

A STRONG MIND: A CLAUSEWITZIAN BIOGRAPHY OF U. S. GRANT

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PART I

Theory and Practice

Chapter 1

Measuring a Man: U. S. Grant and the Historians

A special type of mind...a strong, rather than a brilliant one—Clausewitz on the ideal commander

To me he is a mystery, and I believe he is a mystery to himself—William T. Sherman¹

The life of Ulysses S. Grant has been the subject of much speculation. Whether Grant is praised as an early practitioner of modern war or derided as a drunken, unimaginative butcher, speculation ceases when confronted with the result: Grant succeeded. The success of Ulysses S. Grant on the battlefield alone justifies study of his campaigns and also justifies study of the man. Evaluation of the man requires we take measure of his great success. In doing so, all of Grant's biographers encounter the same contradictions. Grant, the exceptional success in later life, exists in stark contrast to another Grant, seemingly unremarkable, mediocre and apparently devoid of any special talents.

Grant's biographers write about some very different men. The "peacetime" Ulysses Grant failed repeatedly before the war as a soldier, farmer and businessman. The wartime "Unconditional Surrender" Grant, however, succeeded at all levels of command and finally as supreme commander of the largest army (until the 20th century) in

¹ Quote from Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 103. Sherman quoted in Brooks Simpson, *Ulysses S. Grant: Triumph over Adversity, 1822-1865*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000), xvii.

American History. Grant, the President, enjoys another entire set of evaluations, both positive and negative.²

Perhaps other Grants are discoverable within his wartime service. Any evaluation of Grant, his fame and our memory of him arise from his military abilities. Different writers offer contradictory interpretations of Grant as a general. Some detect at Cold Harbor, the merciless, “butcher” Grant, as dangerous to his own troops as to those of the enemy. Others a modern “factory system” Grant, practitioner of a cruel, unimaginative, if relentless, war of attrition. Still others discover a daring, innovative, “blitzkrieg” Grant, architect of the Vicksburg campaign.³

There is much to recommend this approach in writing a biography of Grant. It is far easier to explain the apparent contradictions of Grant’s early life and seeming transformation during the Civil War through deconstruction. Emphasizing one aspect of Grant’s character or specific incidents in his career enables one to lay claim to an “original” interpretation of an oft-tackled subject. There is a measure of truth in all these portraits of the General, though these impressions of Grant are as misleading as the phony photographs of the general circulated early in war.⁴

² William Hesselstine, Ulysses S. Grant: Politician, (New York: Dodd Mead, 1935), finds Grant’s failures as President attributable in some measure to political enemies. David Herbert Donald found Grant the most underrated American in history, due to his political skill as president, Jean Edward Smith, Grant, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), 14.

³See William S. McFeely, Grant: A Biography, (New York: W. W. Norton, 1981), and Ernest B. Furgurson, Not War But Murder: Cold Harbor 1864, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000), for Grant as butcher. See Liddel-Hart, Sir Basil, Sherman: The Genius of the Civil War (London: Benn, 1930) for Grant’s tactics as an extension of the factory system. See James Arnold, Grant Wins the War: Decision at Vicksburg, (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1997), 122 for use of “blitzkrieg” description.

⁴ Horace Porter, Campaigning With Grant, (New York: Century, 1906), 13, reports that newsmen desperate for photographs of the General substituted images of a burly and robust beef-contractor, as Grant seldom stopped in one place long enough to be properly “focused.”

Many biographers of Grant, as many of his acquaintances and contemporaries during the war, found little in his early life to recommend him to the heights to which he rose. Before the war Grant was exceptional chiefly due to his unexceptionality among his fellow graduates from West Point. A few of Grant's fellows saw through the façade. Confederate General R. S. Ewell knew Grant from West Point and Mexico and hoped the North would overlook Sam Grant: "I should fear him more than any of their officers." Later in the war James Longstreet took issue with those officers who believed Grant no better than previous opponents of the Army of Northern Virginia: "Do you know Grant? I tell you we cannot afford to underrate him." Longstreet continued, "we must make up our minds to get into line of battle and stay therer; for that man will fight us every day and every hour till the end of the war."⁵

In spite of an exhausting number of biographies, the "warrior " Grant, emerging, as a lieutenant general in 1863 remains unrecognizable to some in the lonely and apparently alcoholic soldier who left the army in the 1850's. He is perhaps even less apparent in the unproductive farmer unable effectively to cajole even his own slaves to work hard.⁶ The incompetence, bad luck and sheer folly of the "early" Grant finds redemption in a figure purportedly transformed by war. Able to negotiate the myriad of difficulties present, both military and political, the "other" Grant successfully prosecuted the war and achieved a notable and hard won victory. The reality of Lincoln's vision of a "more perfect union" derives in great measure to Grant's practical military abilities. The

⁵J. F. C. Fuller, Grant and Lee: A Study in Personality and Generalship, (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1957), 59. Porter, Campaigning, 47.

⁶ Grant only owned one slave himself, but he often hired them and his wife owned several.

extinction of slavery and termination of a bloody and fratricidal war devolve perhaps principally to Grant's expertise.

The enormity of Grant's transformation cannot be over-emphasized. Before the war Grant suffered "defeat" (and repeated humiliation) at the hands of alcohol, army life, bad investments and farm markets. In 1860, when Lincoln offered Robert E. Lee command of all the armies of the United States, Grant was a clerk in his father's leather goods shop. Where as before 1860 Grant could not adequately provide for his family, during the war Grant defeated Lee and became a destroyer of armies and a unifier of nations.⁷

As tempting as deconstructive descriptions are in explaining the contradictions in Grant's career and personal life, we must reject them. Reductionists in essence, the multiple images offered of Grant are all facsimiles of a complete man. In spite of the many interpretations and portraits offered in the past, no clear image of the man or definitive analysis of his exact relationship to war emerges.⁸

Deconstruction by past biographers and critics, Grant requires re-creation. Multiple Grants exist in the literature, not within Grant himself. Psychologically, while the "child is father to man," in this case we will search for the failure as father to the General-in-Chief. The alcoholic Grant, the Grant of "Hardscrabble Farm," the Grant of the Vicksburg Campaign and Appomattox all manifest themselves as one man.

The scholarship on Grant is voluminous, but also in another sense incomplete. To date there is no systematic Clausewitzian evaluation of U. S. Grant or his campaigns. The

⁷ Many accounts exist detailing Grant's reliance on the largess, loans and good will of others. See Lloyd Lewis, Captain Sam Grant, (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1950), 351-354, 357, and Julia Dent Grant, Personal Memoirs of Julia Dent Grant, (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1975), 80, 82.

⁸ Simpson, Triumph, xvii, questions the possibility of ever providing the answers to the riddles of Grant's personality. If Sherman and Grant himself can't solve the mystery, how can we? While it is not possible to solve all of the mysteries surrounding Grant, it is possible to know something.

theory of Carl von Clausewitz serves as a guide in the search for reconstruction, to reassemble the man and analyze his campaigns. Theory will organize and drive that reconstruction and determine its limits. Doing so enables the search for the strong rather than the brilliant mind valued by Clausewitz and discoverable in all of the U. S. Grants described by the historians.

Chapter 2—Why Clausewitz?

The Germans elevated On War to the status of a military bible—Antulio Echevarria

FM 100-5 serves the Army like a crucible—Archie Galloway

Clausewitz in the hands of Generals is like a razorblade in the hands of children—General Gunther Blumentritt¹

Clausewitz's monumental study, On War provides a guide in assembling a U. S. Grant torn apart and compartmentalized by historians. Described perhaps with little exaggeration, as “not only the greatest, but the only great book on war,” Clausewitz enjoys preeminence in the field of military thought. The popularity of the work first emerged following the elder von Moltke's successful wars of German unification. Von Moltke identified Clausewitz and the Bible as the books that most influenced him; those who sought to emulate von Moltke's victories predictably sought Clausewitz and not the Bible. They should have stuck with the Bible. Misunderstanding, mistranslation and misappropriation began with von Moltke and his admirers and continued as Clausewitz's influence expanded beyond Germany. By the turn of the century Clausewitz enjoyed at least a measure of acceptance in military circles throughout the world.²

General von der Goltz, before the First World War, penned a warning fundamentally true today:

¹ Antulio J. Echevarria, “Borrowing from the Master: Use of Clausewitz in German Military Literature before the Great War”. War in History. 3 (July, 1996): 274; Archie Galloway, “FM 100-5: Who influenced Whom?” Military Review 66 (March 1986): 46, Quoted in Michael Handel, Masters of War: Sun Tzu, Clausewitz and Jomini, (Portland: Frank Cass, 1992), 24.

² Michael Howard, Clausewitz, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 59-73.

A military writer, who, after Clausewitz, writes upon the subject of war, runs the risk of being likened to the poet who, after Goethe, attempts a Faust, or after Shakespeare, a Hamlet.³

Modern U. S. military doctrine (and the doctrine of many of the worlds armies today) is explicitly Clausewitzian. U. S. defeat in Vietnam fueled an explosion of interest in Clausewitz and stimulated numerous books and articles by both military professionals and scholars. The publication of a new manual, FM 100-5, coupled with its Air Force equivalent, AFM 1-1, and Marine Corps publication 1-1, remedied the lack of a coherent doctrine often identified as a root cause of American failure in Southeast Asia.⁴

Like U. S. Grant, Clausewitz and On War are also subjects of unfair deconstruction and frequent misappropriation. Militarists, Marxists, the Nazi Party and many military commentators expropriate Clausewitz, seeking support for particular political ideologies or props for their own fragile and inferior ideas.⁵ Scholars' and generals' incomplete readings, misunderstandings and deliberate distortions have also abused Clausewitz. Going beyond the limits of honest debate in the case of some scholars is regrettable, but

³ Department of Military art and Engineering, USMA, Jomini, Clausewitz and Schlieffen, (New York: West Point, 1954), 46.

⁴ FM 100-5 first appeared in 1982 and has gone through several revisions since that time. Scholars and military professionals disagree on the nature and applicability of Clausewitz to modern doctrine. For the effects of a lack of coherent doctrine in Southeast Asia by a disciple of Clausewitz see Harry G. Summers, On Strategy, (Navato: Presidio Press, 1982), xiv and de Czege, Huba Wass, "Clausewitz: Historical Theories Remain Sount Compass References; The Catch is Staying on Course." Army 38 (September, 1988): 37-39, for how lack of sound doctrine affected successful prosecution of the war. See Lloyd Mathews, "On Clausewitz." Army 38 (September, 1988): 20-24 for a critique of Clausewitz as "unfinished, outdated, ambiguous and semantically suspect."

⁵ Martin Kitchen, "The Political History of Clausewitz," Journal of Strategic Studies, 11 (March, 1988): 28-50, and P. M. Baldwin, "Clausewitz in Nazi Germany," Journal of Contemporary History, 16 (Spring, 1981): 5-26.

not as dangerous as the actions of some German generals whose manipulations arguably contributed to disaster in two World Wars.⁶

Detailing common misunderstandings of the book enables clearer definition of theory and set parameters for our inquiry. Responsibility for misinterpretation devolves at least partly on Clausewitz's method, which provides the basis for this study.

Clausewitz leads us through "a torturous and tortuous"⁷ dialectical process, as "inquiry (is) the most essential part of any theory."⁸ The surface meaning of a particular passage is not always clear, especially when taken out of the format of the dialectic. It may not even be a correct expression of the author's actual viewpoint. The process is the point of many of Clausewitz's examples from On War.⁹

This methodology is "both his weakness as well as his strength."¹⁰ Clausewitz constantly tests each thesis he advances, proposing ideas in direct opposition to his actual conclusions. For Clausewitz many of the phenomena of war exist as part of a spectrum, or as a matter of degree. He also sees polarity in numerous concepts of war. He prefers to describe the dynamic interaction between subjects in opposition rather than make the type

⁶ See Christopher Bassford, "John Keegan and the Grand Tradition of Trashing Clausewitz: a Polemic." War in History 1 (Summer 1994): 319-336. Bassford finds John Keegan's conclusions dishonest and "incompatible with the proper spirit of historical inquiry." See Jehuda L. Wallach, "Misperceptions of Clausewitz' *On War* by the German Military," in Michael Handel ed. Clausewitz and Modern Strategy (London: Frank Cass, 1986), 213-39, for the effects of the deliberate reversal of the political-military relationship by von Schlieffen and others before World War I. See 234-235, for how similar distortions affected German prosecution of the Second World War.

⁷ Micheal Handel, Masters of War: Classical Strategic Thought, (Portland, Frank Cass, 1992), 24.

⁸ Carl von Clausewitz, On War (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 141.

⁹ See for example, *ibid*, 159-161, for a discussion of Napoleon's campaign in 1797. At each stage Clausewitz's dialectic criticizes Napoleon's actions, Clausewitz then demolishes his own criticism, by "taking a wider view." Any individual criticism taken at face value loses its meaning when viewed apart from the whole.

¹⁰ Handel, Masters, 26.

of definitive judgment comforting to most readers. Taken out of context these “advancements” or a description of one aspect of a polarity seem to contradict his real arguments, obscuring his meaning for the unsystematic reader.¹¹

Further confusion exists due to the demonstrably unfinished nature of On War. At the time of his death Clausewitz left notes stipulating his satisfaction with only the first chapter of book I of On War (the work contains 8 books comprised of some 139 chapters).¹² Raymond Aron devotes much of his Clausewitz: Philosopher of War, to clarification of the treatise based on Clausewitz’s assertion that the finished portion provides direction for his planned distillation of the entire book.¹³

Incompleteness in the historical record also exists through accidents in our own time. It is no longer possible to describe accurately the evolution of Clausewitz’s thought, as his papers disappeared in the disorder at the end of World War II. While something of the contents of his papers is known, descriptions left by the last scholars to study them are incomplete and contradictory.¹⁴

The immature (or un-revised) Clausewitz exhibits a tendency to focus on the decisive battle as the supreme arbiter of conflict. This is understandable given the historical context of the Frederickan and Napoleonic era, when entire wars tended to be

¹¹ Raymond Aron, among others disputes the notion that Clausewitz’s method is truly dialectical or that he owes any debt to Hegel, or Kant. See Raymond Aron, Clausewitz, Philosopher of War (Englwood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1985) 223-230, but many of the key concepts most misunderstood arise from his dialectical method.

¹² Clausewitz, War, 70.

¹³ Aron, Philosopher. Most of the first volume of the French edition is dedicated to such a reconstruction. See also Aron’s journal articles “Reason, Passion, and Power in the Thought of Clausewitz,” Social Research, 39, (Winter, 1972): 599-621, and “Clausewitz’s Conceptual System,” Armed Forces and Society, 1 (November, 1974): 49-59.

¹⁴ Peter Parrot, “Clausewitz: A Bibliographical Survey,” World Politics, 17 (January, 1965): 272.

resolved after a single, climatic engagement. Clausewitz advocates the complete destruction of an opponent's military power for a simple and logical reason: in most instances completely disarming an enemy through the defeat of his armed forces allows the attainment of any possible political goal. Thus the quickest, surest road to success follows from destruction of the enemy. This holds true in most eras, in most wars, and in most political contexts. Clausewitz as a student of history recognized the exceptions to this "rule" in many situations. Destruction of an enemy army often requires much more effort than is desirable or necessary, especially if national desires are limited. Also, due to the inherent chance and unpredictability of war, inappropriate effort may lead to unintended consequences. The process of writing, revising and thinking over a period of many years conditioned and refined many of Clausewitz's arguments.

Clausewitz recorded his intention to give greater clarity to On War, removing it from contemporary historical context in order to provide clarity applicable to all wars. By giving equal attention to more limited types of war Clausewitz defined a theory relevant to all eras. Specifically, all wars exist on a spectrum from "simple armed observation," not really war at all, to "a war of extermination." Clausewitz found complete overthrow of an enemy (like that pursued by Napoleon and his conquerors) inappropriate when one desires perhaps only a small advantage during peace negotiations. Just as it is illogical to swat at flies with a sledgehammer, it is illogical to use military force out of all proportion to that necessary to achieve one's goals.¹⁵ Military force at every turn should utilize a level of violence that "depends on scale of

¹⁵ Clausewitz's Note of 10 July 1827, outlines his intentions to revise the entire work keeping in mind "two kinds of war," those involving the overthrow of the enemy and those with more limited aims. Clausewitz, War, 69. 81.

political demands on either side.” Many subsequent readers of the treatise latched onto the supposed focus on climactic battle as a comfortable and simplistic reinforcement of their own prejudices.¹⁶

Critics also often fail to acknowledge the difference between strategy and tactics as Clausewitz defined them. Strategy retains its own logic separate and superior to that of tactics (or operations). Once strategy determines the appropriate scale of conflict and decides on battle, complete victory or annihilation logically serves that strategy better than half-measures or marginal successes. Those who find strategic method in the many chapters of On War discussing the use of the engagement (tactics) confuse very different elements of war. Given all of these problems many soldiers and scholars exhibit “a certain ignorance of the true intellectual and political-philosophical foundations of On War.”¹⁷

Even given all of these problems Clausewitz’s method achieves its purpose to a degree superior to others. While Clausewitz cannot tell anyone what to think or how to act, he does tell us what to think about and a method for evaluating actions. Clausewitz’s theory exists to train the mind to interpret military history, the only alternative to actual experience in combat. No other writer sets forth a system of thought approaching Clausewitz’s rigor. Each individual question, idea or interpretation in Clausewitz is simple. Clausewitz’s well known phrase that “everything in war is simple, but even the

¹⁶ Jehuda L. Wallach, The Dogma of the Battle of Annihilation: Theories of Clausewitz and Schlieffen and Their Impact on the German Conduct of Two World Wars. (London: Greenwood Press, 1986). Clausewitz, War, 585.

¹⁷ Wallach, “Misperception,” 214, attributes such ignorance to disciples of Clausewitz in the Prussian-German Army. It is equally attributable many critics and supporters of Clausewitz’s in other contexts.

simplest thing is difficult,” is equally descriptive of his theory of war itself.¹⁸ Viewing all of these simplicities together brings Clausewitz’s supposed complexity within reach. Clausewitz planned his revision to bring all of On War in line with the “mature” thought expressed in the finished part of the book. Continually keeping in mind Clausewitz’s central thesis of war as a continuation of policy by other means serves to clarify the alleged ambiguity present in the rest of the work.

As a writer Clausewitz confronts us with definitions and observations of reason and insight. One sometimes wonders if he exhibits genius or only states the obvious. His reputation for obscurity derives more from a lack of effort on the part of his readers than from any lack of clarity in his writing or any flaws in his logic. Clausewitz anticipates and utilizes modern concepts of psychology and social science. He describes ideologically based warfare, receiving acknowledgement and quotation by both Lenin and Mao. His concept of ideal war, pushed to its natural limits and unrestrained by policy, provides the inspiration for many writings on the problems of nuclear war. His use of military history anticipates R. G. Collingswood’s idea of history as a re-enactment of the past. His applicability is widespread and appropriate. A myriad of scholars have used On War as the theoretical basis for writings on a myriad of subjects, with and equally diffuse results. In a similar manner, politicians, scholars and soldiers also utilize Clausewitzian thought, both as a theoretical construct and as a practical guide to thinking about the nature of war. From these multiple uses, many removed from fighting itself, we can illuminate the breadth of his thought. Many “Clausewitzs,” both useful and suspect emerge:

¹⁸ Clausewitz, On War, 119

I. The Social Clausewitz

Before establishment of sociology as a discipline, Clausewitz identified the nature of war as neither art nor science, but primarily a social activity. It is driven by the passions and emotions of the people and their leaders, directed by the state but conditioned by the imponderables and accidents of culture and historical context.¹⁹

II. The Red Clausewitz

Marx, Lenin and Stalin all commented favorably on Clausewitz methodology and Lenin copied lengthy parts of the treatise into his notebooks with extensive commentary. Clausewitz also used the term “peoples’ war” to describe irregular, partisan or ideological warfare, over one hundred years before Chairman Mao gave the term its modern meaning. Though Clausewitz died some twenty years before Marx’s *Communist Manifesto*, his relentless logic spanned the great ideological gulf between a conservative Prussian product of absolutism and communist revolutionaries.²⁰

III. The Defensive Clausewitz

Before Fredricksburg, Cold Harbor, Passchendaele or Verdun, Clausewitz recognized the innate superiority of the defensive over the offensive form of war and the danger of misunderstanding the relationship between the two. Clausewitz’s actual views

¹⁹ Clausewitz, *War*, 148-150. Ian Roxborough, “Clausewitz and the Sociology of War,” *British Journal of Sociology* 45 (December, 1994): 619-635, seeks a “neo-Clausewitzian framework for the study of war.”

