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Newport, R.I.**

**Ulysses S. Grant: Operational Art in the 1864 Overland Campaign**

**by**

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**A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.**

**The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.**

**Signature: \_\_\_\_\_**

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## **Abstract**

During the Overland Campaign of 1864, Lieutenant Ulysses S. Grant's use of operational art enabled Union forces to obtain its operational objective – the destruction of Lee's Army of Northern Virginia. By accurately determining the Confederate center of gravity and properly balancing time, space, and force factors, Grant was able to synchronize combat efforts of five separate Union armies dispersed across the eastern and western theaters towards the common objective of defeating Lee's army. Although Lee inflicted heavy casualties on the Union forces and achieved tactical victories throughout the majority of the campaign, Grant achieved his operational objective. While some scholars argue that Grant's strategy relied solely on numerically overwhelming a smaller enemy force through attrition and brute force, Grant utilized a combination of maneuver and force to execute a continuous advance south, thereby fixing Lee's army and eliminating the Confederacy's capability of initiating a sustained offensive for the remainder of the war. Although an unfamiliar concept to the American military during the Civil War, Grant's application of operational art concepts to plan and execute the Overland Campaign provides important lessons learned that are just as applicable today as they were in 1864.

## Introduction

In the summer of 1864, the Army of the Potomac faced General Robert E. Lee's entrenched Army of Northern Virginia in the eastern theater. Despite the fact that the North was numerically superior in men and supplies, previous generals such as Ambrose Burnside, Joseph Hooker, George McClellan, and John Pope had failed to harness those resources to decisively defeat the Army of Northern Virginia. Appointed the commander of all Union armies in March 1864, Lieutenant General Ulysses S. Grant was responsible for planning and executing operations to accomplish what three years of war had failed to. To accomplish this, Grant proposed to: "...take the initiative in the spring campaign, to work all parts of the army together and somewhat towards a common center."<sup>1</sup> Twenty years after the Civil War, Grant summarized the 1864 Overland Campaign in his *Memoirs*: "Soon after midnight, May 3<sup>rd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup>, the Army of the Potomac moved out from its position north of the Rapidan, to start upon that memorable campaign, destined to result in the capture of the Confederate capital and the army defending it. This was not to be accomplished, however, without desperate fighting as the world had ever witnessed; not to be consummated in a day, a week, a month, or a single season. The losses inflicted, and endured, were destined to be severe; but the armies now confronting each other had already been in deadly conflict for a period of three years, with immense losses in killed, by death from sickness, captured and wounded; and neither had made any real progress toward accomplishing the final end." Grant added: "The campaign now begun was destined to result in heavier losses, to both armies, in a given time, than any previously suffered; but the carnage was to be limited to a single year, and to

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<sup>1</sup> Ulysses S. Grant, *Personal Memoirs* (New York: The Modern Library, 1999), 375.

accomplish all that had been anticipated or desired at the beginning in that time. We had to have hard fighting to achieve this.”<sup>2</sup>

The Overland Campaign was approximately six weeks long and began on 4 May 1864 at the Battle of the Wilderness (5-7 May) and ended with the commencement of the Siege of Petersburg on 15 June. Engagements within the campaign included Spotsylvania (8-21 May), North Anna (23-26 May), and Cold Harbor (31 May-12 June). Each tactical engagement in the campaign proved to be a draw or in favor of the Confederates, but this did not deter Grant from continuing to maneuver Union forces southeast, attempting to turn Lee’s right flank to get in between Lee’s army and Richmond. Lee anticipated Grant’s flanking attempts, and was able to establish defensive positions prior to each battle. However, after the battle at Cold Harbor, Grant maneuvered a final time and surprised Lee by stealthily crossing the James River and marching well south of Richmond towards Petersburg. With no reinforcements available and Confederate armies engaged across the entire theater, the resulting ten-month Siege of Petersburg led to the eventual surrender of Lee’s army in April 1865.

