the limited gains achieved.

Grant also demonstrates why leaders must continuously reframe the problem as the environment and constraints change. While it is crucial to relate everything to a single central

¹⁷⁰ Cohen, *Supreme Command*, 214. Grant understood that political considerations overrode military ones. This can also be seen between Lincoln and Grant's discussions regarding the maintaining of incompetent political generals until Lincoln's reelection in 1864. Undoubtedly, Grant understood and accepted the extent of military sacrifices required to achieve Lincoln's aim, incorporating it into his strategy as the strategic environment changed.

¹⁷¹ LTG Ulysses S. Grant to MG H.W. Halleck, 11 May 1864, *OR*, Ser. I, Vol. 36, Pt. 2, 627.

vision and goal, Grant exemplifies the need for military leaders who are adaptable to changing conditions, maintaining a balance between a ‘fox and a hedgehog.’¹⁷² Flexibility enables commanders to successfully apply operational art to construct viable approaches to operations and campaigns as the strategic environment changes.¹⁷³ If not, sacrifices are for naught, leaving military leaders no closer to obtaining the political objectives they seek to support.

Anticipation & Concluding Wars

Finally, Grant’s actions provide a case study on how military leaders set conditions to end wars and achieve the objectives beyond it. He understood Clausewitz’ argument that “the first, the supreme, the more far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make...[is that] the kind of war on which they are embarking” is shaped by the goals of the policy.¹⁷⁴ Grant never lost sight of the reasons why the Union chose to fight, designing campaign approaches towards ending the war.¹⁷⁵ To end the war and destroy the rebellion, Grant recognized that the Union Army had to extinguish the rebellion’s support throughout the Confederacy.

Grant’s actions during the Petersburg campaign also exemplify his understanding of how victory is achieved is just as important as achieving victory itself. Grant looked beyond the military implications, recognizing that Union conquest was not only the end. It was the means to Lincoln’s political aim of reintegrating the Confederacy into the Union under the President’s terms.¹⁷⁶ Grant used Petersburg to set terminal conditions for the Civil War and Lincoln’s aims.

¹⁷² Gaddis, *On Grand Strategy*, 4. Foxes pursue many ends that are often unrelated and even unconnected. A hedgehog relates everything to a single central vision. Military leaders must be able to combine both, reacting to changes in the environment while maintaining their course on the objective.

¹⁷³ US Department of Defense, Joint Staff, Joint Publication (JP) 5-0, *Joint Operations Planning*, (Washington, DC: Government Publishing Office, 2017), I-5, VI-1.

¹⁷⁴ Clausewitz, *On War*, 88.

¹⁷⁵ Fred Charles Iklé, *Every War Must End* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 17.

¹⁷⁶ Simpson, *Let Us Have Peace*, 16.

He used the city and its importance in protecting Confederate communication lines to facilitate Federal destruction of the remaining Southern morale and resistance. Grant achieved what the President desired: a solid foundation for reconciliation and rebuilding.

Conclusion

The case study provides modern military leaders many lessons for synchronizing political and military objectives to set the conditions to conclude wars. First, it gives an example of how to successfully organize operations to achieve post-war objectives based on termination criteria and within the parameters of the strategic environment. Grant's approach linked the "entire war effort to [a] well-articulated war aim" and desired peace settlement.¹⁷⁷ He incorporated multiple strategies oriented on a central vision to set the stage. Upon arriving at Appomattox, Grant believed he achieved the desired military end state meeting the conditions that must exist in the operating environment for the cessation of military operations.¹⁷⁸ Grant paused Union operations. He rightfully understood that he obtained the circumstances for Lincoln's peace terms without further fighting, or the point at which the military was no longer the main effort.¹⁷⁹ Within limited wars, Grant provides a model for leaders to follow that is consistent with the contemporary aims of operational art and strategy-making. The Petersburg Campaign provides a case study for ending a war with "strategic foresight and skill so that the hard-won military victory will purchase a lasting political success."¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁷ Iklé, *Every War Must End*, 14.

¹⁷⁸ US Joint Staff, JP 5-0, xxii.

¹⁷⁹ This is an example of termination criteria, which is determined by the President with the support of the combatant commander. For more information, see US Joint Staff, JP 5-0.

¹⁸⁰ Iklé, *Every War Must End*, x.

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