²⁰ Clausewitz, *War*, 479. See Azar Gat, “Clausewitz and the Marxists: Yet Another Look,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 27 (1992): 363-382 for the limits of Marxist’ affinity for Clausewitz. Donald Davis and Walter Kohn, “Lenin as Disciple of Clausewitz.” *Military Review* 51 (September 1971): 49-55 detail the extent of Lenin’s interest and specific uses of Clausewitz’s thought.

aside, a myriad of generals and scholars abused Clausewitz by finding him a proponent of relentless offensive warfare.²¹

IV. The M.A.D. Clausewitz

Theorists of the atomic age have also identified Clausewitz's concepts as essential to explaining the dynamic of nuclear warfare, deterrence, escalation and the doctrine of Mutual Assured Destruction (M A. D.). His purely philosophical device of the concept of absolute or ideal war, which theoretically has no limits, achieved a grim physical reality with the advent of nuclear weapons. His writings on the restraining aspects of policy are deemed especially significant²²

V. The Historical Clausewitz

Clausewitz wrote extensive works of military history, and identified the purpose of theory as "merely" to comprehend history. Clausewitz found history, and especially military history "incompressible" without a theoretical model to order one's thinking. Military history provides the only alternative to the experience of real war. In this Clausewitz anticipates modern linguistic philosophy, philosophy of history and cognitive science.²³

VI. The Moral Clausewitz

²¹ Clausewitz, War, 357-501. Azar Gat, "Clausewitz on Defense and Attack," Journal of Strategic Studies, 11 (March 1988): 20-26

²² Bernard Brodie, Strategy in the Missile Age, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959) is the best example. K. P. Karunakaran, "Doctrines and their Obsolescence," Institute for Defense Studies Journal 4 (January 1972): 567-72 finds nuclear war "an act of suicide," and no longer an instrument of policy.

²³ See Peter Paret, "Clausewitz as Historian," in Understanding War: Essays on Clausewitz and the History of Military Power, ed. Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992) and Jon Tetsuro Sumida. "The Relationship History and Theory in *On War*: The Clausewitzian Ideal and Its Implications," 65 (April 2001): 333-54.

Ludwig Beck found the moral strength and the intellectual basis to oppose the Nazi regime through Clausewitz's examination of the proper relationship between civilian political leadership, the soldier, and war as an extension of policy.²⁴

VII. The Philosophical Clausewitz

Most soldiers are practical men of action and most military writings technical in nature. W. B. Gallie finds that "Clausewitz, alone among military theorists, was also a philosopher." Other writers disagree as to the propriety of describing Clausewitz as a true philosopher, but the rigor of On War sets him apart from all other writers on military subjects.²⁵

VIII. The Psychological Clausewitz

Clausewitz focused in great detail on the many aspects of the human subconscious affecting battle, as it applies to a commander, individual common soldiers and national groups in general. Before Freud, Jung or even the establishment of the science we know as psychology, Clausewitz inquiry integrated in great detail the many aspects of the human behavior affecting battle.²⁶

²⁴ Klaus Jurgen Muller, "Clausewitz, Ludendorff and Beck: Some Remarks on Clausewitz' Influence on German Military Thinking in the 1930s and 1940s," in Michael Handel, ed. Clausewitz and Modern Strategy, (Frank Cass: London, 1986) 267-86. See also Dan Smith, "Just War, Clausewitz and Sarajevo." Journal of Peace Research 31 (March, 1999): 135-42, for application of Clausewitz to modern ethical problems.

²⁵ W. B. Gallie, "Clausewitz Today," European Journal of Sociology 1 (1978): 143-167. Several authors take issue Gallie's assertion that Clausewitz truly qualifies as a philosopher. Gallie himself is careful in his definition of "philosopher," given twentieth century obfuscations of the term. Raymond Aron replies to some of Clausewitz's critics defining Clausewitz as a philosopher, but carefully asks and delineates "in what sense?" See Aron, "Reason," 599-621.

²⁶ Norman H. Gibbs, "Clausewitz on the Moral Forces in War." Naval War College Review 27 (January-February, 1975): 15-22. Gibbs substitutes the word "psychological" for "moral forces" in this article and finds Clausewitz's writings on moral forces of equal importance to his famous thesis describing war as an extension of policy.

X. The Commercial Clausewitz

Clausewitz, in Book II, chapter three “Art of War or Science of War,” memorably compared war to commerce, in which animate objects interact and condition each other. Several writers find significant business models within Clausewitz’s theory. Clausewitz’s strategic logic serves to train a CEO’s thinking, especially in regards to planning and the idea of friction.²⁷

XI. The Chaotic Clausewitz

Some writers find in Clausewitz’s evaluation of war an expression of modern chaos theory, as he found war inherently unpredictable and unquantifiable. Like modern business and biological models, Clausewitz describes war as an often random or essentially a non-linear phenomenon.²⁸

Very different degrees of success accompany the multiple uses and evaluations of Clausewitz listed here. Many of these uses certainly do not conform to Clausewitz’s own intentions, high standards of scholarship and intellectual honesty. These interpretations often suffer from many of the problems with the treatise listed previously, especially when dealing with subjects apart from the study of war. Yet the sheer breadth of these studies validates the use of On War as a tool.

In evaluating an individual general and his campaigns, Clausewitz provides a most rigorous and sagacious analysis. The first theorist to identify the centrality of human behavior in the study of war, Clausewitz’s description of military genius emphasizes

²⁷ The most useful and comprehensive example by far is Christopher Bassford,, *et al.* Clausewitz on Strategy, (New York: Wiley, 2001).

²⁸ See Alan, Beyerchen “Clausewitz, Nonlinearity, and the Unpredictability of war.” International Security 17 (Winter 1992-93): 59-90.

courage, calmness of judgment and balance rather than the “brilliance” we might normally associate with an Alexander or Napoleon. Clear definition of Clausewitz’s terms and method is possible, despite his work’s incompleteness and others misreading and misuse of the work. In doing so the depth of his analysis enables understanding of Grant as a complete person and military leader, and allows new insight into Grant’s campaigns.

Clausewitz proves useful for another reason. The entire construct of his military theory serves a single purpose. Theory exists not as “positive doctrine” or a “manual for action,” but “merely to help us comprehend history.” History provides the only venue apart from actual practical real-life warxperience for the study of war. Theory trains the mind and Clausewitz’s well-know thesis, that war is a continuation of politics by other means “makes the entire history of war comprehensible” —“Theory should be study, not doctrine,” and On War drives and makes our study of U. S. Grant comprehensible.²⁹

²⁹ Clausewitz, War, 141. Carl von Clausewitz, Principles of War, (Harrisburg, Pa.: Carlyle Barracks, 1942), 67. Peter Paret, Understanding War: Essays on Clausewitz and the History of Military Power, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992) 127.

Chapter 3

Grant the Unconscious Clausewitzian

One does not necessarily have to read Clausewitz to be a Clausewitzian—Michael Handel.¹

Brooks Simpson identifies several writers who find Grant an “unconscious” Clausewitzian, referring, one hopes, to elements of Grant’s strategy and not his apparent inability to handle liquor.² Few have gone beyond identifying Grant as a practitioner and advocate of “modern” or “total” war or war waged against civilians. Similar accusations directed at Clausewitz exist, and some see him in a similar and unflattering light. Such accusations, when directed at Clausewitz, are “likely to be confined to those who have never touched the book.”³

Russell Weigley identifies American adoption of a prototypical Grantian strategy since the Civil War. Historically in two world wars and in wars with native populations, American quasi-Clausewitzian strategists emulate Grant’s methods, building large armies

¹ Michael Handel, Masters of War: Classical Strategic Thought, (Portland, Frank Cass, 1992), 24.

² Brooks Simpson, Let Us Have Peace, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), xv.

³ Bernard Brodie, “Guide to the Reading of *On War*,” in Carl von Clausewitz, On War, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 646. See Sir Michael Howard, “How Much Can Technology Change Warfare?,” Strategic Studies Institute monograph, presented at the U. S. Army War College April, 1994. Howard cites U. S. Grant and Sir Douglas Haig as practitioners of total war who utilized the complete organization of the state to bleed the enemy white through “inescapable battles of attrition.” See also Liddel-Hart’s well known characterization of Clausewitz as the “Mahdi of the mass,” and more recent criticisms by Martin van Creveld and John Keegan, detailed in Christopher Bassford, “The Grand Tradition of Trashing Clausewitz,” War in History, 1 (Summer, 1994): 319-336.

and seeking decisive battles designed to destroy the enemy completely, as Grant did in the Civil War. This strategy (not really Grantian or Clausewitzian), proved successful in some conflicts, but proved less successful in Korea and Vietnam. Those who adopted this proto-typical strategy failed to understand its inapplicability when waging more limited wars.⁴

Writers who emphasize strategy, policy and the social context of war over discussions of weapons and tactical methods perhaps deserve the label Clausewitzian. Others, without a specific debt to the master (or acknowledgment of such a debt), examine Clausewitzian themes in conjunction with traditional narrative. Bruce Catton, like Clausewitz, distinguishes between battles that are tactical “failures,” but still serve the goals of strategy: “this appalling battle (Spotsylvania) was both a victory and a repulse.” A victory, in that it served the goals of policy, but a repulse in that Grant’s tactical desires on the battlefield miscarried. James M. McPherson comments on Buell’s belief, “in limited war for limited goals,” as inappropriate for a war becoming progressively more unlimited and revolutionary in its war aims and methods of prosecution. While thoughtful military historians confront in some manner these and other issues raised in Clausewitz’s theoretical and “non-narrative” approach to history, no historian has written an account of Grant or an analyses of the Civil War dealing methodically with Clausewitzian thought.⁵

⁴ Russel Weigly, The American Way of War, (New York: Macmillan, 1973), 153. See Robert Osgood, Limited War: a Challenge to American Strategy, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), for a discussion of attempts to apply inappropriate and unlimited means to win a war for essentially modest war aims in Korea. See Harry Summers On Strategy, (New York: Presidio Press, 1982), for attempts to apply World War II era strategy and tactics to irregular “political” war in Vietnam.

⁵ Bruce Catton, Grant Takes Command, (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1968), 232; James M. McPherson, Battle Cry of Freedom, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 513

J. F. C. Fuller, often a critic of Clausewitz, perhaps comes closer than any other in applying the rigor of Clausewitz to a Civil War subject. Fuller adapted and applied many of Clausewitz's modes of thinking in his analysis of Grant's strategy and the Civil War in general. Clausewitz argued compellingly on the superiority of strategy over tactics. Politics defines the goal, the end, the purpose of war; strategy determines how the actual fighting on the battlefield itself achieves that goal. But fighting (tactics) is only one of the means strategy utilizes. While certainly important, tactics are rarely decisive and their effects are often limited or made transitory by the confines of strategy. Historians sometime acknowledge these phenomena in writing about other wars (with or without acknowledgement of Clausewitz), as some armies or generals seem consistently able to win battles but lose wars. Fuller appreciated this, elevating strategy, especially Grant's strategy to a level beyond that of Lee and other Civil War generals.⁶

Of the myriad of writers on the Civil War, none has subjected Grant's campaigns systematically to the rigors of Clausewitz, whose theory "penetrates into regions no other military thinker has ever approached."⁷ Perhaps such an omission is understandable. Grant could not have been familiar with theories largely unavailable in English (until 1877) and virtually unknown to the military in Grant's time. During Grant's tenure at West Point, the premier military academy in the Western Hemisphere, works on military

⁶J. F. C. Fuller, Grant and Lee: A Study in Personality and Generalship, (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1957), 264. Fuller idiosyncratically finds that supply, not policy, "remains the foundation of strategy." For two examples of histories emphasizing the preeminence of strategy see Summers, Strategy, Summers uses Clausewitzian theory and recognizes American tactical superiority in the context of strategic defeat in Vietnam. See also B. H. Liddel Hart, A Greater than Napoleon: Scipio Africanus, (New York: Biblio and Tannen, 1971), without acknowledgement of any debt to Clausewitz, Hart details Hannibal's tactical domination in the 2nd Punic War, but acknowledges Roman strategic superiority that eventually triumphed in spite of Hannibal's battlefield prowess.

⁷Herbert Rosinski, The German Army, (Washington: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1944), 122. Clausewitz

strategy were conspicuous by their absence from the curriculum. Grant's army did not embrace Clausewitz until 100 years after Grant's death. Like those historians who subject the dead to Freudian psychoanalysis, "testing" Grant against Clausewitz seems unfair, if not impossible.⁸ Also one might ask, to what purpose? A Freudian might make a correct diagnosis, but the "patient" (long since departed) cannot benefit. Grant and other Civil War generals may have benefited from familiarity with Clausewitz, but if such influence demonstratively did not exist, looking for it in their campaigns seems futile. What then, if anything, can be gained from Clausewitz's somewhat obscure and idiosyncratic analysis?

Clausewitz on the Uses of Theory

The role of theory is merely to help us comprehend history—Clausewitz⁹

Military history is a diverse field encompassing all manner of exposition and analysis. Military historians have long gone beyond simple narrative or the "war story." Studies of weapons, tactics, technology, biography, leadership and more recently, works based on race and gender, define the modern military historian. In contrast, works on military theory are few and far between. Bernard Brodie identifies in writings on strategy "a

⁸U. S. defeat in Vietnam stimulated interest in Clausewitz in the U. S. military. Army manual FM-100-5, the current guide to strategy and tactics, is explicitly Clausewitzian. For two of many examples see Archie Galloway, "FM-100-5, Who Influenced Whom?" *Military Review* 66 (March, 1986): 46-51, and Glenn Harned, "Principles for Modern Doctrine," *Army* 36, (April, 1988): 10-14. For Marine Corps doctrine see Christopher Bassford, "Nonlinearity in Marine Corps Doctrine." in F. G. Hoffman and Gary Horne, eds., *Maneuver Warfare Science*. (United States Marine Corps Combat Development Command, 1998): 1-7.

⁹ Carl von Clausewitz, *Principles of War*, (Harrisburg, Pa.: Carlyle Barracks, 1942), 67.

discontinuity that is not observed in other fields,” as “soldiers are rarely scholars, and civilians are rarely students of strategy.”¹⁰

Because of this discontinuity, the purpose of theory remains ambiguous. Sun Tzu’s Art of War, Machiavelli’s The Art of War and of primary influence in the American Civil War, Jomini’s The Art of War were all written as a guide, a prescription to success in war. All assume a discoverable theory of war, with lessons and methods applicable to real-life situations. While all of these works set conditions on this applicability, the role of theory is clear: Theory provides an ideal, which if studied and mastered should result in victory.¹¹

The immature Clausewitz writing in his twenty-second year divined a radically different if much less ambitious purpose for theory: “The role of theory is merely to help us comprehend history.”¹² Extensive revision and redefinition resulted in a more explicit formulation of this idea:

Theory need not be a positive doctrine or a sort of manual for action. Theory exists to educate the mind, to guide in self-education, not to accompany (one) to the battlefield.¹³

Clausewitz’s biographer, Peter Paret states it another way:

Like military theory, history had no lessons or rules to offer the student, it could only broaden his understanding and strengthen his critical judgment.¹⁴

¹⁰ Bernard Brodie, “The Continuing Relevance of *On War*.” in Carl von Clausewitz, On War. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984, 52.

¹¹ Handel, Masters, 24-27, 75-78.

¹² Clausewitz, Principles, 67.

¹³ *Ibid*, 141.

¹⁴ Peter Paret, “The Genesis of *On War*,” introductory essay in Carl von Clausewitz, On War. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 23.

Subjecting the complexities of military history, in this case Grant's campaigns, to theory reveals no immutable laws of strategy nor will it help us win future battles. It will help us understand Grant's "history," his mind, education, judgment, strength of character and aid in defining the extent of his achievements. While Clausewitz cannot give us an evaluation of Grant or evaluate his war he can suggest to us what kinds of things to think about in constructing our own evaluations and conclusions describing "the kind of war" Grant fought.

It would be problematic and of limited value to try to describe Clausewitz's theory in all its detail and attempt to apply it to Grant's campaigns. Instead, an exposition and application of the heart of his theory, that of most use in understanding Grant and the American Civil War, is justified. The well-known events of the Civil War effectively illustrate the core of his thought and his methodology serves as a guide to its exposition. Clausewitz believed, "without the instrument of history, theory should not be constructed."¹⁵ Applying theory to history enables organization and a clearer comprehension of Grant and his war. Through examination of Grant's historical information we also continually test and define theory. For Clausewitz any theory that cannot stand the test of history obviously cannot be valid.¹⁶

¹⁵ Peter Paret, "Kleist and Clausewitz: A Comparative Sketch," in Peter Paret, Understanding War: Essays on Clausewitz and the History of Military Power, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 156.

¹⁶ Christopher Bassford, "Jomini and Clausewitz: Their Interaction," paper presented at the Consortium on Revolutionary Europe, 1750-1850, February 26, 1993, details Clausewitz's oblique critique of Jomini, whose analysis lacked historicism. See also John Shy, "Jomini," in Peter Paret, ed. The Makers of Modern Strategy, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 164 who argues Jomini divorced theory from any political or historical context in interest of advancing a purely "scientific" theory of war.

The discontinuity in books on strategy Brodie identifies extends to most writing on war and particularly to writings on the Civil War. While interest in the minutia of Civil War weapons, uniforms and the tactics often reaches the point of obsession, few books deal systematically or specifically with the overall strategy of the war. Civil War histories tend to favor narrative history and generally prefer to focus on tactics and operations. Those who do deal with strategy often do so imperfectly. True understanding, the effective “comprehending” of military history, requires theory.¹⁷

Strategy comprises something often best viewed in isolation from the tactical narrative and properly deserves separate consideration. Structurally, part I utilizes a topical approach defining Clausewitzian theory. Part II uses a chronological approach, applying theory in a discussion of Grant and his campaigns.

Seven Forgotten Children—Clausewitz on the uses of History

No German historian can compare with this brilliant pupil of Scharnhorst—Wilhelm Dilthey

We distinguish between the *critical approach* and the plain narrative of an historical event—Clausewitz¹⁸

If history is the “truth” through which one tests theory, the method Clausewitz used in its construction requires understanding. To apply Clausewitz’s method to the study of the Civil War obliges acknowledgment of his “seven forgotten children,” the historical

¹⁷ This observation depends to a great extent on each particular writer’s definition of the word “strategy.” In a Clausewitzian sense, strategy and politics enjoy a symbiosis not present in many others’ definitions of the word. Clausewitz believed true understanding of military problems, whether tactical, social, political or strategic, requires understanding of the links between war and policy.

¹⁸ Paret, “Kleist,” 156, quoting German philosopher and historian Wilhelm Dilthey. Hans Delbreck also compared Clausewitz’s historical writings on the French Revolution to those of de Tocqueville.

writings that provided the basis for the theory developed in On War.¹⁹ Ten volumes embody Clausewitz's posthumous legacy as published and edited by his wife, Maria.²⁰ Three comprise theory constituting On War; the remaining seven contain historical studies, principally of the Napoleonic wars. The writing of the seven volumes of Clausewitz's historical works predates On War, both chronologically and largely theoretically.²¹

In writing history, Clausewitz differentiates between the critique, which examines strategic problems in their extremity, and narrative history, in which one relates events in detail. Clausewitz wages criticism "not so much alongside the commander as in competition with him." In this type of scrutiny one describes mistakes and errors in their fullest form, not as an exercise in hindsight and not to evaluate the reasons for those mistakes. In this way Clausewitz reduces strategic errors to their fundamentals. Making these evaluations unencumbered by the myriad of "excuses" and "justifications" that usually accompany strategic assessments enables a full accounting. This method reveals Grant's motivations, the circumstances driving his military career, and also determines

¹⁹ Henry, Peter A. "Clausewitz and the Campaign of 1812 in Russia," paper presented at the Consortium on Revolutionary Europe, 1750-1850, February, 1992.

²⁰ Celia A. Rodriguez, and Patricia, Shields, "Woman 'On War': Marie von Clausewitz's Essential Contribution to Military Philosophy." Minerva. 11 3/4 (Fall/Winter, 1993): 5-10.