Although not yet recognized as a link between strategy and tactics by the American military during the Civil War, Grant’s application of operational art concepts to plan and execute his Overland Campaign provides important lessons learned that are just as applicable today as they were in 1864. Of particular emphasis was Grant’s ability to accurately determine the enemy center of gravity (ECOG) and properly balance factors across force, space, and time to accomplish the operational objective of destroying Lee’s Army of

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 401.

Northern Virginia. In stating the destruction of Lee's army, Grant's intention was not its literal annihilation; but rather, compelling its surrender.<sup>3</sup>

The scope of this paper will encompass the planning and execution of the Overland Campaign, beginning with Grant's assumption of command of all Union armies on 4 March 1864, to the initial Battle of the Wilderness on 4 May 1864, and finally to the initiation of the Siege of Petersburg on 15 June 1864. The focus will remain on Grant and Meade's summer offensive against Lee, but supporting operations by Major Generals Franz Sigel, Nathaniel Banks, Benjamin Butler, and William Tecumseh Sherman are mentioned briefly to show how they supported Grant's operational objective.

### **Counterargument – Attrition through Numerical Superiority**

There are some scholars who argue that Grant's strategy during the Overland Campaign relied solely on numerically overwhelming a smaller enemy force through attrition and brute force. Lee's former adjutant, Walter H. Taylor commented that: "It is well to bear in mind the 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 for paucity of numbers, and proved more than a match for brute force, as illustrated in the hammering policy of General Grant."<sup>4</sup> Edward Pollard, editor of the *Richmond Examiner* and author of one of the earliest Southern histories of the war, *The Lost Cause* (1866), wrote of Grant: "...he contained no spark of military genius; his idea of war was to the last degree rude – no strategy... he had no conception of

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<sup>3</sup> Russell F. Weigley, *A Great Civil War: A Military and Political History, 1861-1865* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 328.

<sup>4</sup> Walter H. Taylor, *General Lee: His Campaigns in Virginia, 1861-1865* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1906), 230-231.

battle beyond the momentum of numbers...”<sup>5</sup> Lee, possessing little respect for Grant’s military capabilities, posed contemptuous criticism of Grant in a letter to his son, Custis. Lee wrote: “His talent and strategy consists in accumulating overwhelming numbers.”<sup>6</sup> New York Times war correspondent William Swinton wrote in his *Campaigns of the Army of the Potomac* (1866) that Grant: “...hoped at one blow to finish the troublesome, and seemingly invulnerable, adversary... he made little account of those arts that accomplish results by the direction and combination of forces; for at this period he avowedly despised maneuvering. His reliance was exclusively on the application of brute masses, in rapid and remorseless blows...”<sup>7</sup>

While numerical superiority certainly played a factor in Grant’s ability to maintain a relentless offensive against Confederate forces, such criticism of his military capabilities dismisses the balancing advantages that Lee’s army possessed and detracts from Grant’s accomplishments. Acknowledging that resources and numerical strength of the Confederacy were inferior to that of the Union, Grant described in his *Memoirs* the equalizing advantages Lee possessed: “He was on the defensive, and in a country in which every stream, every road, every obstacle to the movement of troops and every natural defense was familiar to him and his army. The citizens were all friendly to him and the cause, and could and did furnish him with accurate reports of our every move. Rear guards were not necessary for him, and having always a railroad at his back, large wagon trains were not required. All circumstances

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<sup>5</sup> Mark Grimsley, *And Keep Moving On: The Virginia Campaign, May-June 1864* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), 236.

<sup>6</sup> John William Jones, *Life and Letters of Robert Edward Lee: Soldier and Man* (New York and Washington: The Neale Publishing Company, 1906), 307.

<sup>7</sup> William Swinton, *Campaigns of the Army of the Potomac* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1882), 439-440.



considered we did not have any advantage in numbers.”<sup>8</sup> If it was simply numerical superiority, then Lee, who had always fought outnumbered, should have been beaten early on in the war.<sup>9</sup> Numerical superiority was not an assurance of victory, as it provided little advantage to previous Union generals. It was Grant’s use of operational art tenets and his willingness to use the army for its intended purpose – to fight, which allowed Grant to move the Union towards complete victory.