²¹ Paret, "Historian," 133, the histories of the Italian Campaign of 1796 and the War of 1799 in Switzerland do run concurrent with the writing of On War and exhibit concern with the political object of war and the duality of absolute and limited war. In general the historical writings do not reflect the mature Clausewitz in terms of theory. For an interesting example see Bassford, Christopher. "Wellington on Clausewitz," paper presented at the Consortium on Revolutionary Europe, 1750-1850, February, 1992. Wellington's critique of Clausewitz's account of the Waterloo campaign focuses on the political reasons for his actions, shortcomings in Clausewitz's account he later identified and changed in On War.

his misunderstandings and miscalculations as well as his sagacity and triumphs. As with all things Clausewitzian, political context and policy considerations remain supreme.²²

The critical approach is in turn divided into three parts: the discovery and interpretation of facts; the tracing of events back to their root causes; and identification and evaluation of the means employed,” or “criticism proper.” Peter Paret speculates in his evaluation of the sharpness of Clausewitz as critic that many of the passages in his posthumous works were edited and toned down, especially his criticisms of Prussian institutions and personalities. Clausewitz consciously declined to publish critical writings likely to affect his career or family. Unlike Clausewitz, we will feel free to take on institutions and personalities, when appropriate. We will hope also, unlike Clausewitz, that our views don’t serve to stifle our careers or affect our families.²³

²²see Clausewitz, War, Chapter five, Book II “Critical Analysis,” 156-159 for Clausewitz’s description of this method. For an extended discussion, see Garry Wills, “Critical Inquiry (*Kritik*) in Clausewitz,” Critical Inquiry, 9 (December, 1982): 281-302

²³ Peter Paret, “A Proposition, Not a Solution—Clausewitz’s Attempt to Become Prussian Minister at the Court of St. James.” in Peter Paret, ed. Understanding War: Essays on Clausewitz and the history of Military Power, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 178-198, specifies some of the obstacles placed in Clausewitz’s path due to his political views. Clausewitz published no major works before his death, opting to avoid the controversy publication would generate. The “toning down” described by Paret, took place out of deference to his widow, governess to Frederick Wilhelm, the future Emperor, Wilhelm Frederick III. For a fuller treatment, see Rodriquez and Shields, “Woman,” 7.

Chapter 4

Definitions: On War in a Civil War Context

War is more than a true Chameleon—Clausewitz¹

It is not possible to detail Clausewitz's theory, derived (in its original form) from the over 2,000 pages in the 10 volumes of his collected works, without committing the academic sin of reductionism. It is possible to find key ideas that drive Clausewitz's inquiry into the nature of war and see if they are present in Grant's own understanding of war and in the conduct of his campaigns. Clausewitz offers multiple definitions of war, each of progressively greater depth and acumen. Each definition offers unique insight into the nature of war. Taken together, they inform and instruct, creating an inclusive system to visualize and comprehend the complexity of armed conflict. Each of Clausewitz's definitions of war complements, redefines, and clarifies the other. The major events and interpretations of the American Civil War are well known, especially in comparison with the often quoted but seldom read writings of Clausewitz. Those events clarify and illustrate theory, giving real world substance to concepts Clausewitz derived from his own historical studies, but constructed in order to apply to all wars in all times.

Definition #1

War is thus an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will.²

¹Clausewitz, War, 89.

² Ibid, 75.

Clausewitz begins his study of war comparing it in its simplest terms to a duel. He specifies the image of two wrestlers, suggesting the idea of opposing forces reacting and testing, each seeking to overthrow the other. Deceptively simple, the duels present in war are diverse and countless, each following its own unique pattern and context. The image extends beyond the initial metaphor of wrestlers to two states or generals in contention, then devolving to war in all its elements. J. F. C. Fuller critiqued Clausewitz's example, suggesting the imagery of two dualists fencing provides a completely different picture of war than two dualists wrestling. True enough. In response to Fuller, Clausewitz might suggest Grant's more mobile Vicksburg Campaign analogous to fencing while Grant and Lee's confrontation in the Overland Campaign properly resembles wrestlers.³

Within this simple definition and imagery resides Grant the duelist, who overthrows Pemberton through deception and maneuver at Vicksburg. More famously Grant and Lee duel in Virginia in 1864, Grant repeatedly moving by Lee's left in a grim and bloody confrontation. No less vividly, the image of a duel extends to politics (Clausewitz's second definition of war). Lincoln dueled with Jefferson Davis, issuing the Emancipation Proclamation and changing the political character of the war in order to overthrow his enemy. Within the political culture of the army itself, "Lincoln finds a general," dueling with McClellan and his various successors over issues of civilian supremacy, war policy and the strategy and tactics of the Army of the Potomac. Bound

³ Aron, *Philosopher*, 117, vigorously defends Clausewitz's choice, viewing war essentially as a contest between human wills, a contest more akin to two wrestlers than fencers, no matter what form war takes on the battlefield. J. F. C. Fuller, *The Generalship of Ulysses S. Grant*, (New York: Da Capo Press, 1929), 236 adopts Clausewitz's image of two wrestlers as most appropriate to the fighting in the Wilderness.

up in the process, Lincoln duels throughout the war with domestic rivals and detractors through public opinion and party politics.⁴

Within this simple definition an economic historian finds complexity in a duel between a Slave-based agricultural South battling to supply its armies and match an industrializing north; a sociologist might describe Northern class divisions, with immigrant laborers dueling with freed blacks, their conflicts undermining the Union war effort; a political scientist might focus on the structure of the Confederate government, as recently seceded states dueled with their new central government over its rights to draft, defining the limits of States Rights in its prosecution of the war.⁵

On a more personal level each individual soldier or citizen, caught up in his or her own private war (Clausewitz's fourth definition sees war as part of man's social existence), duels with political power. Some duel directly with an enemy through participation in combat itself or through actions on the home front. For some the duel exists between their government's pressure to motivate them to volunteer or to conscript them and their own apathy or impulse for survival. Some duel with their own government's war aims and seek overthrow through political change. Others struggle with the moral issues of war, seeking the preservation of "rights" or the creation of "a more perfect union." Imagining all of these duels occurring simultaneously illustrates

⁴ Civil War historians identify in these countless duels obvious subjects for detailed study. For Lincoln and his Generals, see Kenneth P. Williams, Lincoln Finds a General, 5 vol. (New York: MacMillan, 1949—59) and Williams, T. Harry, Lincoln and His Generals, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1952).

⁵ See Thomas C. Cochran, Frontiers of Change: Early Industrialism in America, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), for competing economic systems. Iver Bernstein, The New York City Draft Riots: Their Significance for American Society (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) and Eric Foner, Politics and Ideology in the Age of the Civil War, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), detail class and racial divisions in the North. Albert B. Moore, Conscription and Conflict in the Confederacy, (New York: Macmillan 1924) examines the implications of the Southern draft system.

Clausewitz's concept of war as a trinity (Clausewitz's third definition), consisting of the interaction between the uncertainty of military action, the passions of the people and the "rational" element, the policy of the state.

Imagining Grant himself as a duelist during the Civil War finds a multiplicity of conflicts in which Grant sought to over-throw his "enemies." These occurred on both a personal and professional level and go far towards explaining Grant's success in the war. They also provide systematic insight into Grant the man. Clausewitz's recognition of the supremacy of the human element in war, in which he goes further than other theorists, helps us rediscover Grant in his totality. Grant dueled on the field of battle with opposing armies. He dueled throughout his career politically, both within the army itself through participation in the bureaucratic wars of its commanders and through interactions with his superiors in Washington. He also dueled politically with those outside the army who sought his destruction. Newspapermen, politicians, and eventually entire political parties sought his advancement or overthrow in order to advance their own perceptions and agendas in prosecution of the war. In larger terms Grant dueled, and mastered public opinion in general, an essential component of success in a democratic state. Apart from "domestic" politics, Grant dueled politically with Southern political concerns. As Grant began operating at higher levels of command his military actions made political policy affecting Southern morale and internal cohesion. His use of black troops, his prisoner exchange policy and his specific military campaigns all challenged the basic coherence and viability of the secessionist state.

Finally, Grant dueled with his own personality. The qualities of a great commander, like tactical success on the battlefield, cannot be quantified or predicted.

Grant's own inner life, behavior and character, through which he became a remarkable general, reflect his success in this struggle. Grant's mastery of the battlefield is comprehensible only through his mastery of himself.⁶

Definition #2

Is war not just another expression of their thought, another form of speech or writing? Its grammar, indeed, may be its own, but not its logic.⁷

Clausewitz's best-known and arguably most important formulation conditions all of his historical and theoretical writings:

War is a continuation of policy (politics) by other means. The political object is the goal, war is the means of reaching it, and the means can never be considered in isolation from their purpose.⁸

Firmly linking war to the logic and practice of politics, Clausewitz removed it from the "science" of technology and the practice of tactics. In his "Note of 10 July 1827," Clausewitz advised his readers to keep the thesis of war as a continuation of policy by other means continually in mind throughout the reading the treatise, "as it will greatly facilitate the study of the subject and the whole will be easier to analyze."⁹

⁶ Clausewitz, War, 102-112 discusses the personal qualities required of effective leadership at higher levels. Allan Nevins's, The War for the Union: The Organized War to Victory, (New York: Scribner's, 1971) 4:18, identifies Grant as "always perfectly self-possessed" and quotes Schofield, who found Grant above all "incapable of deceiving himself."

⁷ Clausewitz, War, 605. Mao used a similar metaphor in his description of the formation of the Second United Front with the Kuomintang, which temporarily ended the Chinese Civil War: "In the past we used the machine gun to criticize them, now we use the pen and the tongue." Quoted in Ross Terrill, Mao, (New York: Harper & Roe, 1980), 135.

⁸ Clausewitz, War, 87. This idea permeates Clausewitz's works and provided the basis for the proposed revision of On War, incomplete by Clausewitz's death.

⁹ Ibid, 69.

Helpful as this admonition is, the word policy means different things to different people and Clausewitz formulated his own definition of the word. To begin with, difficulties are present in the translation and common interpretation of his most famous formulation “war is merely the continuation of policy by other means,” (and in its numerous restatements throughout the 600-odd pages that make up On War) rendering it in effect, inaccurate, at least in English. The German word *politik* has multiple meanings encompassing in English both “policy” and “politics.” *Politik* includes the specific measures taken by the actors in government, the intrigues and negotiation of “politics” (without the pejorative connotation present in English). It also includes the larger influence of ideology (policy) driving the general practice of government.¹⁰ Application of Clausewitz’s most famous and important dictum as popularly translated (without clear definition of *politik*), is misleading. Success in war requires the fulfillment of the needs of both the “tactics” of political action (the operation of statecraft on a day-to-day basis) and the “strategy” (or the larger war aims) of policy or ideology.¹¹

“*Politik*” also extends to the social relations within the state. All armies reflect the social makeup of the states they serve, especially the policy of government toward the army and its own people. “*Politik*” extends to “class” and social issues. In Clausewitz’s time the essential question involved the participation of the bourgeoisie and peasantry in the life of the Prussian state. In Grant’s experience the issue of slavery, its expansion or eradication and the power of the Southern aristocracy proved central.

¹⁰Azar Gat, “Clausewitz’s Political and Ethical World View,” Political Studies, 37 (January, 1989): 97-106, defines Clausewitz’s definition of *politik*. The Howard/Paret translation tends to use “policy” and “politics” somewhat interchangeably, in a manner that seems most familiar to their popular usages in English.

¹¹ Bassford, “Trashing,” provides a different interpretation of this and other problems of rendering just this brief passage into English.

Absolutist Europe's reaction to the Napoleonic and French Revolutionary experience defined Clausewitz's age and he finds it impossible to separate political (policy) activity from the character of governments and peoples caught up in those conflicts. Wars are an extension of these inclusive policy definitions as well:

The aim of policy is to unify and reconcile all aspects of internal administration as well as of spiritual value, and whatever else the moral philosopher may care to add . . . we can only treat policy as representative of all interests of the community.¹²

Clausewitz offers a very large and wide-ranging definition of "*politik*," beyond a specific policy decision to wage a particular war, beyond the internal political make-up of a state or even conscious intent. States drag a myriad of policy extensions, "all interests of the community," with them into war. Many of those interests may not necessarily be known, only revealed (for benefit or detriment) given the pressures and events of the war itself. A generation of mistaken policies on the part of the Prussian state produced the army thoroughly defeated by Napoleon. In this war, as in all conflicts, "war naturally shared in the errors of policy, and therefore could provide no corrective."¹³

Grant also understood that the Civil War consisted of more than battles between soldiers and struck a balance between a myriad of "tactical" political considerations and the ultimate strategic policy goal, reconciliation and reunion. As the war progressed the Union (and Grant personally) identified and targeted the Southern "policy" of a slavery-based social order and a nation created through session. As with Prussia in its war with the French the South could "provide no corrective in order to win the war." A Confederate state bereft of its two essential weaknesses, slavery and its doctrine of states

¹² Clausewitz, *War*, 605-606.

¹³ *Ibid*, 609-10.

rights, would lose its reason for existence. Even many Southerners understood they “could not surrender the essential and distinctive principle of Southern civilization (slavery)” to prosecute the war more effectively. War shared in these “errors” (or weaknesses) of policy defining a target for Lincoln and Grant’s strategy. Political context always defines a “given” quantity subject to only limited manipulation.¹⁴

Grant’s collaborator and partner, William T. Sherman, also recognized both the uniqueness and power of the political dimension of war. Lincoln’s reelection in 1864 defined Northern policy in the Clausewitzian sense “of all interests of the community.” Sherman wrote to Halleck of the progression from questions of policy (as defined by the election) to their extension, war:

The issues are made, and all discussion is out of place and ridiculous. The section of thirty-pounder Parrott rifles now drilling before my tent is a more convincing argument than the largest Democratic meeting of the State of New York can possibly assemble at Albany.¹⁵

The election restated and reinforced the fact that war for reunion defined the policy of the North, and the army’s success or failure continued to determine the fate of that policy. The “more convincing argument” over policy, the other means, clearly lay with military action.

Definition #3—A Paradoxical Trinity

One can identify all of Clausewitz’s most profound insights with one or another element of the trinity—Edward Villacres and Christopher Bassford¹⁶

¹⁴ McPhearson, *Cry*, 835, quoting a *Richmond Examiner* editorial opposing arming slaves late in the war.

¹⁵ William T. Sherman, *Memoirs of William T. Sherman* (New York: Library of America: 1990), 366.

¹⁶ Edward J. Villacres and Christopher Bassford, “Reclaiming the Clausewitzian Trinity,” *Parameters* 25 (Autumn 1995): 9-19, contains an insightful discussion of the many uses and interpretations of Clausewitz’s concept.

Clausewitz, through his trinitarian definition of war, created a new and unique framework for its understanding, identifying three components of war:

(a) the blind natural force of violence, hatred, and enmity among the masses of people; (b) chance and probability, faced or generated by the commander and his army; and (c) war's rational subordination to the policy of the government.¹⁷

Clausewitz suggests a rational theory of war recognizes a balance between three dominant tendencies of war "like an object suspended between three magnets." While all of the forces of war listed above exist throughout a society, the first concerns mainly the people, the second the variable skills of an army and its commanders, and the last (the only truly controllable element) the rational formulation of policy by governments. Due to this holistic definition Clausewitz's theory effectively describes wars of vastly different characters. Maoist-style revolutionary warfare certainly demanded that policy cultivate and direct the hatred and emotions from the people in a quite different manner than Frederick the Great's more limited "Cabinet Wars" required. In any war, particularly effective or ineffective armies determine the feasibility of satisfying the passions of the people or goals of governments appealing to war.

In the American Civil War, Grant intuitively recognized the interplay of emotion and chance conditioning the rational application of policy at a practical level. In recognizing the blind forces of violence and natural hatred of the people, Grant accepted and utilized the intervention of the mitigating force of politics. Grant observed three classes of Southern civilians: unionists, secessionists and neutrals. Initial Union policy (supported by Grant) respected all private property. Hoping to reap the benefits of

¹⁷Beyerchin, "Nonlinearity," 69, paraphrasing Clausewitz. Clausewitz, War, 89. .

Unionist allies and careful not to antagonize civilians of any political affiliation, government (and Grant as its policy instrument) interceded between its soldiers and Confederate civilians. Each part of the trilogy conditions the other, and the Union citizen-soldiers understood and initiated a policy more rational and effective than their government's. The citizen soldiers, better than the government or the officers leading them:

Knew who was 'secesh' and, more rarely, who was Unionist. Above all they knew who was rich,--equated rich with planter aristocracy. They often found a happy correlation between 'secesh property' and the property most likely to provide an abundance of food.¹⁸

Grant accepted the soldiers' natural inclinations and directed them toward legitimate military and political targets. The soldiers realized the logic of such a course. Their actions stimulated the evolution of the government's policy of increasing "severity" directed towards Southern war resources, "civilian," public or military.

In dealing with the "chance and probability" of war Clausewitz describes, Grant cultivated cooperation throughout the army. Experience and professionalism overcome to some degree uncertainty, the "friction" present in war. Grant never lobbied politically for advancement and subordinated personal ambition to effective prosecution of the war. In contrast to Hooker, whose attitude toward his superiors led Lincoln to doubt his ability for high command and "Baldy" Smith, who ruined his chances for command of the Army of the Potomac through his criticism of other generals, Grant just fought the war. As general-in-chief Grant operated in the same professional manner and elicited

¹⁸Mark Grimsely, The Hard Hand of War: Union Military Policy Toward Southern Civilians, 1861-1865, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) 103.

cooperation even from the Army of the Potomac, whose officers resented the appointment of a Westerner to top command.¹⁹

In the realm of government, Grant also fostered cooperation and communication. Unlike McClellan who questioned and debated Lincoln's political actions, Grant chose to serve policy, executing changing policy as the war unfolded. Unlike the incapable Hooker (again), who wanted Lincoln's job and openly advocated military dictatorship, Grant ensured that Lincoln knew of his rejection of those who sought his candidacy for President. Grant never questioned the correctness of civilian control of the military (again Clausewitz's central thesis) and was content to follow orders and policy as directed by his superiors.²⁰

In Clausewitz's trinitarian definition, "war is dictated by the political whole which contains it, which reveals and highlights the conduct of all." Clausewitz thoroughly applies the political idea to all aspects of his thinking about war. Whether evaluating an individual citizen soldier's motivations or a president's, "war cannot be divorced from its political life." Any thinking about war removed from its political whole leaves us "with something pointless and devoid of sense."²¹

Definition # 4 Clausewitz and the Social Nature of War

War is neither an art nor a science—Clausewitz²²

¹⁹Williams, General, 293, 213.

²⁰ Ibid, 213, Catton, Command, 108-109.

²¹ Aron, Philosopher, 273. Clausewitz, War, 605.

²² Clausewitz, War, 149.

Clausewitz's fourth definition of war is also original, setting him apart from all previous and most contemporary theorists. Sun Tzu, Jomini and Machiavelli all entitled their works on strategy The Art of War. Each contained "scientific" discussions of tactics and offered literal prescriptions for their use. Clausewitz, in his chapter "Art of War or Science of War" rejects both formulations:

War is not an exercise of will directed at inanimate matter, as is the case with the mechanical arts (science), or at matter which is animate but passive as in the case with the fine arts. In war, the will is directed at an animate object that *reacts*. We therefore conclude that war does not belong in the realm of arts and sciences: rather *it is part of man's social existence*.²³

During the war Grant humorously demonstrated his understanding of Clausewitz's description of war as a dynamic of action and reaction. A reporter at the beginning of the Overland Campaign questioned Grant: "How long will it take you to get to Richmond?" Grant responded: "I will agree to be there in about four days—that is, if General Lee becomes a party to the agreement; but if he objects, the trip will undoubtedly be prolonged."²⁴ One's opponent in war reacts and that reaction is unpredictable as is the performance of one's own troops and junior officers. A myriad of other imponderables exist, known and unknown, all requiring their own evaluation. It is impossible to formulate perfect plans or "text book" solutions to military problems. Grant understood this in a critique of many Civil War generals made long after the war:

Some of our generals failed because they worked out everything by rule. They knew what Frederick did at one place, and Napoleon at another

²³ Ibid, 148-149.

²⁴ Porter, Campaigning, 43-44.

. . . Unfortunately for their plans the rebels would be thinking about something else.²⁵

War then is neither art nor science though it contains elements of each.