### **Operational Art**

To understand how Grant incorporated operational art tenets into his planning process, one must understand what operational art is. Milan Vego, a professor and military theorist in the Joint Military Operations Department at the Naval War College, defined operational art as the: “Component of military art concerned with the theory and practice of planning, preparing, conducting, and sustaining campaigns and major operations aimed at accomplishing strategic or operational objectives in a given theater.”<sup>10</sup> For Grant, operational art was the understanding that the war could not be won with a single, decisive victory; a realization he acknowledged early in the war during his engagements in the west. Instead, victory would require the synchronization of multiple tactical actions across an entire theater that together would achieve the operational objective. Furthermore, Colonel John F. Meehan III, a former Director of Theater Operations at the US Army War College wrote in *Parameters* that the essence of operational art is the employment of one’s military forces to accomplish strategic objectives primarily by: “the identification of the enemy’s

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<sup>8</sup> Grant, *Personal Memoirs*, 471.

<sup>9</sup> Grimsley, *And Keep Moving On*, 16.

<sup>10</sup> Milan N. Vego, *Joint Operational Warfare: Theory and Practice* (Newport: Naval War College, 2007), I-4.

Center of Gravity and the single minded focus on the sequence of actions necessary to expose and destroy it...”<sup>11</sup>

James J. Schneider, a senior faculty member of the School of Advanced Military Studies, maintains that with the capability of distributing forces across an entire theater, the birth of operational art occurred in April 1864 during the planning of Grant’s Overland Campaign, whereby Grant planned a campaign consisting of two major operations, with Sherman and Banks in the west; and Meade, Butler, and Sigel in the east.<sup>12</sup> Since previous Union generals had access to the same technologies and troop strength as Grant, what set him apart? Prior to commanding all Union armies, Grant demonstrated his military capabilities in every grade from regimental to departmental command,<sup>13</sup> and was never pushed into command until he gained sufficient experience and was prepared for it.<sup>14</sup> Much of what set Grant apart from other Union generals was derived from his battlefield experiences in the western theater, where he had an opportunity to hone his ability to focus on an objective and create an acceptable balance of the operational factors of space, time, and force in order to achieve that objective. Most notably, Grant’s capture of Vicksburg demonstrated Grant’s maturing application of operational art tenets.

### **Objective and Center of Gravity**

In choosing an operational objective, a commander acknowledges that achieving the objective requires the completion of multiple, simultaneous tactical objectives. Linking an

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<sup>11</sup> John F. Meehan, III, “Operational Trilogy”, *Parameters* vol. XVI, no. 3 (1986): 15.

<sup>12</sup> James J. Schneider, “The Loose Marble – and the Origins of Operational Art.” *Parameters*, (March 1989): 92.

<sup>13</sup> T. Harry Williams, *McClellan, Sherman, and Grant* (Chicago: Elephant Paperbacks, 1962), Kindle edition, 101.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

operational objective to a corresponding COG focuses commanders' planning efforts. Vego defines COG "as a source of massed strength – physical or moral – or a source of leverage whose serious degradation, dislocation, neutralization, or destruction would have the most decisive impact on the enemy's or one's own ability to accomplish a given political/military objective."<sup>15</sup> When planning a campaign or major operation, it is critical to identify the friendly center of gravity (FCOG) so that it can be protected, and the enemy center of gravity (ECOG) so that it can be defeated. Properly identifying the ECOG ensures the proper application of the principles of objective, mass, and economy of effort.<sup>16</sup>

Prior to 1864, the operational objective of the Union was to capture the Confederate capital of Richmond, with the belief that the war would end shortly thereafter. This was not an absurd strategy, since the American army had done just that fifteen years earlier during the Mexican War, when the war came to an end upon American forces occupying Mexico City. Unfortunately, had Union forces captured Richmond earlier in the war, the Confederates would have simply established a capital elsewhere.<sup>17</sup> The British made this same mistake during the Revolutionary War when they believed the capture of large cities such as Charleston and New York, or even the nominal capital of Philadelphia would force the colonists to capitulate. Believing that Grant's predecessors had mistakenly viewed geographic locations as their objectives, Badeau wrote: "This was a view of the situation which Grant's predecessors in chief command had failed to grasp. Most of the national generals in every theater, prior to him, had attempted to carry on their operations as if they