Clausewitz's definition of war as social interaction provides the basis for entire genres in the current study of war. Clausewitz, acknowledged as the foremost commentator and theoretician of war, gives credibility to and clearly anticipates modern military scholarship focusing on social conditions raised by the issues of gender, race and class.²⁶

This particular definition of war rose out of Clausewitz's participation in the Prussian reform movement, which in turn rose out of defeat at the hands of the socially and politically unified French:

Very few of the new manifestations in war can be ascribed to new inventions or new departures in ideas. They result mainly from the transformation of society and new social conditions.²⁷

Clausewitz viewed French success as a result of the corrupt ordering of Prussian society, which prevented participation of the people in the life of the state. Reform of the army required social change and the re-ordering of the state, not just changes in weapons and tactics. If war is social interaction, not art or science, then the natural study of war is society. Truly understanding weapons, tactics and strategy, i.e., "traditional" military history, is only possible through understanding their origins within the social context of a nation. Changes in tactics and weapons *require* social change. Armies are reflections of

²⁵ John Russell Young, *Around the World With General Grant*, (New York: American News Company, 1879) II, 352-3.

²⁶ For the effects of military technology and class see John Ellis, *The Social History of the Machine Gun*, (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1986). For war and gender see *Gendering War Talk* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993). See John W. Dower, *War without Mercy: Race & Power in the Pacific War*, (New York: Pantheon, 1986) for race and war.

²⁷ Clausewitz, *War*, 515.

the societies that field them, and their utility is often based less on numbers and weapons than motivation and political unity. Class, ideology and the structure of the state define the origins for all military studies as they determine at their root the numbers, types of weapons, tactical methods and strategies employed.

Clausewitz's participation in the Prussian reform movement provided practical application and experience in the use of "social engineering" to achieve military goals. On War contains numerous reference to and justifications of reform. The reformers brought members of the bourgeoisie into the Prussian officer corps, ended exemptions from conscription and organized a "people's militia," raising the status of the peasant classes and ending the monopoly of the nobility in military service.²⁸ The reformers attributed French revolutionary victories not to any innate superiority of French soldiers, armies and certainly not the any superiority of their revolutionary ideology. The reformers instead focused on failings in the structure and policies of their own state. In making these changes Clausewitz emulated in substance that aspect of the French Revolution, "which had handed war back to the people," through conscription and citizen participation in people's militias.²⁹

Grant recognized the social nature of war in a Clausewitzian sense. His analysis of his Mexican experience as well as his conduct in the Civil War demonstrates this understanding. Grant's participation in both theatres of battle under Scott and Taylor enabled a sober evaluation of both Mexican public life and its military abilities. Grant

²⁸ The best works on the Prussian reform movement are William Shanahan, "Prussian Military Reforms: 1786-1813, (New York: AMS Press, 1966), and Peter Paret, York and the Era of Prussian Military Reforms 1807-1815, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963).

²⁹ Clausewitz, War,

saw the Mexican army “as a microcosm of Mexican society.” Mexican social weakness enabled U. S. victory over an enemy that out-gunned and outnumbered them. While Mexican artillery technically enjoyed a measure of superiority over American guns; intangible social and political factors undermined that superiority.³⁰

Grant identified a huge gulf between “the better class” that “tyrannize [sic] over the lower . . . much as a hard master does over his Negroes.” Unmotivated politically, the average soldier enjoyed no from benefit and exhibited little interest in the outcome of the war. The peasant classes developed no concept of nationalism akin to the American experience, and Mexican military leadership induced little personal loyalty. Victory, if it came, benefited only the upper classes that jealously defended their position of privilege. So war generated correspondingly little enthusiasm on the part of the average soldier. Political disorganization in the end proved decisive, in spite of stands by the under-paid, under-fed Mexican troops as brave “as I have ever seen made by soldiers.”³¹

The Mexican peasantry felt themselves something apart from their government and leadership. Evidence of any kind of “modern” nationalism, as had grown up in the nation-states of Europe, did not exist. Such a fragmented society generated similar structural fragmentation within its army. Weapons and courage were not enough. The political and social cohesion absent in the Mexican state and also absent in its army proved decisive.

³⁰Geoffrey Perret, Ulysses S. Grant: Soldier and President, (New York: Random House, 1997.), 76. See also Grant, Memoirs, 84-85.

³¹John Y. Simon, *et al.*, editors Papers of Ulysses S. Grant. Vols., 1-22, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press: 1967— I. 97. Hereafter abbreviated as GP.

Grant's analysis of the weaknesses of Mexican society mirrors Clausewitz's perception of weaknesses in the Prussian state. Class division prohibited large segments of Prussian society from full citizenship and this exclusion crippled Prussian ability to match French armies either in size, technical innovation or most significantly, in motivation. The Prussian army at this time comprised some 50% mercenaries. It is, of course, quite difficult to foster devotion, love of country, and self-sacrifice in an army of unwilling draftees and mercenaries. The harsh methods of the Prussian officers, who attempted to substitute discipline for true commitment failed.³²

Grant found the Mexican officers also harsh and cruel; General Ampudia "has gone so far as to boil the heads of one or two of his prisoners in oil so as to preserve them," and Grant reported Mexican prisoners saying "their officers cut and slashed among them with their sabers at a dreadful rate to make them advance." The structure of Mexican society benefited the Americans and crippled the Mexican Army. Grant summed up the paradox of their circumstances: "They doubled us in number, doubled us and more in artillery, they behind strong Breast-works had every advantage." All these material and tactical advantages provided no relief to an army hobbled by political reality: "Poor fellows; if they were well drilled, well fed and well paid, no doubt they would fight and persist in it; but as it is, they are put to the slaughter without avail"³³

Definition #4—Part II

³² Shanahan, Reforms, 48.

³³ GP I: 81, 85, 144.

The Value of a Man—War, Pragmatism and Social Revolution From Above.

It is possible that sooner or later we will have to defend the King of Prussia against his own army—
Czar Alexander I

I have been anxious and careful that the inevitable conflict shall not degenerate into a violent and remorseless revolutionary struggle—Lincoln³⁴

Lenin, writing in his own political context of war and revolution, described Clausewitz's assessment of war as a continuation of policy as "the theoretical basis of views on the significance of any war." Marxist appropriation also lends credibility to and anticipates modern economic interpretations of war and society. Illumination of this idea, of great value to the study of the Civil War, requires further development of a Clausewitzian interpretation based on class.³⁵

Gerhard von Scharnhorst, Clausewitz's teacher and the first director of the Berlin War Academy, imparted to him "an essentially unideological view of social and political arrangements." Clausewitz advocated the arming of a peasant militia, universal military service without exemption and admittance of the bourgeoisie to the officer corps as a necessary and practical matter, regardless of his own views on the subject. Pragmatism and urgency drove Clausewitz's commitment. Preservation of the state outweighed

³⁴ Czar Alexander I, on the Prussian reformers, quoted in Alfred Vagts, A History of Militarism, (New York: Free Press, 1959), 144. Abraham Lincoln in Roy Bassler, ed, Works of Lincoln, vol. V, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 48-49.

³⁵V. I Lenin, "Socialism and war," in The Lenin Anthology, ed. by Robert C. Tucker (New York: W. W. Norton, 1975), 188. Marxist appropriation of Clausewitz and his participation in the Prussian reform movement has led some writers to attempt to "liberalize" Clausewitz. Clausewitz himself was willing to sacrifice his own life in the interests of preservation of the ultraconservative Prussian state. His commitment to social justice surely extended only to the extent that it strengthened Prussia and mitigated the effects of French revolutionary propaganda. This said, recent documents uncovered by Peter Paret indicate his support for a constitution and a parliament for Prussia. These views, if known, unquestionably further diminished his chances for advancement in Prussian government circles. See Peter Paret, Clausewitz and the State, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978). For revision of interpretations of Clausewitz as a modern liberal reformer see Azar Gat "Clausewitz and the Marxists: Another look," Journal of Contemporary History, . 27 (1992): 363-382. Aron, Philosopher, 267-77 details Lenin's dishonest hijacking of several of Clausewitz's key concepts.

preservation of class privilege and in the mind of some the reformers even preservation of the monarchy. Monarchs and monarchists regarded these reforms as risky and as potentially revolutionary as the French example. In a similar manner as the reformers, Grant and Lincoln's fear for destruction of their state drove their own social engineering. They also feared slave rebellion (which might stimulate Northern opposition to the war and negatively affect Northern society also) and the divisiveness such a move generated amongst neutralists and Southern unionists. The class structure of the Confederacy exhibited its own class "contradictions," making it vulnerable and open to revolutionary attacks on its most fundamental levels. Lincoln played a very dangerous game. Lincoln sought to destroy a nation in rebellion, tear apart and restructure its society, while maintaining the allegiance of the remaining loyal Border States (many in the midst of their own social revolution) and then reintegrate them all into a new and better whole acceptable to all.³⁶

Clausewitz commented on the changes to traditional methods of war French practice produced: "By revolutionary methods, the French had burned away the old concept of war, as if with acid." In the American Civil war a naiveté existed regarding Southern unionist sentiment and commitment to their own revolution. The war burned away that naiveté in bloody battles such as Shiloh and Antietam, as well as through the advent of irregular war. In its substance the American Civil war "called forth issues of national existence comparable to those of the wars of the French Revolution."³⁷

³⁶ Peter Paret, *Clausewitz and the State*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 286-306, 343-50. See also Carl von Clausewitz, Peter Paret ed. *Historical and Political Writings*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 223-235.

³⁷ Clausewitz, *War*, 228. Weigly, *American*, 89.

Also in practical terms, emancipation or its threat, put great political pressure on Southern society. Even slaves distant from advancing Union armies exhibited less deference and willingness to work and forms of passive resistance born from renewed hope of freedom increased. Emancipation, even as an idea, increased slave-owner suspicion and fear of rebellion, requiring further dissipation of limited Southern manpower to deal with the threat of rebellion. The psychological effects of emancipation on Southern morale also should not be underestimated. The prospect of revolution is unsettling, even to those who are pursuing it. As the South conceived defeat, the specter of occupation and the destruction of the existing social order weighed heavily on all elements of Southern society.

Emancipation carried with it the promise of social revolution in the South. Grant, like the Prussian reformers, pursued social revolution as a means to victory. Grant supported the organization of black regiments, denying slave labor to the South and utilized “contrabands” (recently freed slaves) for the Northern war effort. Emancipation made clear Northern “intention to smash the slaveholding aristocracy that had spawned secession.” If many Northerners found themselves reluctant to fight to abolish slavery, most Southerners were not part of the slave-owning system and many exhibited a similar reluctance to fight to preserve it. In moral terms, if preserving the Union represented preservation of something “good,” emancipation added a new dimension to American freedom, and created something better. The war compelled an evolution toward a democratic realism, achieving something closer to the ideals of the republic.³⁸

³⁸ Grimsely, Hard, 140-141.

Grant sought to end the war by exhausting or breaking-up Confederate armies in the field, ending the South's physical ability to resist. Of equal importance, Grant also targeted the moral element, the Southern will to resist. Exhaustion of Lee's Army of Northern Virginia and Sherman's campaigns in Georgia and the Carolinas were only the physical expression of his achievement. Grant used all military means at his disposal to achieve specific political objects and continued to use political means to further those objectives after the war.³⁹ Grant, like Clausewitz, realized that military victory in and of itself guarantees nothing. One can "win" the war and lose the peace. Politics continues before, during and after its "instrument," war, is exercised.⁴⁰

Grant observed in Mexico an army crippled by its social structure. Southern social problems constituted a vulnerability far less crippling to their army, but fatal nonetheless. In finding the Southern economy and social system legitimate targets. Grant truly waged "total war," not in its physical destruction but in its politics. Grant understood the social dimensions of war. His strategy was appropriate and Clausewitzian, not because of its totality, but because in its totality it matched total political objectives. No student of the contemporary formal writings about war, Grant through intuition and observation developed his own system applicable to his time and experience. His definitions and understanding of war proved superior to that of his fellows and compatible in their essentials with Clausewitz.

³⁹Simpson, Peace, details Grant's efforts after the war to preserve the political results of the victory.

⁴⁰Ibid, xv. Brooks Simpson finds Grant "broadened" Clausewitz by recognizing that the end of hostilities did not mark the end of the political struggle to achieve war aims. Actually Clausewitz is clear. Politics exists before, during and after hostilities. Clausewitz asks, "Do political relations stop when diplomatic notes are no longer exchanged? Political lines continue throughout the war into the subsequent peace. How could it be otherwise?" Clausewitz, War, 605.

Chapter 5

Defining The Ill-Defined: Strategy, Operations, Tactics and Why Size Doesn't Matter

Strategy, in all its forms, is a most perplexing word—J. F. C. Fuller

In the highest realms of strategy there is little or no difference between strategy, policy and statesmanship—Clausewitz

Strategy is politics, tactics is fighting—Raymond Aron¹

Of the many potential confusions present in picturing war, perhaps none is more difficult than conceptualizing the relationship between strategy, operations and tactics. Politicians, businessmen, sports commentators and writers of military history as well as soldiers, use these words extensively, with little precision. The manner in which these words are used vary from writer to writer and of course, from soldier to soldier. Thinking clearly about war requires clear definition of these terms. Without a clear or common definition, understanding the thought processes of those using the terms is impossible. Also those who use the terms without precise definition risk incomprehensibility. Lack of precision in any given officer or scholars' particular use of the terms renders comparison and evaluation difficult, even if discussion derives from a common doctrine.² Civil War soldiers' own definitions are often even less clear, as no comprehensive

¹J. F. C. Fuller, The Generalship of Ulysses S. Grant, (London: Da Capo Press, 1929), 7; Carl von Clausewitz, On War (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 178; Raymond Aron, Clausewitz, Philosopher of War (Englwood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1985), 137.

² For example see Antulio J., Echevaria, II. [Clausewitz's Center of Gravity: It's Not What We Thought](#), Naval War College Review, 56 (Winter 2003): 108-123, for a discussion of modern (and diffuse) use of the term "Center of Gravity" as it relates to strategy, operations and tactics for all of the services.

common doctrine existed. Each soldier's conception of strategy, operations, and tactics conditioned his thinking and conception of warmaking, as well as his post-war justifications for success or failure.³

Clausewitz talks only about strategy and tactics.⁴ The formal concept of an operational level, inserted somewhere between strategy and tactics, appeared in Germany only in the later part of the 19th century. Confusion and ambiguity characterize most definitions of strategy, and its relationship with operations and tactics. Although strategy is "big" and tactics, "small," with the operational level falling somewhere in between, as hierarchical categories they are probably not precisely definable. Determining when tactics becomes operations or whether maneuvering division-size units is a strategic or operational decision is problematic, making precise historical analysis equally problematic. Tactical considerations, though rarely decisive in and of themselves, determine the feasibility of a given strategy or operational plan. Strategy often stipulates the employment of particular tactical or operational combinations in its achievement of policy goals. A commander pursuing a specific operational plan or even a tactical method

³ Herman Hattaway and Archer Jones, How the North Won, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1983), 14, find in the writings of Halleck and Beauregard agreement on certain fundamentals qualifying as "what would be called today doctrine." This may be true, but those fundamentals enjoyed no formal, systematic or universal transmission even among well-educated Civil War soldiers. "Doctrine" to whatever extent it existed, remained undefined and diffuse.

⁴ Clausewitz, War, 128-29, 308, 177. Clausewitz does use the term "operational objective" and "operations" in On War. In describing the use of advanced corps to delay and to observe the enemy, his use of the term does seem to imply "big" tactics, but "operations" for Clausewitz do not constitute a level of warfare worthy of the detailed discussion devoted to strategy or "the engagement." He also identifies "the operational side of war," referring to the management of a campaign, which includes maintenance and supply as well as the engagements determined by strategy. See Wallace P. Franz "Two Letters on Strategy: Clausewitz' Contribution to the Operational Level of War," in Michael I Handel, ed. Clausewitz and Modern Strategy (London: Frank Cass & Company, 1986) 171-194, for a dissenting view. Franz finds Clausewitz's use of the terms war, campaign and battle analogous to the modern use in the U. S. army of strategy, operations and tactics. If true it is largely irrelevant for Clausewitz's purposes and definition of strategy, which above all distinguished between the political logic of strategy and all of the the "tools" for its implementation.

can make policy (i.e. Clausewitz's definition of strategy) in its own right, to the benefit or detriment of an overriding political authority. Historically, whether by design or accident, many examples exist "of a single tactical incident having massive strategic repercussions."⁵

Clausewitz's definition is superior chiefly due to its simplicity. Military acts never exist in a vacuum. Individual actions, regardless of sheer scale, may or may not affect the overall political climate in a given situation, so their effects may or may not qualify as strategic in scope. Firing on Fort Sumter was "small" in that it involved relatively few troops and was tactically insignificant, especially compared to later Civil War battles, but obviously the political effects proved extraordinary and strategic.⁶ Lee's army-size great success at Chancellorsville killed lots of Union troops, and broke Hooker's will and the cohesion of his army, but achieved little strategically. Taken in the larger context of the war, it arguably did little more than confirm that a stalemate existed in the Virginia theatre. Clausewitz distinguishes between actions whose affects reach into the political dimension (strategy) and the nuts and bolts of individual battles or even theatre-size operations (the engagement) that may or may not have larger strategic

⁵ Martin Dunn, "Levels of War: Just a Set of Labels?" Research and Analysis: Newsletter of the Directorate of Army Research and Analysis, 10 (Oct. 1996): 4, quoting Lt. Gen. John Sanderson on the effects of the Israeli shelling of refugee camps in Lebanon.

⁶ James McPherson, "Abraham Lincoln as Commander in Chief," interview, Oct. 26, 2008, Harry Kreisler Institute of International Studies, University of California, Berkeley declared the firing on Fort Sumter analogous to the attack on Pearl Harbor in unifying the country in support of the prosecution of the war.

implications. Above all, strategy in a Clausewitzian sense defines something essentially separate from and superior to tactics and operations.⁷

Soldiers in the Civil War had their own conceptions of these terms and used them in their own confusing, and generally deficient, ways. Military writers interpreting the past bring along their own definitions, often reflecting similar confusions. Halleck's conception of strategy and tactics is probably typical of most soldiers of his time:

Strategy is defined to be the art of directing masses on decisive points, or the hostile movements of armies beyond the range of each other's cannon. Strategy regards the theatre of war, rather than the field of battle. Tactics is the art of bringing troops into action, or of moving them in the presence of an enemy, that is, within his view, and within the reach of his artillery.⁸

When we test this definition of strategy against the history of the Civil War we are quickly confronted with the "smallness" of Halleck's view of strategy. Limiting strategy to a single theatre of action is clearly inadequate in dealing with the area encompassing the American Civil War. Also absent is any conception of any "purpose" to strategy, except that of bringing the enemy to battle. Winning those battles is an end in itself; the belief being that "winning" battles automatically wins war. This definition encompasses none of the conceptual tools needed to fight a revolutionary war of continental proportions. As a commander-in-chief, Halleck remained true to his own definitions and conception of strategy. Willing to advise and direct, but not to command,

⁷ Archer Jones, *Civil War Command & Strategy*, (New York: Free Press, 1992), 158 describes Chancellorsville as "a modest tactical victory" for Hooker, due to Lee's proportionately higher casualties. No one at the time on either side regarded such a marginal material success as a victory.

⁸ Russel Weigley, *A Great Civil War*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), xx. If one defines "decisive points" as politically decisive objects, Halleck's definition appears more insightful. Halleck's actions during the war seldom give evidence of this view.

Halleck functioned more as a clerk for Lincoln and Stanton than as a formulator of policy or coordinator of multiple armies in multiple theaters of war.⁹

Russell Weigley sees in this small definition of strategy a lack of a concept of operations among Civil War generals. The prevailing idea of strategy, restricted to a single theatre, blurred the line between strategy and operations and tactics. This crippled Civil War generals who could not conceive of the war as a whole and rarely looked beyond their own department or theatre. Most failed to direct their warfighting toward achieving specific and war winning political goals. Most Civil War soldiers confused winning battles or occupying places with winning wars.¹⁰

The smallness of this definition is even more apparent when examined on a political level. Organizing human activity, such as war, is primarily a social or political task. Confined to the “directing of masses,” strategy for Halleck acknowledges nothing other than a purely military view. Why these “masses” are being directed and to what purpose is unstated. Conditions external to the process of direction are ignored. The makeup of both one’s own army and society as well as that of the enemy find no room for expression. Halleck leaves the term “decisive points” undefined, but the object of the masses is the physical army or battlefield itself, rather than any decisive political object.

If we accept Halleck’s definition of the term “strategy” as inadequate, it may be useful to examine other definitions and arrive at an acceptable vocabulary for discussing

⁹ Lincoln famously described Halleck as “a first rate clerk,” given his unwillingness to take active command. Michael Burlingame and John R. Turner Ettliger, editors, Inside Lincoln's White House: The Complete Civil War Diary of John Hay, (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999) 191-192.

¹⁰ Weigley, Great, xx.

the course of the Civil War in general and Grant's campaigns in particular. Halleck's definition is derivative of Jomini, whose own definition is equally defective:

To repeat. Strategy is the art of making war upon the map, and comprehends the whole theater of operations. Grand Tactics is the art of posting troops upon the battle-field according to the accidents of the ground, of bringing them into action, and the art of fighting upon the ground, in contradistinction to planning upon a map. Its operations may extend over a field of ten or twelve miles in extent.¹¹

Jomini reduces strategy to a game on a map, defines levels of war through geographic limits and formulates principles "all calculated to baffle the simple and fascinate the worst sort of intellectual soldier." Critics generally find Jomini's formulations exist in a vacuum divorced from historical context and political purpose.¹²

Modern definitions of strategy are sometimes even less satisfying. Jomini's fellow Frenchman, Andre Beaufre, historian of the fall of France in 1940 and one of the architects of NATO, offers a definition that at least has the virtue of simplicity: strategy is the "art of dialectic will-powers using force to solve their conflict." This definition may be vague enough to encompass designs of a political nature in the term "conflict," but this definition seems equally applicable to tactics or operations as to strategy.¹³

Field-Marshal Earl Wavell, writing in the 1950's, offers a definition analogous to Halleck's more than a hundred years before: "strategy, (is) the art of bringing forces to

¹¹ Jomini, Baron de, The Art of War, (1862; repr., Westport: Greenwood Press, nd), 62. Michael Howard, Studies in War and Peace, (New York: Viking Press, 1972), 21-36, credits Jomini with an understanding that war is an instrument of policy though critical of his formulaic and abstract strategic principles.

¹² Michael Howard, Studies in War and Peace, (New York: Viking Press, 1972), 21-36, credits Jomini with an understanding that war is an instrument of policy though critical of his formulaic and abstract strategic principles..

¹³ Andre Beaufre, Introduction to Strategy, (London: Faber & Faber, 1963), 22.

the battlefield in a favorable position.” Absent is any acknowledgment of the link between the mechanics of warfare, on any level, and ultimate political goals.¹⁴

In a confusing, but marginally superior, 1964 definition, the U. S. Joint Chiefs of Staff clumsily christen strategy as:

A science, an art, or a plan governing the raising, arming, and utilization of the military forces of a nation to the end that its interests will be effectively promoted or secured against its enemies, actual, potential, or merely presumed.¹⁵

Clausewitz rejected the idea that the practice of war (and by implication strategy) belonged to realms the sciences (which should be reserved for the pursuit of pure testable knowledge unobtainable in war) or the arts (in which humans interact with inanimate and unchanging constructs). In war the enemy is un-testable, animate, and constantly reacts. Still less can all the implications of strategy be reduced to merely a “plan,” given war’s intricacy and fluidity. Clausewitz defined war within the framework of man’s social existence, and this definition’s reference to the “raising and arming” of military forces acknowledges this on at least some level. Also, “interests . . . promoted or secured” may roughly correspond with policy desires, but the connection is not explicit.¹⁶

In a definition, contemporary to that of the Joint Chiefs above, Admiral J. C. Wylie of the United States Navy offered the following: “A plan of action designed in order to achieve some end; a purpose together with a system of measures for its

¹⁴ Field-Marshal Earl Wavell, *Soldiers and Soldiering*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1953), 47. Bernard Brodie, *Strategy in the Missile Age*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959), 11-12, Wavell finds tactics both more important and more difficult to master than strategy, comparing them to the difference between bidding in bridge, and playing the hand.

¹⁵ U. S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Dictionary of United States Military Terms for Joint Usage* (N. p. 1964), 40.

¹⁶ Clausewitz, *War*, 148-49.

accomplishment.” Unlike the previous definitions, which lack explicit acknowledgment of the political dimension of strategy, here we find the elimination of any specific military component altogether.¹⁷

Robert M. Epstein of the U. S. Army School of Advanced Military Studies proceeds in a similar manner. Epstein finds “strategy refers to the overall plan of war,” and limits the definition of “plan” to “the creation of theatres of operations, the assignment of objectives for the different theaters of operations, and the allocation of resources to the theaters of operations.” The “plan,” appears exclusively military and essentially operational in its use of the “tools” of war, in this case the division and corps-size units of the later Napoleonic Wars. Epstein attributes victory in modern war “to the cumulative effects of tactical engagements and operational campaigns” while a single great battle often decided earlier wars. How a mere plan, with its creation of theatres, their objectives allocation of resources or even the effects of a military victory necessarily achieves war aims remains unstated. Despite an obvious applicability given his limited subject, Epstein’s definition lacks Clausewitz’s historicism.¹⁸

Basil Liddell Hart, a poorly informed critic of Clausewitz, chose some definitions of strategy clearly derivative of him. Hart’s definition, “the art of distributing and applying military means to fulfill the ends of policy,” mirrors Clausewitz’s “the art of the

¹⁷J. C. Wylie, Rear Admiral, USN, Military Strategy: A General Theory of Power Control, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1967), 13.

¹⁸ Robert M. Epstein, Napoleon’s Last Victory and the Emergence of Modern War, (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1994), 5-6, 185. Clausewitz, War, 579. Clausewitz uses the term “military operations” in describing the formulation of plans for an entire war, indicating again a “plan” merely the method of implementing strategy, not strategy in and of itself.

employment of battles as a means to gain the object of war.”¹⁹ Hart substituted “military means” for battle in reaction to Clausewitz’s supposed obsession with combat as the only means to accomplish political goals in war. Liddell Hart’s definition, while paying lip service in theory to policy, is not always reflected in “practice” through his historical writings. Given his World War I experience, Hart echoes Jomini, finding the “perfection of strategy,” as producing “a decision without any serious fighting.” Hart’s book, Strategy, provides numerous examples of tactical and operational achievements and some strategic successes produced with little loss of life. The measure of achievement for Liddell Hart is less policy goals than cost, or the “game” element of matching concentration to weakness. Political context is often absent, along with any acknowledgement that the achievement of extreme policy goals may require extreme effort and sacrifice.²⁰

Edward Luttwack distinguishes between a “horizontal strategy” (where states oppose, deflect and reverse each other’s actions in peace and war), and a “vertical” strategy (which is concerned with the technique of tactics and operations). Luttwack’s definition is interesting but roughly corresponds to the Clausewitzian political ends

¹⁹ Liddell Hart, Strategy, (New York: Praeger, 1967), 333-335. Hart cites Clausewitz’s use of the term “battles” (the engagement in the Howard/Paret translation) as evidence of a fixation on fighting that “narrows” the meaning of strategy to battle itself, at the expense of policy. Even a cursory reading of On War demonstrates Clausewitz’s view that policy drives everything and battle may or may not be appropriate to achieve political goals. See also Jay Luvas, “Clausewitz, Fuller and Liddell Hart,” in Michael I. Handel ed., Clausewitz and Modern Strategy, (London: Frank Cass, 1986) 197-212, and Christopher Bassford, “John Keegan and the Grand Tradition of Trashing Clausewitz: a Polemic,” War in History 1 (1994): 319-336.

²⁰ Hart, Strategy, 338, 167-76. Liddell Hart’s discussion of the Schlieffen plan for example, concentrates on its indirectness (Hart’s pet concept), its psychological component (also indirect) and its failure in execution, ignoring its political effect and appropriateness in achieving Germany’s policy goals.

(horizontal strategy) and military means (vertical strategy). Luttwack's definition is inclusive of Clausewitz, but is unique in his presentation.²¹

As in other wars, "small" or incomplete definitions of strategy hobbled Civil War generals in their conception and execution of the conflict. Historians, making their own evaluations, exhibit similar confusion and misunderstanding. Allan Nevins ranks Grant *intellectually* below "the major strategists of the war, below Joe Johnston, Sherman, and Thomas—far below Stonewall Jackson and Lee." Regardless of one's opinion of Grant's intellectual abilities (Nevins might be right), Nevins compares apples with oranges, or in this case, tacticians with strategists. Thomas's battlefield success at Nashville or Jackson's Valley Campaign represent something far less than and apart from Grant's function as commander of all the Union armies. This is more than a problem of semantics. Whatever choices the historian makes (one could label Grant a *grand* strategist, Thomas a *battlefield* strategist, etc.), the soldiers on Nevins's list exhibit no equivalency with Grant in level of responsibility or political accomplishment no matter how one defines the term "strategy."²²

Herman Hattaway and Archer Jones display a similar disconnect in their definition of strategy, failing to identify the political links between policy and the actual movements on the battlefield: "Strategy means the movement of armies to bring about battle under favorable conditions or the retreat of the enemy." They also suggest a method for strategy's application similar to Liddell Hart, finding the goal in strategy the same as in

²¹ Edward N. Luttwack, *Strategy: The Logic of War and Peace*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987) xii.

²² Allan Nevins, *The War for the Union, The Organized War to Victory, 1864-1865*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons), 4:16. ²² Fuller, *Generalship*, 7, finds the term "grand strategy" would be more comprehensible if labeled "political strategy," while the more commonly used term "strategy," should be called "field strategy."

tactics, that of “producing tactical contact with the enemy at his weak spot.” Jones also has a geographic component reminiscent of Jomini, suggesting that an army’s movements in view of the enemy becomes “grand tactics,” while those including multiple theatres and naval war constitute “grand strategy.”²³

Alan T. Nolan and others adroitly solve this problem by inventing their own vocabularies. Nolan distinguishes between the “operational strategy” of a battle or campaign (corresponding to Halleck’s definition of strategy, which he quotes) and the “grand strategy” of the war as a whole, corresponding to Clausewitz’s definition. Nolan adds the terms “true grand strategy” and “official grant strategy” to differentiate between a correct strategy to win the war and the defective strategies actually pursued at various times throughout the conflict. James M. McPherson proceeds in a somewhat similar manner dividing “strategy” in a Clausewitzian sense between *Policy* (War aims), *National Strategy* (concerned with political, economic, diplomatic and psychological mobilization to achieve the goals of the war) and *Military Strategy*, (concerned with using military victories to achieve the political goals of the war). Scholars neglecting to make such distinctions fail in their attempts to coherently analyze and explain war.²⁴

Contemporary American doctrine is explicitly Clausewitzian, while acknowledging as well a debt to Sun Tzu. FM-100-05, the major statement on U. S.

²³ Hattaway and Jones, *How*, 711, 420-21, Hattaway and Jones do express the logical observation that “the significance of battles tends to be proportionate to the political stakes involved.” That much said they make the obtuse statement “battles do not end wars,” in their discussion of the results of Gettysburg and Vicksburg. If engagements (battle) don’t serve political goals and end wars what does (campaigns?), remains unstated.

²⁴ Alan T. Nolan, *Lee Considered*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 61-62. James M. McPherson, “A. Lincoln, Commander and Chief” in Eric Foner, ed. *Our Lincoln: New Perspectives on Lincoln and his World*, (New York: Norton, 2008), 21-22. McPherson further includes traditional definitions of operations and tactics, for a rather hefty total of five categories.

doctrine, finds Clausewitz “thoroughly institutionalized by all the major U. S. services.”²⁵ FM 100-5 also institutionalizes the concept of operations (often described by Americans as “grand tactics”), even though Clausewitz makes no distinction between tactics and operations. Nothing in Clausewitz’s writings excludes or questions the usefulness of such inventions and use of the term operations enjoys general usage. Some prefer even further subdivisions to the levels of war, finding three levels an inadequate reflection of the realities of battle.²⁶

In the end we return to Clausewitz’s clearer definitions and simpler system. The tactical and the operational level (and any other levels one cares to define) certainly can exist conceptually within his theory; they comprise the “engagement” used for achieving the political goals of the war. The size of the units involved in the engagement is irrelevant. Fighting and maneuvering corps or division-sized units in irrelevant or stalemated engagements failing to serve policy define at best ineffective strategy. Other, perhaps smaller engagements or changes in policy, may “have direct political repercussions,” and define a shorter route to victory. In the American Civil War the debate on the relative merits of a “conciliatory” or “hard war” policy toward Southern civilians illustrates Clausewitz’s observations. Each policy possessed a strategic dimension, though in terms of size each engagement remained limited to an individual farm, plantation or town, hardly an “engagement” at all. Each policy sought the same

²⁵ See Lieutenant Colonel Archie Galloway, “FM 100-5, who influenced whom,” *Military Review* 66 no.3 (March, 1986): 45-51 and Young, Richard J. “Clausewitz and His Influence on U. S. and Canadian Military Doctrine,” in Alan P. English ed. *The Changing Face of War*. (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 1988): 9-21.

²⁶ Luttwak. *Logic*, 69-71 identifies five subdivisions, Dunn, “Levels,” 4-9, identifies four levels in current U. S. doctrine and attributes a similar construct to Liddel Hart, who distinguished between national strategy and pure military strategy. Fuller, *Personality*, 259 identifies five levels in common usage, including grand strategy, grand tactics, field strategy, major tactics and minor tactics.

strategic outcome, the detachment of Southern civilians from their allegiance to the Confederate government. Conciliation hoped to preserve Southern Unionists and court neutrals through the protection of private property and “rights (i.e., slavery)” in border states or occupied areas. Hard war focused on the psychological desire of secessionists to resist, risking the defection of neutrals and loyalists as the North destroyed the war-making potential of those same occupied areas.²⁷

Implicit in Clausewitz’s system is the acknowledgement that the effects of strategy manifest themselves at many levels. Any engagement, regardless of its sheer scale, may demoralize or stimulate an individual, an army or a nation. Strategy, to use a modern formulation, contains “micro” and “macro” components. Repulse of the Confederates at Gettysburg with its great human cost contained “macro” strategic effects politically as regards to foreign affairs and the material ability of Lee to operate offensively later in the war. Sherman’s March generated no comparable casualties and no significant battles, yet generated far greater effects politically on a “micro” level. Sherman’s actions proved decisive on individual Southerners morale. Engagements must serve policy at some level or be deemed irrelevant. Any evaluation of battle neglecting its relevance to policy renders the evaluation itself irrelevant.²⁸

For Clausewitz strategy defines something apart from tactics and operations, something very simple and very large, not large in scale materially, but large in its effects politically. Unlike other writers, he takes care to point out the supremacy of strategy over

²⁷ Mark Grimesly, The Hard Hand of War, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 3, provides an excellent discussion of these issues.

²⁸ Clausewitz, War, 92-3. Sherman felt the marches the equivalent of a dozen battlefield victories in their political effects on winning the war. William T. Sherman, Home Letters of General Sherman, M. A. deWolf Howe ed., (New York: Scribners, 1909), 337.

everything else in his analysis of war. While tactics and technology change, strategy is a constant. While certainly not superfluous, Clausewitz views tactical ability (or lack thereof) “the fighting value of the troops,” as essentially a “given” quality, “virtually limited to material factors.”²⁹ Like logistics, administration or intelligence, a high degree of tactical ability on the part of an army and its commanders is desirable and occasionally decisive, but is only relevant when measured against the perspective of the larger goals of strategy. At the point of the making of strategy, all the capabilities and deficiencies of the army, people and state come into play, as they currently exist. They are part of the equation of strategy and while all these factors may condition strategy, they do not define strategy nor do they trump strategy itself. Grant always operated on this basis, accepting the material and political limitations imposed by circumstance, and formulating his strategy accordingly.³⁰

This defines no mistake or omission on the part of Clausewitz. Fighting at any level, making policy or inducing great political effect by definition exhibits strategic effect. So while the convenience of using multiple terms to define multiple levels of war may be demonstrable and discussions of multiple levels of war apart from strategy might be interesting (even to Clausewitz, who rejected them), they may also be superfluous. What counts at every level is their production of political effect leading to the end of the war itself:

²⁹ Clausewitz, War, 194, 147.

³⁰ Michael Howard and other writers have taken Clausewitz to task for his supposed neglect of logistics and the special implications of naval warfare. See Howard’s “Karl von Clausewitz: the Forgotten Dimensions of Strategy,” Foreign Affairs, (Summer, 1979): 84-92 and John E. Tashjean, “Clausewitz: Naval and Other Considerations,” Naval War College Review (May-June, 1986): 51-58, for a discussion of Clausewitz’s naval critics. Lincoln favorably contrasted Grant with soldiers such as McClellan, who refused to act due to supposed lack of material resources. See Catton, Command, 177-78.

War should be conceived as an organic whole whose parts cannot be separated, so that each individual act contributes to the whole and itself originates in the central concept.³¹

Raymond Aron's description of strategy as politics and tactics as fighting is simple and satisfying. Taken with Clausewitz's own observation that at the highest levels, little difference exists between strategy, policy and statesmanship, we achieve an understanding of the superiority of strategy to tactics and are able to differentiate between what happens "technically" on the battlefield at any level, and what is happening "politically," making policy at any level. This is also satisfying to a modern reader. Strategy as a term today (unlike in Clausewitz's time) is applicable to many fields of human endeavor besides military matters.³²

An effective analysis makes no distinction between strategy, policy, and statesmanship. They define the logic of war. The term "operations" in its modern definition generally corresponds to the Jomini/Halleck/Wavell definition of strategy, the bringing of armed forces to the battlefield. Tactics is fighting on the battlefield itself. Tactics and operations comprise the "grammar" of war, the fighting, which is distinct from conventional (peaceful) forms of statesmanship. The political logic of strategy defines the purpose of the war; the method of its obtainment through use of engagements varies. In all evaluations, achievement of policy goals defines the relevance of battles, campaigns, weapons, and even the soldiers themselves.

³¹Clausewitz, War, 607.

³² Aron, Philosopher, 373.

Clausewitz's Definition of Strategy and Tactical Fetishism

No military commander since Napoleon himself had surpassed or ever would surpass Lee's exercises in Napoleonic battlefield tactics—Russell Wiegly

The effects of genius show not so much in novel forms of action as in the ultimate success of the whole—Clausewitz

How could we have succeeded so well, yet failed so miserably? —Col. Harry S. Summers

Military strategy, while one of the most ancient of human sciences, is at the same time one of the least developed—Bernard Brodie³³

If Aron's definition of strategy is simple and satisfying, Clausewitz's is perhaps more accurate: "Strategy is the use of the engagement for the object of war."

Clausewitz's definition is superior to Aron's in that it recognizes that however small the difference between strategy, policy and statesmanship, strategy (in the context of war), by definition, contains fighting. Strategy possesses its own grammar (fighting), but it shares the logic of policy and statesmanship.³⁴

In contradiction to some the definitions of strategy previously discussed, the logic of strategy is not the logic of tactics. Many soldiers (and historians) fail to distinguish between the two. Many perceive strategy as purely a larger version of operations or tactics, subject to the same measures and conditions. Preparations for tactical confrontation and the engagement itself dominate most soldiers' efforts. The level of professionalism required to command in modern armies continues to increase, as it has

³³ Wiegly, *Great*, 229, on Lee at Chancellorsville, whose much admired tactical victory cost him 22 percent of his force to 13 percent of Hooker's and arguably achieved little of lasting strategic importance. Clausewitz, *War*, 177; Summers, Col. Harry S., *On Strategy*, (New York: Dell, 1982), 3, commenting on U. S. tactical superiority in the Vietnam War. Bernard Brodie, *Strategy in the Missile Age*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959), 21.

³⁴ Clausewitz, *War*, 128, 605. Some modern critics of Clausewitz find his theory neglects means other than war in resolving conflicts or in the achievement of policy goals. The subject of *On War* is war, so no one should be surprised at Clausewitz's focus.

historically, leaving little time either for scholarly study or practical “training” in solving strategic problems. The engagement exists as an end in itself, connected tenuously to strategic concerns and political context often only through ideology or political slogans.³⁵ Few soldiers attain independent and important command and therefore never have to make decisions involving strategy. Strategy is “handed down,” from the upper levels of command, seldom accompanied with information explaining how a soldier’s tactical achievements figure in the larger picture. It is assumed that at the lower levels of command it is enough to relate the particulars of the essential task at hand: it is not necessary or even desirable for a commander to know more.³⁶

Therefore even fewer links exist between strategy and tactics than one might expect. The strategic results of tactical combinations are rarely appreciated or studied. Links are seldom made between the problems of policy and the action on the battlefield itself. “Winning” is something dramatic and decisive and is measurable in terms of casualties inflicted, possession of the battlefield, guns captured etc. Bernard Brodie identifies “a peculiarly professional bias,” of professional soldiers, who tend to view human problems through a narrow and limiting lens of tactical specialization.³⁷

Fixation on the engagement as an end in itself and the retention of out-dated tactical systems often reaches into a dimension approaching a fetish. Soldiers repeat tactical formula in the face of overwhelming evidence that their methods are

³⁵ In many wars the strategic context and goals of the belligerents may be relatively simple and obvious to the vast majority of soldiers. In defensive wars or wars of national liberation, the ends and means generally are clear for at least one side in the conflict, while of necessity less clear for an attacker or occupying power. Revolutionary, civil wars, and wars of aggression or choice are by definition more complicated.