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<sup>15</sup> Vego, *Joint Operational Warfare*, VII-13.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> J.F.C. Fuller, *Grant and Lee: A Study in Personality and Generalship* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1957), 41.

were fighting on foreign fields. They sought to out-maneuver armies, to capture posts, to win by strategy pure and simple. But this method was not sufficient in a civil war.”<sup>18</sup> Whereas Grant’s predecessors had been concerned with maneuver, Grant knew that seizing a city meant nothing with Confederate armies still in the field. Grant’s operational objective thus became the destruction of the military power of the rebellion, specifically Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia. Destruction of the Army of Northern Virginia would further facilitate achievement of the Union’s strategic objective – the unconditional surrender of the South, as there would no longer be a Confederate force capable of further military resistance.

By identifying the destruction of Lee’s army as the operational objective and ECOG, he could concentrate all available forces towards the primary strength of the rebellion, rather than wasting resources on peripheral objectives. He was the first commander to unify the operations of all five Union field armies and focus all efforts towards a single objective. Before that field commanders acted independently. After his bloody engagement at Shiloh in 1862, Grant understood that the Union would have to destroy everything that could be used to support or supply the Confederate armies in order to defeat the rebellion,<sup>19</sup> which heavily influenced his decision-making process for the remainder of the war.

To attack the ECOG, Grant planned for two simultaneous offensives in the western theater. Sherman, who was to move his armies from Chattanooga to Atlanta, would lead the first offensive. His primary objective was to destroy General Joseph E. Johnston’s Army of Tennessee, and his intermediate objective was the capture of Atlanta, an industrial and rail hub of the South. Banks was to assist Sherman by capturing Mobile, one of only two ports

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<sup>18</sup> Adam Badeau, *Military History of U.S. Grant, Volume III* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1881), 643.

<sup>19</sup> Grant, *Personal Memoirs*, 194.

still in Confederate possession. Banks was then to approach Johnston's army in the rear, while Sherman approached from the front.<sup>20</sup> Ultimately, the primary intent of the western operations was to preclude Johnston, the other main Confederate army, from reinforcing Lee, and vice-versa.

In the east, Grant planned three simultaneous offensives. First, Grant instructed Meade that: "Wherever Lee goes, there you will go also."<sup>21</sup> Next, to support Meade, Sigel was to move through the Shenandoah Valley to destroy the Virginia and Tennessee Railroad, a key supply route for the Confederacy, and also prevent a northern invasion through the valley.<sup>22</sup> Finally, Butler was to advance up the Peninsula via the James River, with Richmond and Petersburg as his objective.<sup>23</sup> Grant made it clear what the collective objective was when he spoke to his staff the night before the campaign began: "...I want all commanders to feel that hostile armies, and not cities, are to be their objective points."<sup>24</sup>

Although the offensives by Banks, Butler, and Sigel ultimately proved to be failures, the synchronized offensives nevertheless put additional pressure on the Confederates and diverted strength away from the main Union armies of Sherman and Meade. As Lincoln would say: "...if a man can't skin he must hold a leg while somebody else does."<sup>25</sup> By leveraging cumulative tactical effects between the eastern and western theaters, Grant was able to prevent the shifting of forces between Lee's Army of Northern Virginia and

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<sup>20</sup> Fuller, *Grant and Lee*, 208.

<sup>21</sup> Grant, *Personal Memoirs*, 378.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 375.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 376.

<sup>24</sup> Horace Porter, *Campaigning with Grant* (New York: The Century Co., 1907), Kindle edition, 35.

<sup>25</sup> Grant, *Personal Memoirs*, 381.

Johnston's Army of Tennessee, thus degrading Lee's forces to the point where he was forced to surrender.

### **Operational Factors – Space, Time, and Force**

Operational factors are the variables with which all operational commanders must seek to balance as much as possible in order to successfully accomplish a military objective, by identifying the right force to employ at the right place at the right time. Since lost time can never be regained, it should serve as the central factor from which planning considerations derive.<sup>26</sup> When Grant assumed command of all Union armies, he was immediately faced with several time-related challenges that instilled a sense of urgency in his decision making cycle. With the presidential election in November 1864, the possibility of foreign intervention (England and/or France), three-year enlistments set to expire, and waning Northern support for the war, Grant was under pressure to secure a quick win, and only had eight weeks from the time he assumed supreme command to plan a campaign to do so.

One of the ways Grant attempted to balance the factors of space-time was to apply an innovative operational idea that accelerated the time in which an operation occurs.<sup>27</sup> From the start of the campaign until the siege initiation six weeks later, there were only a few days where the two armies were not engaged. The continuous and uninterrupted combat was different from the previous tempo and intensity experienced by either side during the war. Previously, a battle or engagement would last for a few days, followed by a long period of

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<sup>26</sup> Vego, *Joint Operational Warfare*, III-51.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., III-57.

inactivity where the armies would rest and replenish supplies. After the second day at the Battle of the Wilderness, Union forces had sustained heavy casualties. Instead of Grant withdrawing his forces to lick its wounds, he ordered the soldiers to continue moving south in an attempt to turn Lee's left flank, which he would continue several more times until reaching Petersburg. With that order, Grant had changed the conduct of the war. By maintaining a high tempo Grant was attempting to achieve victory in the quickest amount of time, thereby protecting the strategic FCOG – Northern popular support for the war. The longer the war dragged on, the less likely the North was willing to support it.<sup>28</sup> Because the geography of the eastern theater limited maneuver, Grant was correct in quickly engaging Lee's army so that Union attacks were conducted against hastily constructed entrenchments. Had Lee's army had additional time to reinforce their entrenchments, or even worse, to withdraw into Richmond and fortify its defenses, the war would have been prolonged.

To balance the factors of space-force, Grant desired to increase the numerical size of his forces<sup>29</sup> so that he would be able to: "...concentrate all the force possible against the Confederate armies in the field."<sup>30</sup> Despite achieving numerical superiority, Grant was still faced with the challenge of concentrating superior combat power across a vast area. Major General JFC Fuller, an innovative British army officer, military theorist and historian, wrote that: "The strategic strength of the Confederacy lay in its size and also in its lack of communications, for its conquest demanded its entire occupation, and how to effect this occupation was the outstanding military problem of the Federal Armies."<sup>31</sup> Another problem

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<sup>28</sup> J.F.C. Fuller, *The Generalship of Ulysses S. Grant* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977), 366.

<sup>29</sup> Vego, *Joint Operational Warfare*, III-51.

<sup>30</sup> Grant, *Personal Memoirs*, 374.

<sup>31</sup> Fuller, *Grant and Lee*, 41.

Grant encountered was that the geography of Virginia limited maneuvering space to a narrow strip between the Allegheny Mountains and the Chesapeake Bay, and the majority of rivers and streams ran west to east, presenting a natural barrier to north-south movement.<sup>32</sup> In addition, much of the terrain was heavily wooded and most dirt roads were narrow and became quagmires in the rain.<sup>33</sup> Critics question why Grant did not utilize the navy to bypass the difficult terrain and approach Richmond from the south, similar to the goal of McClellan's Peninsula Campaign. At President Abraham Lincoln's insistence, Grant was obliged to keep his forces between Lee and the Federal capital to prevent further incursions north,<sup>34</sup> so maritime maneuver was not an option. Also, Richmond was not the objective; Lee's army was. In order to achieve the stated objective, Grant had to maneuver his forces overland, engaging Lee's army as necessary in an attempt to force him from his entrenchments to fight in the open, where Union numerical superiority and firepower would then have an advantage.