³⁶ Brodie, Missile, 14-19, discusses this phenomenon at some length.

³⁷ Ibid, 16.

unsuccessful, obsolete, or politically inappropriate. Clausewitz witnessed tactical fetishism in the perpetuation of Frederick the Great's oblique order and mechanistic fire tactics. Even after witnessing ten years of Napoleonic and Revolutionary victories by new methods, Prussian leaders felt no compulsion to adopt methods enabling them to meet the French on equal terms. Even the twin humiliations of Jena and Auerstadt and the near destruction of the Prussian state at the hands of Napoleon left many unconvinced of the need for change. Typically, some members of the Prussian service perceived their tactical system as something other than an instrument of policy. While the new tactics: "might be good for the French, a vivacious race, it dishonors the Germans . . . it means dishonoring their national character by taking their famous firing away from them." A soldier who links a particular tactical method with national honor and personal identity finds change enormously difficult.³⁸

In a similar manner, most generals in the Civil War repeated their own mistakes, fighting (or not fighting) according to methods and preconceptions of a previous generation. Most had no clear idea how victory over an army or capture of a place related to ending the war. Often hobbled by their concerns with the minutia of interior lines or strategic points, they abdicated political effectiveness in favor of principles of war. Like the Prussian in the example above, Civil War soldiers' ways of thinking about war defined them. Change involved more than the adoption of new tactical formations or weapons: it required reconstruction of professional and personal views often held for a lifetime. In a well-known, though highly controversial, example from Civil War historiography, Grady

³⁸ Vagts, Militarism, 135.

McWhiney and Perry Jamieson attribute Southern defeat largely to Confederate offensive tactics driven by the legacy of Celtic culture. The “Celtic connection” thesis McWhiney and Jamieson advance (if true) is only relevant in its relation to strategy. It is not that “the Confederates destroyed themselves by making bold and repeated attacks,” but that Lee and others failed to define a strategy to use those bold and repeated attacks to win the war. The Southern obsession with tactics McWhiney and Jamieson identify matches their own, strategy as a term being largely absent from their analysis.³⁹

Successive commanders of the Army of the Potomac offered nothing beyond a replay of previous attempts to beat Lee in Northern Virginia, using the tactics of their predecessors. Since none of them possessed the ability to defeat Lee tactically, the question of the use of such a victory strategically failed to arise. Lincoln understood this better than most of his contemporaries. In response to Joseph Hooker’s assertion that the present crisis required military dictatorship, Lincoln challenged: “only those generals who gain successes can be set up as dictators. What I now ask of you is military success, and I will risk the dictatorship...go forward and give us victories.”⁴⁰

Even Robert E. Lee himself, the unsurpassed practitioner of Napoleonic tactics who “won” most of his battles, proved unable to turn tactical ability into a lasting strategic advantage. Training and habit, as well as the example of Napoleon’s early career, led Lee to target successive Union armies seeking a decisive decision on the

³⁹ See Grady McWhiney and Perry D. Jamieson, Attack and Die: Civil War Tactics and the Southern Heritage, (University, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1982), 9. Though their subject is clearly “tactics,” a discussion of its relationship to strategy would reinforce their argument. Strategy as term is absent from their index, and the authors include no definition of the term.

⁴⁰ Warren W. Hassler, Commanders of the Army of the Potomac, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1962), 130-132

battlefield itself. The link between tactical triumph in Northern Virginia and winning a campaign or the war remained as elusive for the generally “successful” Lee as it did for the generally unsuccessful Northern commanders. Lee’s critics generally concede his tactical brilliance, finding fault in a supposed obsession with Virginia and inability to see the war in its entirety. Clausewitz suggests another evaluation, applicable to Lee the successful and innovative tactician, apart from the larger considerations of Southern strategy in its entirety:

If by skillful deployment one can place the enemy at such a disadvantage that he cannot continue fight without risk. And if after some resistance he retreats. We can say that at this point we have beaten him. But, if we have lost proportionately as many men in the process as he did, no trace of this so-called victory will show up in the final balance-sheet of the campaign.⁴¹

Lee’s reputation stems from repeated battlefield triumphs over his larger, if less able, opponents. Factoring in Lee’s often-disproportional losses in achieving his “victories” (Second Manassas, Seven Days and Chancellorsville) leads one to question the value of such engagements at all. The final balance-sheet of the Virginia Campaign (if viewed as a single entity) exhibits little “trace” of most of Lee’s “so-called” victories, just as Clausewitz suggests. Victories require breaking an enemy both materially (i.e. tactically) and morally (i.e. strategically). Even Lee realized that his victories, of variable tactical “completeness,” were failing, both materially and politically, to win the war.

⁴¹ Clausewitz, *War*, 230. Clausewitz’s discussion is tactical and he continues to include moral factors considered apart from physical losses. He concludes by identifying the “winner,” of the engagement by the sum of moral and physical strength left to each. The strategic effects of course require further evaluation, but such marginal successes rarely generate political change.

Whatever the positive psychological and moral effects of his battles, Lee never succeeded “in winning peace with the first wave of panic” that often follows tactical victory.⁴²

The repetition of unsuccessful military acts also defines tactical fetishism. If something clearly isn't working, do more of it. This tendency, evident in the Civil War, exists throughout military history. In a modern and bloody example, soldiers in World War I repeated the same tactical formula for most of the war. For four years all the major combatants fed larger and larger quantities of men and material into battle utilizing the same obsolete methods and tactical formations as if the innovations of the machine gun and massed artillery never occurred. Arguably, accountability for policy changes lies with the political leadership but the makers of military action share responsibility when their inadequate methods clearly fail to achieve the goals of policy.⁴³

On a larger level, the combatants devised and continually revised mechanistic, operational/tactical schemes to defeat an anticipated enemy, without regard for political context. Germany's Schlieffen Plan, “divorced from its political life,” appears ludicrous without its tactical and operational assumptions. Austria opposed Serbian nationalism and terrorism and asked for German help. How did Germany choose to aid Austria in its fight

⁴² Hattaway and Jones, How, 199-200, 384, lists Lee's losses at Chancellorsville as 21 percent compared to 15 percent for the Union. McWhiney and Jamieson, Attack, 19, report a 18.7 to 11.4 percent differential at that battle and give figures of 18.8 to 13.3 percent for Second Manassas. At the Seven Days battle Lee's losses proportionally reached almost double those of McClellan, 20.7 to 10.7 percent, according to McWhiney and Jamieson, 30 percent to 20 percent according to Hattaway and Jones. Clausewitz used the phrase “winning the peace with the first wave of panic” to describe Napoleon's method of winning wars with a few decisive battles. Occupation of an opponent's capital and the dislocation of government this entailed often accompanied such battles. Clausewitz quoted in Aron, Philosopher, 282. Lee's strategic intentions seem clear. Enough Fredericksburgs or Chancellorsvilles should tire the North and produce political results, thus Lee sought Napoleonic war winning, single battle victories. See Douglas Southall Freeman, Lee, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1961), 437, for Lee's understanding of this dynamic.

⁴³ Vagts, Militarism, 229-290, details the almost universal control of this process by army professionals, who refused to change their demonstrably irrational and ineffective tactics and often prevented civilian government access to information regarding the extent of their defeats.

against Serbian terrorism? Invade Belgium. While this simplification ignores the operational concerns of the Central Powers, it cuts to the core of the problem. It is difficult to see how crushing Belgium and destroying the French army ends Serbian nationalism/terrorism or ends traditional Russian support for fellow Slavs. Either Germany had an agenda other than defense of itself and its allies or irresponsibly chose to respond to any conflict in any political context with an all-out offensive against neutrals and the French. Standing Clausewitz on his head, Schlieffen's mechanistic plan itself ultimately dictated policy as "mobilization will inevitably mean war" and Germany failed to plan for other contingencies.⁴⁴

French Plan 17 reveals similar flaws. Plan 17 suffered from the same mechanistic disconnect from political context evident in the Schlieffen Plan: however war came, the French would attack the Germans. It also suffered tactically from the mistaken French belief in the superiority of the offensive and the ability to overcome material deficiencies through the moral element. Complex, mechanistic operational and tactical design reached the point of obsession. Formed in a political vacuum, all of these plans failed.⁴⁵

Bernard Brodie comments on the disconnect evident in World War I between "winning" tactically on the battlefield and winning the war:

Clearly each side was trying to achieve 'victory,' but what did that mean? It is abundantly evident that for the commands of both sides the

⁴⁴Schlieffen proudly embraced his obsession with planning divorced from the concerns of policy. See Gordon A. Craig, The Politics of the Prussian Army: 1640-1945, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 277. Walter Goerlitz, The German General Staff, 1657-1945, (New York: Praeger, 1966), 133, finds that for Schlieffen, the problem "admitted of only one solution (a massive attack on France)," in the event of war, regardless of the political conditions leading to war. B. H. Liddel Hart, The Real War 1914 to 1918, (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1930), 33, 40, 49-50.

⁴⁵ Clausewitz irrevocably committed himself to the superiority of the defensive, both tactically and strategically nearly a century before the disasters of 1914-1918, See Clausewitz, War, 357-358 and especially, 82-84.

term was a mere symbol, almost devoid of content save that it determined who asked whom for an armistice.⁴⁶

Continuing slaughter served no positive political aim. By 1918 the Allied introduction of the tank and German infiltration tactics attempted to break the stalemate, but these tactical changes signaled no change in their fundamental misunderstanding of strategy and policy. Clausewitz perceptively described this situation: “*The very idea, the honor of victory, appeared to be the whole point so far as the commanders were concerned.*” The armistice left all the major combatants exhausted and settled few of the outstanding political questions of the war. Europe entered a second and even bloodier conflict twenty years after 1918, with many of the same military assumptions and obsolete tactical methods in place. The actual results of the war looked like victory for few of the belligerents.⁴⁷

The problem, of course, extends beyond the application of obsolete tactical systems. Superior, innovative tactics and modern technology are certainly desirable, but their inappropriate application cannot redeem mistakes in strategy. Germany exhibited tactical superiority (and a technical advantage) over most of her enemies in two World Wars. In the second war, operational triumph in France floundered on Hitler’s ideological and strategic (i.e., policy) blunders. Erich von Manstein, architect of Germany’s decisive and largely unanticipated victory over France in 1940 commented on this problem:

⁴⁶ Brodie, *Missile*, 26.

⁴⁷ Clausewitz, *War*, 265. Clausewitz’s quote criticizes soldiers giving up combat before winning a complete victory. It seems applicable in the opposite case, when continuing the fight also serves no practical political purpose.

Germany's supreme command (principally Hitler) had no kind of 'war plan' to determine what measures should be taken once the victories it hoped for had been won.⁴⁸

Von Manstein is correct in his critique of German strategy. No one, apparently including Manstein, asked the essential question: How does utterly destroying French military power in a "tactically perfect" operation win the war for Germany?⁴⁹ Paradoxically, in a phenomenon perceptively described by Clausewitz, the shock of Germany's perfect "victory" generated unintended political consequences of great disadvantage to her future prosecution of the war. "Victory" exhibits "an infinite range of effects." The only question is if victories "stun the loser or rouse him to greater efforts." In this case the rapid fall of France stunned a neutralist United States, driving her abandonment of isolationism and stimulated her material and political support of Britain. In a similar manner the French debacle roused the Soviet Union to greater efforts, hardening its views on Germany's interest in the Balkans, Finland, and the Dardanelles. Peter J. Parish identifies Chancellorsville as a similar victory, "a success so dazzling as to be dangerous for the victors, and a defeat so stinging as to arouse rather than demoralize the vanquished."⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Erich von Manstein, Lost Victories, (Chicago: Regnary, 1956), 153.

⁴⁹ Alistair Horne, To Lose a Battle, (Little, Brown & Co.: New York, 1969), 157, describes the German plan as "tactically perfect, "but fatally flawed as it included no political dimension designed to end the war in Germany's favor.

⁵⁰ Clausewitz, War, 567, in the chapter "The Culminating Point of Victory," examines the interaction of conditions necessary to generate a final decision. The victory over France roused Germany's enemies, current or potential, rather than stun them into submission. See Robert A Devine, The Reluctant Belligerent, (John Wiley & Sons: New York, 1965), 65-88 for a description of changes in American foreign policy due to the war in Europe. See Albert Seaton, The Russo-German War 1941-45, (Praeger: New York, 1971), 13, for Stalin's views following the fall of France. Peter Parish, The American Civil War, (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1975), 278-79.

The Fall of France distorted the true reality of the power relationship between Germany and her adversaries. Several critics attribute mistakes in the planning and execution of the invasion of the Soviet Union, to a “victory disease,” given Germany’s easy defeat of the French. Paradoxically, a more “ordinary” victory restraining Hitler’s unrealistic war aims seems a more desirable outcome for Germany. When Germany attacked the Soviet Union, her superior methods caused millions of Soviet casualties, but her negative and essentially unlimited political intentions ruled this superiority moot.⁵¹

Manstein’s critique of Hitlerian strategy also reveals a basic flaw in Manstein’s thinking, a flaw also present in the thinking of many soldiers and scholars. Policy itself determines (or ought to determine) the tactical and operational methods appropriate to achieve policy goals. The question should never be one of defining a policy and a plan to win the war after a hoped-for victory is won. Errors in the “logic” of policy (or its abdication) can seldom be redeemed by the “grammar” of military action. Matching ends and means often proves an elusive contradiction. The application of inappropriate force (either too little or too great) generally derails policy because of or in spite of the short-term outcome on the battlefield itself. Raymond Aron finds genius in Bismarck’s ability to gain decisive victories and destroy French arms without destroying the balance of power. Success of the whole, rather than victory in battle defines Bismarck’s achievement.⁵²

⁵¹ Heinz Guderian, Panzer Leader, (E. P. Dutton & Co.: New York, 1952) 142. Guderian reports, “Our victory in the West had so befuddled the minds of our supreme commanders that they had eliminated the word ‘impossible’ from their vocabulary.” R. H. S. Stolfi, Hitler’s Panzers East: World War II Reinterpreted, (University of Oklahoma Press: Norman, 1991), 19, finds accounts of German over-confidence exaggerated after the war.

⁵² Aron, Philosopher, 244. Clausewitz, War, 177, uses similar language.

Clausewitz found in Napoleon's strategy a flaw applicable also to Manstien (and Hitler's) way of thinking. Bonaparte "ruthlessly cut through all his enemies' strategic plans in search of battle, because he seldom doubted the battle's outcome." By doing so the engagement became the basis of all his strategic plans and his strategy ceased to be something independent. "*The strategic planning* of these engagements, rather than the tactical decision should be considered the operative principle." Napoleon reliance on favorable tactical decisions worked until he began losing engagements. Since no strategy existed apart from his tactical superiority, losing engagements proved fatal.⁵³

U. S. prosecution of the war in Vietnam provides the best example of the disconnect that often exists between tactics and strategy and the danger of relying on tactical and technical superiority to win wars. By any conventional measure of power, the United States enjoyed an overwhelming preeminence over its Communist Vietnamese enemy. The United States also successfully applied that superiority in practice on the battlefield. In fact it is difficult to find an example of a truly significant tactical success on the part of either the North Vietnamese regular army or the Vietcong guerillas against American arms during the course of the war. The Vietnamese suffered some millions killed in the conflict (versus 58,000 American deaths), yet ultimately managed to prevail. After the war a Vietnamese colonel addressed this paradox, finding total American battlefield superiority "true," but "also irrelevant."⁵⁴

The advent of nuclear weapons underlines this paradox in a very real and non-theoretical way. Nuclear weapons make it "absurdly easy" to destroy any enemy.

⁵³ Ibid, 386. Lee arguably suffered from a similar defect in his strategy, especially in his invasions of the North.

⁵⁴ Summers, Strategy, 3.

Clausewitz's theoretical construct, the concept of absolute or ideal war, postulates a conflict unconstrained by policy. Theoretically, a lack of political limitations allows war to reach a totality unattainable in real life. Clausewitz uses this construction to illustrate the role of policy in limiting war and the absurdity of pushing war past the limits appropriate to policy.⁵⁵ If we think like Clausewitz, the overriding unlimited destructive power of nuclear weapons demonstrates their uselessness. Nuclear weapons make total destruction absurdly easy. The question then becomes one of defining a rational policy that such destruction serves. In any conflict, nukes could "win," tactically and operationally, but can their actual use implement a rational policy?⁵⁶

The great difficulty lies in matching a particular war aim to an appropriate military means or tactical method. Soldiers often do not see (and many are never asked to see) anything except the enemy in front of them. A company commander (or even a general commanding a division or corps) may exhibit superior insight into the political reality of the war he is fighting. Concrete firsthand experiences with the actual conflict as it unfolds at the point of combat often trumps the impressions of those wielding policy at the top. A true understanding of the intersection of war and politics often lies with the soldiers themselves, but they often have no means to affect strategy, the larger picture. So even the gifted, thoughtful soldier, unable to communicate his knowledge and insight

⁵⁵ Brodie, Missile, 19; Peter Moody, "Clausewitz and the Fading Dialectic of War," World Politics 3 (April 1979): 417-433, is explicit that use of nuclear weapons can serve no rational political aim. See Clausewitz, War, 579-581, for his theory of absolute and real war.

⁵⁶ If we define deterrence as "use," then of course nuclear weapons serve a positive political purpose. That their mere possession alone also carries great political baggage cannot be denied. Brodie, Missile, 268 records the dangerous "abiding faith in the ritual of liquidation," that often drives irrational (i.e., traditional) views of the use of nuclear weapons. Herman Kahn, On Thermonuclear War, (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 17-29 discusses and largely rejects the idea that the use of nuclear weapons serve no rational policy.

up the chain of command and affect strategy, returns to his job, to tactics. He follows orders, focuses on what he can affect; the enemy in front of him.

Strategy defines the purpose of the war and outstrips all other concerns. Successful generals design a unity between operations, tactics, and the purpose of the war. This is difficult enough. This unity must also be communicated down the chain of the command so that participants at every level fight in a manner contributing to achieving that purpose. In many cases it is not just how well soldiers fight on the battlefield, but also the methods used to fight. Strategy may force troops to fight (or not fight) in a manner contrary to their own training, instincts and also in a manner ultimately detrimental to their own survival. Clearly killing is not enough, and conversely, the one getting “killed” the most in the engagement can still win the war. Grant’s bloody battles in 1864 represented “tactical” defeats. For previous Union commanders thinking tactically, such reverses therefore constituted total defeats. The Burnside, Pope, Hooker and McClellan chose to break-off their battles and lose their campaigns. Grant, thinking strategically, found his battlefield reverses, if not irrelevant, at least largely irrelevant strategically. Killing Lee’s troops also was not enough. At Petersburg, the slow unfolding of siege warfare ultimately took Richmond and accomplished the “physical destruction” (through surrender) of Lee’s army. That final destruction resulted less from tactical combinations or Grant’s operations cornering Lee at Appomattox than from the “political attrition” of Grant’s hard war strategy. Southern morale collapsed under the psychological pressure of Sherman’s marches, Sheridan’s destruction in the Shenandoah and the twin sieges of Richmond and Petersburg. Lee’s surrender signaled

less an operational or tactical triumph of the Army of the Potomac than the triumph of over-all Union strategy.⁵⁷

In all of this, using terms such as “tactical victory” to describe a great casualty differential (such as occurred at Cold Harbor) seem futile if no strategic benefits derive to the “winner”. A “victory” void of political effect and superfluous to the ending of the war constitutes no victory at all. It is at best irrelevant and at worst a murderous waste of lives counterproductive to both sides in terms of time and material resources. After Chickamauga, some Southerners remarked of Bragg, “victory has crippled him.” Clearly coupling the term “victory” to engagements “crippling” the winner materially is also misleading. It also reflects a self-deception, (for both the “winner” and the “loser”), preventing a realistic and effective understanding of the true nature of the war, the “kind of war,” one fights.⁵⁸

Clausewitz, Numbers, High Tides, The Myth of Battle and the Myth of Lost Cause

The South would have won at Gettysburg, and Independence, but for the failure of *one man*—J. William Jones

The notion that a single purely military victory can effect a permanent political settlement was among the most dangerous delusions of the age—Walter Goerlitz

⁵⁷ Grant’s biographers often confuse killing and strategy and some attribute a similar misunderstanding to Grant. William S. McFeely, *Grant: A Biography*, (New York: W. W. Norton, 1981), 78, finds “the most important part of Grant’s knowledge” before the war the simple idea that “to make war is to kill.” McFeely misses Grant’s subtlety in understanding the war’s purpose and the difficulty of making bloodshed serve politics.

⁵⁸ Hattaway and Jones, *How*, 454.

One may marvel just as much at the remarkable results of some victories as at the lack of results of others—Clausewitz⁵⁹

No historians find themselves more hobbled by incomplete and confused definitions of strategy and the levels of war than the instigators of the so-called “Myth of Lost Cause.” Tactical fetishism forms the basis for their method of inquiry, instigated by Lee, propagated by Jubal Early, and arguably forming the basis for much of the subsequent historiography of the Civil War. Lost Cause historians see a victorious Union and a victorious General Grant as an accident. Winning “by mere attrition” implies a strategy only possible through the accident of Northern superiority in numbers. Lost Cause historians basically play a numbers game, adding up Lee’s smaller numbers and Grant’s larger numbers, and find Northern triumph inevitable. In this quest, “Jubal Early’s strength estimates began to assume the power of a Lost Cause mantra.” This also applies to casualties. If Grant lost more heavily than Lee, Lee by definition must be the better general. Lee’s cause submitted due to superior numbers, not to the superior warmaking ability of his opponent.⁶⁰

Clausewitz, always suspicious of arguments based on “scientific” calculation or formula ignoring the real world, denigrates evaluations based on material calculation. All commanders wish to take to the field the largest army possible. In practice however, “the size will be decided by the government (i.e., policy), and the general commanding the army usually has to accept the size of his forces as a given factor.” The skillful strategist

⁵⁹ Alan T. Nolan, “The ‘Lost Cause’ of the Confederacy as a Historical Myth,” in Win Coleman and Pat Perrin, eds. The American Civil War, (New York: Greenhaven Press, 2005), 194-204, 199, Jones attributes loss of the battle and the war to James Longstreet. Goerlitz, Staff, 135. Clausewitz, War, 253.

⁶⁰ Brooks D. Simpson, “Continuous Hammering and Mere Attrition: Lost Cause Critics and the Military Reputation of Ulysses S. Grant,” in Gary W. Gallagher and Alan T. Nolan, eds. The Myth of the Lost Cause and Civil War History, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 200), 149, 162.

considers the “givens” of tactical ability and numbers and all other factors. Logically, “superiority of numbers in a given engagement is only one of the factors that determines victory.”⁶¹

Ignoring the strategic and the political, Lost Cause historians also marginalize and neglect the material, ignoring Lee’s losses of 50,000 men in the first three months of his command while highlighting Grant’s loss of some 51,000 men in the Overland Campaign up to his reaching the James River. Grant’s high losses eventually ended the war achieving the strategic and political goals of reunion. That Lee’s equally high losses did not achieve lasting results remains unacknowledged.⁶²

Clausewitz in On War denigrates those “who may be tempted to look for genius in places where it does not and cannot exist,” in tactics:

Thus, such a commonplace maneuver as turning an opponent’s flank may be hailed by critics as a stroke of genius, of deepest insight, or all-inclusive knowledge. Can one imagine anything so absurd? Where execution is dominant, as it is in the individual events of a war whether great or small, then intellectual factors are reduced to a minimum.⁶³

In contrast to almost all other theorists, Clausewitz fails to find that “*falling on an enemy’s rear* is an accomplishment in itself.” Like any other tactical formulation, “it has no value in isolation.” In both strategy and tactics “forces sent to operate against the

⁶¹ Clausewitz, War, 196, 194. Lincoln memorably praised Grant “as the first general I ever had,” precisely for his acceptance of the “given” factor of Union means. All of Lincoln’s other generals “would look over the matter and pick out some one thing they were short of and they knew I couldn’t give ‘em and tell me they couldn’t hope to win unless they had it. (He) doesn’t ask impossibilities of me, and he is the first general I have had that didn’t.” Quoted in Fuller, Personality, 89.

⁶² Thomas L. Conolly, “Robert E. Lee and the Western Confederacy: A Criticism of Lee’s Strategic Ability” in Gary W. Gallagher, ed. Lee the Soldier, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press: 1996), 16. McPhearson, Cry, 733, 735. William A. Blair “Grant’s Second Civil War: The Battle for Historical Memory” in Gary W. Gallagher The Spotsylvania Campaign, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 247, 223-253.

⁶³ Clausewitz, War, 178.

enemy's rear and flank are not available for use against his front." A flank attack in battle clearly comprises a tactical device, possibly advantageous but typically precautions are taken against such attacks. A particular commander may excel in cunning, in the "game" element of tactics, out-guessing or surprising his opponent during the execution of a flank attack (or through some other expedient), but the decisive confrontation might just as easily occur elsewhere (i.e., the front).⁶⁴

A. L. Conger in his biography of Grant commented on the relative simplicity of tactical choices available to a commander: "roughly speaking, on the offensive one has the choice of attacking on the right flank, the left flank, or the center, or maneuvering against the rear." The permutations of these simple choices are endless, all easily countered and subject to chance and probability. Clausewitz finds little of value in those critics who examine only the material factors of such battlefield combinations, excluding the moral and political factors driving strategy:

They reduce everything to a few mathematical formulas of equilibrium and superiority, of time and space, limited by a few angles and lines. If that were really all, it would hardly provide a scientific problem for a schoolboy.⁶⁵

The sagacious critic looks to strategy, to political results, and the success of the whole, a complexity which "Newton himself would quail before."⁶⁶

The pinnacle of the Lost Cause tactical argument focuses on the supposed failures of Longstreet at Gettysburg. Lee's invasion of the North allegedly marked the "high tide" of the Confederacy. Lost Cause historians believe a tactical victory on Northern

⁶⁴ Clausewitz, War, 460.

⁶⁵ A. L. Conger, Rise of U. S. Grant, (New York: Century, 1931), 298. Clausewitz, War, 178.

⁶⁶ Clausewitz, War, 585-586.

soil following Lee's triumph at Chancellorsville sufficient to gain foreign recognition and win the war. Lee's defeat at Gettysburg, supposedly due to Longstreet's failings, therefore lost the war. Scapegoating Longstreet excuses Lee, explains the loss of the war in easily understandable terms, thus eliminating the need to think about wider and more significant strategic/political problems.⁶⁷ Attributing the loss of a war to a single battle and the loss of a battle to the actions of a single man define at best reductionism, at worst an unwillingness to honestly acknowledge the reality of the war. How winning at Gettysburg achieves foreign recognition or how recognition wins the war also remains unanswered. Grant denigrated such notions, believing recognition by France and Britain of little consequence. Direct foreign intervention itself also guaranteed nothing: "even if war was declared France would lose Mexico and England Canada."⁶⁸

Grant's correct strategy endured operational and tactical failure by Grant or more often by his subordinates. Given the supremacy of strategy over tactics Grantian strategy won the war. Because Grant's strategy was correct, great tactical failure at Cold Harbor (and elsewhere) ultimately proved almost irrelevant. Lee's own great failure at Gettysburg (Pickett's Charge) did matter and proved greater, as Lee's strategy remained unclear and unfulfilled.

Those who point to Lee's ability to win battles in technical terms of casualties inflicted and opposing generals befuddled mask the true nature of the war. In a similar manner, those who focus on the minutia of Grant's superior numbers without considering the war in its entirety also will miss the nature of the war. Battle itself, the only thing

⁶⁷ Nolan, *Considered*, 167-174, contains a discussion of the "social comfort" provided by this view of the war and some of the assumptions about the role of tactics necessary to hold it.

⁶⁸Young, *World*, II: 167.

which war has to offer policy, proves elusive in its usefulness and its effectiveness in transforming politics. Clausewitz provides a method to evaluate battle and relates his method it in a manner reminiscent of his trinitarian definition of war:

Three things are easily distinguished here: the effect upon the instruments themselves—the generals and their armies; the effect on the belligerent states; and the actual influence that those effects can have on the future course of the war.⁶⁹

Some military historians often embrace tactical fetishism perhaps even more completely than the men they write about. The minutia of tactical maneuver, weaponry, uniforms, unit composition and leadership often occupy the central focus of many of the accounts of the many wars recorded by military historians. These focuses led at least one historian to speculate: “Military history may be a stunted discipline, the province of retired generals and armchair generals who actually take pride in their ignorance.” Michael Geyer, (who integrates military and social history) attributes to some of his fellows “a pugnaciously parochial worldview” that accounts for their preference for the trivialities of war, rather than the substance. Thus, a B. H. Liddel Hart could write his History of the Second World War without mentioning the link between Nazi anti-Semitism, Soviet partisan warfare, Hitler’s racial policies and the German defeat in the East. Instead Liddell Hart attributes German defeat by the Soviets to a lack of tracked vehicles, as the “issue in Russia depended less on strategy and tactics than on space, logistics, and mechanics.”⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Ibid, 253.

⁷⁰ D. D. Guttenplan, The Holocaust on Trial, (W. W. Norton & Company: New York, 2001) 135. These remarks refer specifically to John Keegan, whose history of World War II of over 500 pages makes only two mentions of the Holocaust, arguably the centerpiece of Hilterian strategy. Keegan describes himself as “a military historian of a rather technical sort,” and is unfavorably contrasted with Eberhard Jaekel, who “is responsible for bringing together the Holocaust and the battlefield.” Geyer, Professor of Contemporary European History at the University of Chicago, found Holocaust denier David Irving’s

For this type of historian, war is all “maps and chaps,” with an abundance of arrows, unit symbols, war stories and speculations, often divorced from political reality. Generally reductionist, this kind of history at its worst defines an irrelevancy. In these accounts, one bunch of guys goes off and fights this other group of guys. Then they go off and fight another group, but if they had just gone here and done something sooner or later or better, they might have won the battle, the campaign and the war.⁷¹

There is of course, nothing “wrong” with this kind of history or historian. The narrative in detail of a battle, the study of weapons, tactics and the telling of the “war stories” of individuals are legitimate subjects for the historian. The key question, like questions of strategy, is the purpose. Weapons, tactics and leadership (and nearly everything else in war) all derive from policy. When historians identify and evaluate deficiencies in objects (weapons) or actions (tactics), the relevant focus lies not in the weapons or methods themselves but in the policies and social organization that produced them. As we have seen, Clausewitz distinguishes between narrative histories, “which merely arrange facts one after another, and at most touches on their immediate causal links,” and the critical approach, designed to find something of greater substance. Clausewitz identifies “the truly critical parts of historical inquiry,” as “the investigation of and evaluation of the means employed,” and “the tracing of effects back to their causes.” History is experience and provides the only evidence for theory and it must be analyzed “down to its basic elements, to incontrovertible truth.” That no such rigor exists

books on military history held in high esteem by many military historians. Irving’s research and methods, apart from his political views, have been discredited. B. H. Liddell Hart, History of the Second World War, (G. P. Putnam’s Sons: New York, 1970), 157, 158.

⁷¹Guttenplain, Holocaust, 135. Weapons descriptions also often dominate such accounts, the minutia of aircraft performance, firepower and armor thickness as well as production numbers trumping the policy decisions determining their production and method of employment.

in many narrative accounts of some military historians should surprise no one. For one seeking more comprehensive and substantive explanation, Clausewitz's historicism, which acknowledges ever-changing political and historical contexts, proves superior.⁷²

Unclear thinking on the part of Civil War soldiers derived from mixed and imprecise definitions of the levels of warfare and the nature of their interaction. Inadequate formal training and misunderstanding of the lessons of the Napoleonic and Mexican wars determined that Civil War soldiers fought according to no coherent and common system. The way Civil War soldiers used J. F. C. Fuller's most perplexing word, "strategy," positively antagonized Lincoln. The officers, Lincoln said, believed the war could be won by strategy. Lincoln said no, hard, tough fighting would win it, not strategy. Grant through intuition and experience perceived the true relationship between politics and the hard and tough fighting necessary to win the war. More correctly he bonded politics and bloodshed. Grant's clear thinking on these matters proved unique and surpassed that of all other Civil War generals. In the words of James Longstreet, "he eclipsed us all."⁷³

⁷² Clausewitz, War, 156-157.

⁷³ Williams, General, 178; Smith, Grant, 15.

Chapter 6

Military Doctrine and the Intellectual Origins of U. S. Grant

Every age had its own kind of war, its own limiting conditions, and its own peculiar preconceptions—
Clausewitz

Every war I knew anything about had made laws for itself—Grant¹

A book entitled Intellectual Origins of U. S. Grant, would surely be one of the thinnest books ever written. While Grant's intellect itself is not open to question (Clausewitz can find no example of a great commander of low intelligence),² Grant himself clearly owes no debt to specific military thinkers. Even in later life his meager library contained no works on military strategy or military history.³

Familiarity with contemporary military doctrine seems axiomatic for any graduate of West Point. This is not the case. West Point curriculum in the 1830's and 1840's (Grant graduated in 1843) emphasized engineering to the detriment of any comprehensive study of the theory of war. Doctrine (perhaps too strong a word) in Grant's time derived from Dennis Hart Mahan. Mahan, an engineering officer, authored West Point's standard scientific text on the art of war. Mahan referred to Jomini as "my best military friend" and Mahan's "widely circulated notes" based on the study of French texts dominated the

¹Carl von Clausewitz, On War (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 593; John Russel Young, Around the World With General Grant, 2 vols. (New York: American News Company, 1879), II: 351-2, 625.

²Clausewitz, War, 103.

³Louis A. Coolidge, Ulysses S. Grant, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1917), 54.

academy for forty years. Apart from civil and military engineering, distillations of the works of Jomini dominated studies of strategy and tactics.⁴

Christopher Bassford in his book Clausewitz in English details the transmission of Clausewitz's ideas to the United States before the Civil War. Bassford finds Clausewitz "present but not accounted for." Present, in that some of Clausewitz's articles had been translated, not accounted for in that his ideas remained largely unknown, unexamined or misunderstood.⁵

Grant throughout his career never relied on any theoretical work or military manual. While most Civil War generals rode into battle with "a sword in one hand and Jomini in the other," Grant at least in the initial stages of the Vicksburg campaign, took only his toothbrush. When quizzed after the war about the theories of Jomini, Grant proved unequivocal: "He had never paid much attention to that authority."⁶ Grant's unconcerned, indirect rejection of prescriptive theory echoes Clausewitz's explicit rejection: "a positive doctrine is unattainable" and theory need not be a "*manual* for

⁴Azar Gat, Military Thought in the Nineteenth Century, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 18-23. Gat details the influence of Mahan and of Henry Halleck's translations of Jomini, all of which post-dated Grant's tenure at the academy. Gat finds Jomini's influence on all major Civil War generals pervasive, excepting U. S. Grant. James McPherson, Battle Cry of Freedom, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 331-32, questions the significance of Jominian influence on Civil War strategy, as Grant, "the most successful strategist of the war," never read Jomini. Grady McWhinney and Perry D. Jamieson, Attack and Die: Civil War Military Tactics and the Southern Heritage. (University: University of Alabama Press, 1982), 146-53, find the offensive tactics observed during the Mexican War of more importance than Jomini's writings or the teachings of Mahan at West Point. This debate further illustrates that no common doctrine existed. Bernard Brodie, "The Continuing Relevance of On War," in Carl von Clausewitz, On War, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 57.

⁵Christopher Bassford, Clausewitz in English, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) 35, 51. Halleck lists Clausewitz three times in bibliographies of his *Elements of Military Art and Science*, without ever identifying Clausewitz's central thesis or any discussion of his main ideas.

⁶J. D. Hittle, Jomini and his Summary of the Art of War, (Harrisburg, Pa.: Stackpole, 1947), 2; James Arnold, Grant Wins the War: Decision at Vicksburg, (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1997), 122. Coolidge, Grant, 54.

action.” For those seeking “rules” in theory to win wars or battles, Clausewitz directly offered, “rules are not only made for idiots, but are idiotic in themselves.”⁷

Some historians identify a positive advantage in Grant’s lack of book learning:

Had he been so primed he might have ended as another Halleck, his mind perplexed, bemuddled by the hopeless task of reconciling the principles of eighteenth-century geometric strategy with the conditions of the Civil War.⁸

This much said, it would be wrong to characterize Grant as anti-intellectual or uninformed. It is wrong to attribute his achievements to a lack of “study,” although this is demonstrative in a strictly academic sense, given West Point’s lack of formal instruction in strategy or doctrine. Grant “studied” in the actual environment of war and politics. Technical proficiency in handling the large bodies of troops engaged in the Civil War certainly could not have been gained from theory, from instructors at West Point, or from any existing military manual. Even less value could properly be ascribed to Clausewitz’s other substitute for experience, military history. No American ever led bodies of troops approaching the scale of even Grant’s early commands. Grant expressed his awareness of this in a letter to his sister well before his first success at Donelson. Grant pointed out that his army’s numbers surpassed those of Scott’s in the Mexican War.⁹

Sherman, in keeping with the thinking of the day, looked at war as discoverable science and questioned Grant’s familiarity with important works he believed necessary to

⁷Clausewitz, War, 140, 141, 184.

⁸ A. L. Conger, Rise of U. S. Grant, (New York: Century, 1931), 306.

⁹ GP 4: 96.

a successful commander. Sherman in March 1864 “confessed” his reservations with Grant himself:

My only points of doubt were as to your knowledge of grand strategy, and of books of science and history, but I confess your common sense seems to have supplied all this.¹⁰

Even tactical lessons, generally the area of the military art most accessible through books and manuals, provided only limited value: “A book cannot really teach us to do anything.” Changes in the battlefield environment due to advances in technology demonstrated their actual importance only through war itself. No one really solved the major tactical problem during the war on either side, regardless of using books, experience, or any innate creative genius as a guide.¹¹

Grant by his own account felt obliged, however briefly, to utilize Hardee’s manual on tactics. Hardee’s book superseded Scott’s instructions (poorly absorbed by Grant at West Point), but practical considerations soon demonstrated their own limited utility. Grant found Hardee “a mere translation from the French,” and soon abandoned the book in favor of practice. Grant explicitly states in his memoirs, “I never studied the tactics that I used.”¹²

Anticipation of the political dimension of war also presents an impossibility to “learning by the book.” The specific character of a war and the interplay of social and political factors within it defy prediction. Clausewitz’s trinitarian definition of war defines unpredictable political interaction within the country and parallel political

¹⁰ Sherman, Memoirs, I, 400; Joseph T. Glatthar, Partners in Command: The Relationships Between Leaders in the Civil War, (New York: Free Press, 1994), 143.

¹¹ Clausewitz, War, 148.

¹² Ulysses S. Grant, Personal Memoirs of U. S. Grant, (New York: Da Capo Press, 1952), 128-29. Grant ranked himself at the bottom of his class in tactics and drill.

interaction within the army itself. Domestic politics also conditions and influences operations and defines policy. The war itself pushes all of these political actors, constantly creating new and unpredictable political imperatives and relationships. Uncertainty in the time before the Civil War existed in the extreme. As it fractured American society and the country itself, it also fractured the army. No one anticipated such extremes, the extent of Southern resolve or the scale of effort required to overcome it. It is not surprising soldiers within the army neglected to “wargame” a scenario accounting for such events.