Another technique to balance the factors of space-force is to employ naval forces to provide logistical supplies and establish forward bases.<sup>35</sup> While Grant did not utilize a maritime route to maneuver his forces closer to Richmond, he did take advantage of the sea to maintain the stream of supplies that were necessary to sustain the large Northern armies during the campaign. Proximity to the coast was the primary reason Grant ordered Meade to move south against Lee's right flank, instead of his left flank, where the terrain was more open and advantageous for maneuver. By maneuvering on Lee's right flank and staying as

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<sup>32</sup> Grimsley, *And Keep Moving On*, 4.

<sup>33</sup> Grant, *Personal Memoirs*, 373, 403, 405.

<sup>34</sup> Grimsley, *And Keep Moving On*, 82.

<sup>35</sup> Vego, *Joint Operational Warfare*, III-51.



close to the coast as possible, Grant utilized the navy to change his base of supply at will. Utilizing the sea as a supply route also limited the number of soldiers that would normally be required to protect the line of supply.<sup>36</sup> Grant effectively leveraged the Union navy's sea control to maintain a continuous supply network and shift his operations closer to the enemy, thus shortening his lines of operation.

The composition and size of a force will affect how a commander balances the factors of time-force.<sup>37</sup> Although the Union did retain a larger number of forces, there were weaknesses in the composition and size of that force that created challenges for Grant. The first challenge was that three-year Union enlistments were set to expire in the summer of 1864. At least a dozen regiments were scheduled to leave the army in July.<sup>38</sup> Of the total Union enlistments set to expire, approximately 136,000 veterans reenlisted and another 100,000 did not. For the soldiers that did not reenlist, they became increasingly averse to danger during the final weeks of their enlistments, which limited their combat potential and lowered the morale of the soldiers that did reenlist. This posed impediments during the summer period when fighting was at its heaviest. In addition, the quality of soldiers that replaced the wounded, killed, or discharged was questionable as a Federal draft was initiated in the spring of 1864, and as desertions increased, Grant complained that: "out of five report North as having enlisted we don't get more than one effective soldier."<sup>39</sup> Knowing the potential effects of the upcoming presidential election and that many enlistments were set to expire, Grant was under pressure to achieve victory as soon as possible.

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<sup>36</sup> Fuller, *Grant and Lee*, 209.

<sup>37</sup> Vego, *Joint Operational Warfare*, III-59.

<sup>38</sup> James McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 734.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 720.

Finally, balancing the factors of space-time-force is the most difficult aspect in planning a campaign because rarely, if ever, will a commander achieve a perfect balance between all three factors. The challenge for a commander is to achieve the right balance to still achieve the stated objective. One method to help balance the factors is to increase the attrition of the enemy's forces.<sup>40</sup> While Vego argues that an operational commander should avoid attrition, Grant selected attrition as an alternate method to defeat Lee's army. His initial plan was to force Lee's surrender by drawing him from his defenses and defeating him in open-field combat, but Lee was too skillful an adversary in the defense.<sup>41</sup> Unable to wrest Lee from his entrenchments, Grant opted: "...to hammer continuously against the armed force of the enemy and his resources, until by mere attrition, if in no other way, there should be nothing left to him but an equal submission..."<sup>42</sup> The longer Grant waited to attack, the more advantage Lee gained in the defense. In particular, Grant recognized that it was better to fight Lee outside of his stronghold (Richmond), than in it. Grant estimated that if Lee was given time to move his forces and reinforce Richmond, it would take five assaulting soldiers to match one in the defense.<sup>43</sup>

### **Lessons Learned from Grant's 1864 Overland Campaign**

There are two key lessons that operational commanders can take away from Grant's Overland Campaign. The first is that a commander must strike an acceptable balance between the tempo of one's forces and the capability of sustaining that pace. The higher the

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<sup>40</sup> Vego, *Joint Operational Warfare*, III-57.

<sup>41</sup> Russell F. Weigley, "American Strategy from its Beginnings through the First World War," in the *Makers of Modern Strategy: From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, ed. Peter Paret (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1973), 433.

<sup>42</sup> Grant, *Personal Memoirs*, 619.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 380.

tempo, the more likely an army is to achieve surprise and exploit its numerical superiority. Grant saw the value in using a rapid tempo to reconcile his force disadvantages (entrenched Confederate army operating from interior lines) and space disadvantages (limited maneuver terrain), thereby decreasing the chances of the campaign resulting in a protracted war of attrition. Although the campaign itself was not decisive, in that the Army of Northern Virginia was not destroyed; the rapid pace at which the Army of the Potomac continued its attack prevented any possibility of Lee providing or receiving reinforcements and degraded his forces to the point where it was no longer a sustainable fighting force.

Army Doctrine Reference Publication 3-0 (Unified Land Operations) identifies tempo as one of the elements of operational art which helps commanders and their staff establish the conditions that will facilitate the accomplishment of a desired objective. A rapid tempo allows the commander to maintain the initiative and provides the capability of overwhelming an enemy's ability to counter an opponent's actions.<sup>44</sup> From Grant's engagements in the western theater, he learned that the initiative remained with the attacker.<sup>45</sup> Of his victories in the west, excluding Shiloh, all had occurred while on the offensive. Whereas many of his predecessors understood the power of the defense and feared attacking an enemy on the ground of their choosing, Grant felt otherwise and appreciated the power of initiative.<sup>46</sup> His ability to maintain the initiative allowed the Army of the Potomac to continue maneuvering deeper into Southern territory and closer to achieving its objective.

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<sup>44</sup> U.S. Department of the Army, *Unified Land Operations*, Army Doctrine Reference Publication 3-0 (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Army, May 2012), 4-7.

<sup>45</sup> Williams, *McClellan, Sherman, and Grant*, 90.

<sup>46</sup> Grimsley, *And Keep Moving On*, 27.

Since a force expends increasing amounts of energy and resources when operating at a high tempo, it is important to assess during the planning phase whether the force has sufficient capacity to maintain accelerated operations.<sup>47</sup> Grant's entire plan for the campaign was predicated on the fact that he would need to remain in close proximity to the coast. He effectively leveraged the Union Navy's sea control to maintain a continuous supply network and shift his base of operations closer to the enemy, thus shortening his lines of operation. Without a capable logistics system providing the necessary sustainment, Grant's forces would not have been able to maintain its accelerated tempo, which would have allowed Lee to strengthen his defenses, and more than likely prolonged the war.

With the capability of coordinating simultaneous operations across a vast theater, Grant could not have developed or executed his campaign plan without the assistance of an experienced and trusted staff, which leads to the second key lesson – commanders must effectively incorporate their staffs into the planning process so that they can properly assist in the execution of a campaign. According to the Army Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures 5-0.1 (Commander and Staff Officer Guide), the primary responsibilities of a staff is to support the commander, assist subordinate units, and inform units and organizations outside the headquarters.<sup>48</sup> Historian T. Harry Williams noted that where Grant was superior to Lee was in his effective use of his staff. Whereas Lee possessed a minimal staff that were essentially glorified clerks, Grant leveraged: "...an organization of experts in the various phases of strategic planning."<sup>49</sup> Historian R. Steven Jones, who thoroughly researched and detailed the personal staffs of Lee, McClellan, Sherman, and Grant in his book *The Right Hand of*

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<sup>47</sup> U.S. Department of the Army, *Unified Land Operations*, 4-7.

<sup>48</sup> U.S. Department of the Army, *Commander and Staff Officer Guide*, Army Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures 5-0.1 (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Army, September 2011), 2-1.

<sup>49</sup> T. Harry Williams, *Lincoln and His Generals* (New York: Vintage Books, 1952), 313.

*Command*, contends that Grant used his staff more effectively than any other commanding general, which by the time of the Overland Campaign, had progressed into a professional staff that functioned much like the highly advanced Prussian staff.<sup>50</sup> Grant's staff not only assisted with day-to-day administrative tasks, but they were also involved in the planning process. Without an efficient and professional staff helping to manage his disbursed armies, it is unlikely that Grant could have achieved the level of success that he did.

Grant was accustomed to thoroughly briefing his staff officers of his plans, then distributing them throughout the theater to provide additional instructions to subordinate commanders that which could not be conveyed easily through written orders.<sup>51</sup> In this way, Grant's staff performed as his proxies and ensured that all subordinate units were working towards the same objective. An example of this delegation of authority was described by one of Grant's most trusted staff officers, Lieutenant Colonel Horace Porter, when he detailed Grant's method of handling troops in battle: "I want you to discuss with me freely from time to time the details of the orders given for the conduct of the battle, and learn my views as fully as possible as to what course should be pursued in all the contingencies which may arise. I expect to send you to the critical points of the lines to keep me promptly advised of what is taking place, and in cases of great emergency, when new dispositions have to be made on the instant, or it becomes suddenly necessary to reinforce one command by sending to its aid troops from another, and there is not time to communicate with headquarters, I want you to explain my views to commanders, and urge immediate action, looking to cooperation,

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<sup>50</sup> R. Steven Jones, *The Right Hand of Command: Use & Disuse of Personal Staffs in the American Civil War* (Mechanicsburg: Stackpole Books, 2000), 61.

<sup>51</sup> Badeau, *Military History of U.S. Grant, Volume II*, 41.

without waiting for specific orders from me.”<sup>52</sup> Thus, Grant intended to maintain control of the campaign by effectively leveraging his staff’s ability to provide information to subordinate commanders as well as providing decision-making authority based on his intent. Jones summarized Grant’s role as an innovator in the use of staff by writing: “In Grant, all of the factors compatible with staff advancement came together: large armies, cooperative operations, and a willingness to experiment with staff improvements. Grant was not a staff reformer; he was a competent, intelligent general looking for more efficient ways to fight a complicated war. He simply found a creative way to use an organizational element available to all Civil War generals – the personal staff – and made it his right hand of command.”<sup>53</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Vilified as a drunken butcher by “Lost Cause” historians, Grant’s unfavorable reputation was perpetuated by a presidential administration wrought with numerous scandals, none of which were directly tied to Grant, but nonetheless occurred under his watch. It was only in the mid twentieth century that historians began to reassess Grant’s contribution to modern warfare in an attempt to restore his reputation. Grant’s development of his final campaign in 1864 is an excellent example of a commander employing his forces in a coordinated fashion to exploit enemy vulnerabilities and concentrating superior combat potential to achieve the operational objective. Although Clausewitz’s theories were not translated to English until 1873, his thoughts on war appropriately summarize Grant’s efforts during the Overland Campaign to balance operational factors in order to attack an ECOG: “It is against the center of gravity that our energies should be directed. If the enemy is thrown

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<sup>52</sup> Porter, *Campaigning with Grant*, 32.

<sup>53</sup> Jones, *The Right Hand of Command*, 219.

off balance, he must not be given time to recover. Blow after blow must be aimed in the same direction: the victor, in other words, must strike with all his strength and not just against a fraction of the enemy's. Not by taking things the easy way, but by constantly seeking out the center of his power, by daring all to win all, will one really defeat the enemy.”<sup>54</sup>

Grant had two choices in the summer of 1864 – to assault and risk heavy casualties, or not assault and prolong the war. In a war where for every soldier killed in combat another two soldiers died of illness, Grant chose to end the war as quickly as possible, leading to fewer casualties than if the war had continued to drag on.<sup>55</sup> In three years, the Union armies in Virginia sustained 100,000 casualties (killed, wounded, or missing) with little to show for it; in six weeks Grant had neutralized Lee’s army and forced a final defense of Petersburg, where a ten month siege would lead to the eventual surrender of Lee, at the cost of 60,000 Union casualties.

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<sup>54</sup> Clausewitz, Carl Von. *On War*. Edited and Translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976, 595.

<sup>55</sup> Fuller, *The Generalship of Grant*, 361, 371.

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