Napoleon’s example existed, unique in its own extremity of context, and character, and inapplicable to American practice. Whatever technically one could learn from the example of Napoleon about commanding large armies, his integration of the political and military leadership in one man makes his model’s relevance to a democratic country unconvincing. Arguably the “Age of Battles,” in which a single engagement often decided major issues in major wars, ended with Napoleon, though generals North and South sought such decision early in the conflict.¹³

The example of the Great Napoleon provided only limited utility for Grant and other observers, given the particular conditions of a democratic America. De Tocqueville, alluded to the contrast between the democratic method of making war and the more formal monarchical European system:

Great generals are always sure to spring up. A long war produces upon a democratic army the same effects that revolution produces upon a

¹³ Russell Weigley, The Age of Battles: The Quest for Decisive Warfare from Breitenfeld to Waterloo, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), xii-xiii, questions if such battles historically actually achieved the decisive results attributed to them. Clausewitz finds examples of such decisiveness, but points out that in most wars “destruction tends to be a gradual process,” as the political object “can no longer be achieved by a single tremendous act of war” see Clausewitz, War, 91, 227.

people; it breaks through regulations and allows extraordinary men to rise above the common level.¹⁴

De Tocqueville's observation seems applicable to the rise of U. S. Grant, whose story developed along lines inconceivable in a monarchical system. Grant, speaking after the war, attributed Napoleon's success to "making war in his own way," putting him in a category apart from his changeless opponents. The same could be said of Grant himself, whose uniqueness as a military man grew out of his democratic experience.¹⁵

Grant also weighed in on the inapplicability of any doctrine (especially European) in an American context:

I don't underrate the value of military knowledge, but if men make war in slavish observances of rules, they will fail. No rules will apply to conditions of war as different as those which exist in Europe and America¹⁶

Grant understood the limits to theory and devised his own method of study and learning. This preference for experience over formal learning reinforces Grant's reputation as a practical man. Benefits may accrue from high standing in one's class at West Point and familiarity with books of military history, but they never supply adequate information about war, each unique in character and each with its own "rules." From these practical lessons, "and every engagement was a lesson, and not merely a victory or a defeat—he built up his art of war." Grant, with no theoretical models to fall back on,

¹⁴ Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America, (New York: Knopf 1945), 2:278.

¹⁵ Grant may have studied more than is commonly believed. Long after the war Grant extemporaneously treated his companions to a detailed description of "all of Napoleon's campaigns, from Marengo down to Leipsic, speaking of each battle in a most minute matter—as thoroughly learned as a problem in mathematics." The "lecture" purportedly then reached back to the wars of Frederick the Great, the campaigns of the Thirty Years War and those of Julius Caesar. This surprised his listeners, who rarely heard Grant speak on the art of war, "a subject to which he had an aversion." See J. F. C. Fuller, Grant and Lee: A Study in Personality and Generalship, (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1957), 67-68.

¹⁶Young, World, II: 352-3.

looked to his own logic and experience as a teacher, as “every war I knew anything about had made laws for itself.”¹⁷

Jomini and the American Civil War

Pity the soldier who is supposed to crawl among these scraps of rules, not good enough for genius, which genius can ignore or laugh at—Clausewitz

He appears to have been his own law, his text book being the war itself—J. F. C. Fuller¹⁸

There is a trend among scholars to see Jomini and Clausewitz as polar opposites. Some use the terms Clausewitzian or Jominian as epithets. In fact some congruence exists in their respective theories. Michael Handel finds them “mostly in agreement on the fundamental issues.”¹⁹ Jomini “borrowed” extensively from On War in his later work, leading some to identify a parallelism in their approach. The two theorists read each other’s works, shared personal experience in the Napoleonic wars and a common interest in the wars of Frederick the Great. Despite these commonalities each theorist enjoys very different receptions by many observers.²⁰

Closer examination of Jomini may tend to “rehabilitate” his work, especially if one looks at the more mature thinker of The Summary of the Art of War rather than his less

¹⁷ Fuller, Personality, 82.

¹⁸ Clausewitz, 136. This is an oblique reference by Clausewitz to Jomini’s synthetic rules, which are “absolutely useless.” J. F. C. Fuller, The Generalship of Ulysses S. Grant, (New York: Da Capo Press, 1929), 185.

¹⁹ Michael I. Handel, Masters of War: Classical Strategic Thought, (Portland: Frank Cass, 1996), 3.

²⁰ Christopher Bassford, “Jomini and Clausewitz: Their Interaction,” Consortium on Revolutionary Europe, 1750-1850: Proceedings. 22 (February, 1993), discusses some of the points of similarity and details reasons for their very different receptions.

sophisticated (and less Clausewitzian) early works.²¹ Others remain less forgiving. John Shy finds a basic flaw in Jomini's commitment to "reductionism and prescription." For our purposes the key is his reception among all of the leading generals of the Civil War. If Clausewitz is right and the purpose of theory is to "train one's mind," then the mode of thinking of the Jominians, however misguided when tested against Jomini's actual writings, provides a proper focus of study. Jomini "by isolating strategy from its political and social context," helped train the minds of Civil War soldiers to separate the political and military aspects of conflict, "a mode of thinking about war that continues to haunt us."²²

George McClellan, writing in the periodical Galaxy in 1869, illustrates his esteem for the French theorist (shared by nearly all Civil War generals) through his statement:

Jomini was the ablest of military writers, and the first author in any age who gathered from the campaigns of the greatest general (i.e. Napoleon), the true principles of war and expressed them in clear and intelligible language."²³

Reliance on theory derivative of French experience is understandable given the towering, almost transcendent figure of Napoleon. Because of this focus on Napoleon, soldiers who valued theory found themselves dependent on 18th century models, already

²¹ Bassford points out Jomini clearly benefited from his reading of Clausewitz. After Clausewitz's death Jomini added and emphasized a "sixth and essential branch" to his Summary of the Art of War, "*Diplomacy in its relation to war*," after reading On War. Jomini suggests considering statesmanship, strategy, grand tactics and logistics in combination and effectively promotes the political origins of a war and concedes "different kinds of war influence in some degree the nature and extent of the efforts and operations necessary for the proposed end." Jomini, Art, 11-12. Civil War soldiers generally relied on translations and condensations of his earlier works.

²² An overriding characteristic of Jomini's writings, when viewed as a whole, is their inconsistency and ambiguity. See John Shy, "Jomini," in Peter Paret ed. The Makers of Modern Strategy, (Princeton: Princeton University Press) 143-185 who identifies four major weaknesses in Jomini's work.

²³Department of Military Art and Engineering, USMA, Jomini, Clausewitz and Schlieffen, (New York: West Point, 1954), 2.

carried to their logical extreme and already exhausted by the emperor himself. Innovative and original in his own time (Clausewitz described Napoleon as “the god of war himself”) by the end of his career generals such as Blucher and Wellington to a great extent also “discovered” the Napoleonic method and developed effective counters to it.²⁴

Jomini’s interpretation of the Napoleonic wars rejected historical and social context in the interest of constructing a “scientific” theory, true for all times and circumstances.²⁵ In doing so he left unanalyzed the forces of political revolution driving Napoleon’s military revolution. The revolutionary context clearly could not be duplicated in other wars. The politics of the revolution stimulated and drove many of the tactical innovations present in French arms (such as attacking in column instead of line). In Jomini’s defense, the political concerns of his decidedly unrevolutionary masters limited his ability to praise openly or even acknowledge the revolutionary origins of Napoleon’s triumphs.²⁶

Clausewitz again provides the contrast, finding French success directly attributable to the effects of the revolution. Since Bonaparte, war

Again became the concern of the people as a whole, took on an entirely different character, or rather closely approached its true character, its absolute perfection. Their seemed no end to the resources mobilized.²⁷

²⁴ David Chandler, *The Campaigns of Napoleon*, (New York: Macmillan Company, 1966), believes Napoleon purposely declined to impart in any systematic way his methods, even to his own marshals, in order to maintain his own supremacy.

²⁵ Shy, “Jomini,” 143-185 is the best evaluation of Jominian theory to date. See especially p. 144-146.

²⁶ See Gunther E. Rothenberg, *The Art of Warfare in the Age of Napoleon*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), 15 and Vagt’s, *Militarism*, 115 for descriptions of the revolutionary origins of French Revolutionary tactics.

²⁷ Clausewitz, *War*, 515.

Jomini also rejected the idea that changes in technology materially affected his conclusions in Summary of the Art of War. Evidence of some of the power of the rifled musket, the explosive artillery shell, and armored warships emerged during the Crimean War. Jomini observed these exponential changes in battlefield lethality but found no reason to change his conclusions: “This contest cannot influence in respect the great combinations of war, nor even the tactics of battles.”²⁸

Civil War soldiers relying on an interpretation of war devoid of the dynamics of history, politics, or changing technology suffered. Application of Jominian methods in a changing, real-world environment also largely failed. An obsession with “interior lines,” “geographic movement points,” or any of Jomini’s other mathematical/theoretical pseudo scientific constructs impeded prosecution of the war. Removal of historical and political context from theory produced a similar disconnect in the military strategy pursued early in the war. This represents less an explicit act on the part of Civil War generals than a reflection of a particular method of thinking peculiar to this time.

Strategy does not represent a solvable mathematical equation or engineering problem. Most Civil War generals attempted to a greater or lesser extent to make it so. The campaigns of generals with the “slows,” McClellan, Halleck, Rosecrans, and, later in the war, Thomas, reflect this method of thinking. Each planned and waited for the ideal situation, the last delivery of troops or supplies, until the events of war, or opportunity, had passed them by. Each sought to apply a mechanistic formula and meet specific

²⁸ Edward Hagerman, The American Civil War and the Origins of Modern Warfare, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 18. Jomini also predicted the extensive use of fortifications at Sevastapol were an aberration that would not be repeated. While no modern writer uses Jominian theory to explain or understand nuclear combat or modern terror techniques Clausewitz remains applicable. See Major Frank Sobchak, “Clausewitz: ‘On Afghanistan,’” Military Review 85 (2005): 89-91, enumerable books and articles exist on Clausewitz and nuclear weapons. See Brodie, Missile, and Richard Lebow “Clausewitz and Nuclear Crisis Stability,” Political Science Quarterly, 103 (Spring, 1988): 81-110, for example.

material or geographic conditions before acting, often divorced from real-world political and military needs and considerations.

Bruce Catton sums up this syndrome, which applied to Halleck's defective "lost opportunity" strategy pursued in the West after Shiloh. Instead of fighting, Halleck fortified strategic points, occupied territory and obsessed over questions of supply:

The books from which he had gained his strategic wisdom had somehow failed to teach him that the destruction of the last sizable Confederate army in the West would solve all of those problems for him.²⁹

Occupation of Corinth followed victory at Shiloh, the Navy seized New Orleans, destroyed Confederate naval units and Memphis fell. Instead of uniting his forces and destroying Beauregard (soon replaced by Bragg), Halleck consolidated his gains, and pondered the occupation of "key" cities and territory. Distracted by guerillas, logistics and administration, he repaired railroads, dispersed his forces and in so doing forgot to make war. No decisive battle in the West occurred, leaving the Confederates free to refit, raid union communications, and fortify the Mississippi.

Different in context and content, but no less indicative of "linear" thinking is the case of George Thomas. As well as seeking the perfect plan, he also sought the perfect instrument to achieve his goals. Colonel Henry Stone of Thomas's staff admiringly said of Thomas: "He realized too keenly the importance of victory to allow anything that might secure it to be neglected." Stone betrays his own and Thomas's lack of understanding of the true purpose of battle, stating, "compared with the destruction of Hood's army nothing else was of any account." However desirable "victory" in battle and the destruction of Hood's army, destruction in and of itself guarantees nothing. Grant's

²⁹ Bruce Catton, Grant Moves South, (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1960), 278.

strategy required Thomas's army be unleashed in the interior of the Confederacy *ala* Sherman, and required it as rapidly as possible.³⁰

After interminable delays to re-equip (especially his cavalry) Thomas did deliver a crushing tactical victory at Nashville, completely wrecking Hood's army. This carefully orchestrated and technically well-organized demolition of Hood reaped no commensurate strategic advantage. Sherman out-maneuvered Hood, or rather Hood out-maneuvered himself strategically, months before his actual destruction. The strategic construct designed by Grant and Sherman rendered both Thomas and Hood almost moot to the course of the war before their battle took place. Hood accomplished his own irrelevance by moving North rather than continuing to confront Sherman. Hood mistakenly waited at Nashville for his own demolition while Thomas re-equipped. Certainly his self-destructive assault at Franklin achieved results far beyond those Thomas could have inflicted offensively in the same time-period. Thomas's continued delays allowed Hood time to fortify, requiring yet more delays to ensure the success of the set-piece battle he desired. If Hood moved north or merely stepped back from Nashville the set-piece process must necessarily start over. Stanton remarked to Grant of his and Lincoln's concerns: "This looks like the McClellan and Rosecrans strategy of do nothing and let the rebels raid the country."³¹

After Nashville, Thomas true to form, wanted to wait until spring to pursue Hood's shattered army—by that time Sherman and Grant obviously would have won the war, rendering Thomas completely irrelevant. Responsibility for the final victory of Northern arms in any case devolves principally to Sherman and Grant. Thomas's

³⁰ Fuller, *Generalship*, 327.

³¹ Hattaway and Jones, *How*, 649.

reluctance to act ensured he played no part in the final dismemberment of the Confederacy. Grant found him “too ponderous in his preparations and equipments to move through a country rapidly enough to live off it,” in the manner of Sherman or Sheridan. Though an excellent tactician and fighter, he failed to tailor those excellent tactics to Grant’s overall strategy to win the war. Thomas, in J. F. C. Fuller’s correct estimation, strategically remained “a man of parochial vision.”³²

On the Confederate side Joe Johnston’s performance before Atlanta illustrates a similar manner of thinking. Politically Atlanta required a great battle. Johnston through his own inaction lost command to the reckless Hood. Johnston’s perpetual search for the perfect tactical opportunity for an attack on Sherman proved unrealistic. Unaware of or unresponsive to the political needs of his nation, his strategy failed to serve effectively the cause of Southern independence. Grant after the war identified Johnston’s “Fabian” strategy as the correct one. His removal due to political miscalculation left Johnston without a command to pursue that correct strategy.³³

³² Fuller, Generalship, 337, 168. GP 13: 273. Hattaway and Jones, How, 653 find that Hood “completed the destruction of his own army” by moving North and through ill-advised assaults on Northern entrenchments. Hattaway and Jones include an admiring evaluation of Thomas, focusing on his tactical achievements. Marszalek, Commander, 216. McPherson, Trial, 252. Thomas enjoys an undeserved reputation for greatness among many Civil War historians. Parish, American, 483, offers the following evaluation of Thomas at Nashville: “he came nearer than any other general in the Civil War to the complete destruction of an opposing army,” apparently forgetting Grant’s total destruction of Confederate armies at Donelson, Vicksburg and Appomattox. Geoffrey Perret, A Country Made by War, (New York: Random House, 1989), 248, 251, goes even farther, saying of 60 major battles only Thomas “pulled off what no other army commander achieved in the Civil War—the battle of annihilation.” McPherson, Cry, 815, reports that upon Hood’s resignation about half of his original 40,000 men remained. Many of the “annihilated” 20,000 served with Johnston upon his recall to command.

³³ Some critics disagree on Johnston’s intentions. Russel Weigley, A Great Civil War, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 363, believes Johnston understood politically that Atlanta required a battle and planned to fight one. Grant’s own well-known assessment of Johnston’s strategy as essentially correct is hard to refute, except for its divorcement from Confederate political reality. See Grant, Memoirs, 482-483. Clausewitz’s history of Napoleon’s Russian campaign on this point is instructive. A pointless diversion from the correct Russian strategy of retreat and attrition, “Kutusov would certainly not have fought the battle of Borodino, which he probably did not expect to win, if it had not been pressed upon him by the court, the army and the whole country.” Borodino represented a political necessity, given the

Grant summed up these generals who, “were working out problems of an ideal character, problems that would have looked well on a blackboard.”³⁴ Neglecting the practical and the essential, they floundered on both the military and political imperatives of the war that did not conform to their textbook solutions. Grant echoes Lincoln, who in 1864 told Grant:

That while the armies were sitting down waiting for opportunities to turn up which might, perhaps, be more favorable from a strictly military point of view, the government was spending millions of dollars every day; that there was a limit to the sinews of war, and a time might be reached when the spirits and resources of the people would become exhausted.

In this Lincoln demonstrates his understanding of Southern strategy, the limits of Northern political capital, and the necessity to link military action to its political consequences. Delay served Southern strategy, however unfavorable an individual Northern army’s material or tactical circumstance. Grant, using the example of his Vicksburg campaign, expressed the futility of waging war divorced from its political context or according to rules or maxims divined by past theorists:

If the Vicksburg campaign meant anything, in a military point of view, it was that there are no fixed laws of war, which are not subject to the conditions of the country, the climate, and the habits of the people. The laws of successful war in one generation would insure defeat in another.³⁵

significance of the “great prize (Moscow)” Napoleon acquired as its result. A correct strategy requires great finesse and political sensitivity in its application. Johnston at best failed to communicate to his government his intention to risk his army in a battle for the great prize of Atlanta. Carl von Clausewitz, *Historical and Political Writings*, Peter Paret, ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 141.

³⁴ Young, *World*, II:352-3

³⁵ *Ibid*, 625.

Grant broadly includes “the conditions of the country” and “habits of the people,” thinking in terms similar to Clausewitz’s definition of policy as “all interests of the community.”

Clausewitz also expressed familiarity with generals seeking the “fixed laws of war” identified by Grant. His critique of both von Bulow and of Jomini points out the pitfalls of their methodology, dependent on mathematical or scientific thinking and form. Such generals operated with “scraps of rules . . . idiotic in themselves . . . divorced from moral values.”³⁶ Grant succeeded in part through his ability to think in ways not taught at West Point. Unlike mathematics, engineering and other subjects at “The Point,” in strategy and in war there is no quantifiable “right” answer.

The applicability of the “theoretical” Jomini to real life problems exists. A Prussian officer reported Jomini’s advice to the Tsar during the Dresden campaign in 1813 completely impractical, to the point that “no one ever took him seriously again.” Clausewitz critiqued (from his own personal knowledge) officers in the 1812 campaign in Russia, “lost in the most recent ideas of all, those of Jomini,” who never thought things through for themselves.³⁷

T. Harry Williams is correct in his assessment of Jomini’s thinking, and by implication that of his many disciples:

In attempting to introduce rationality and rules into war, he deflected attention from its violent nature and made it seem like a game or

³⁶ Clausewitz, War, 135-136, see Clausewitz’s Carl von Bulow essay and also, 134-140 for a description and critique of prescriptive doctrine and Jominian style of thinking about war. See 184 for the absurdity of quantifying or divining rules to govern psychological factors of spirit or will.

³⁷ Gordan A. Craig, “Problems of Coalition Warfare: The Military Alliance Against Napoleon, 1813-1814,” in Harry R. Borowski ed., The Harmon Memoiral Lectures in Military History, 1959-1987, (Washington, D. C: Office of Air Force History, 1988), 329. Clausewitz, Historical, 134.

a geometric exercise, in which maneuver became more important than battle.³⁸

Grant, unlike Sherman, never looked at war as a game. Brooks Simpson carefully documents Grant's abhorrence of war.³⁹ We will speculate that Robert E. Lee surely enjoyed the "game" element in war; he certainly was good at it. Lee continually formulated and executed brilliant tactical combinations. He repeatedly outthought, outfought, outmaneuvered, and disoriented "those people," comprising the Northern enemy. In an oft-quoted observation after Fredericksburg, Lee identified a potential "fondness" for war. The "gamesman" in Lee felt elation, pride and redemption after a successful battle. The moral man in Lee understood those feelings to be inappropriate.⁴⁰ If Grant experienced a similar exhilaration in victory, it is certainly not reflected in his simple dispatch after Appomattox:

Gen. Lee surrendered the Army of Northern Va this afternoon on terms proposed by myself. The accompanying correspondence will show the conditions fully.⁴¹

Jomini looked at war, held it aloof from the real world, and "found" an ideal he believed applicable for all time. Clausewitz looked at ideal war, unlimited and perfect in conception, removed it from perfection and found a grim and complex reality. Clausewitz describes absolute war, or war in abstract, with no logical reason existing to limit the scale of violence applied in order to secure

³⁸ T. Harry Williams, "The Return of Jomini—Some thoughts on Recent Civil War Writing," *Military Affairs*, v.9 No.4 (December, 1975): 204.

³⁹ Brooks Simpson, *Ulysses S. Grant: Triumph over Adversity, 1822-1865*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000), 528, includes 20 different references to Grant's personal reactions to the brutality of war.

⁴⁰ McPhearson, *Cry*, 572.

⁴¹ Grant, *Memoirs*, 559.

victory. All commanders should keep the concept of absolute war in mind in determining a war's purpose and the appropriateness of means used to achieve that purpose.⁴²

In last quarter of the 20th century, the authors of U. S. Army and Marine Corps manuals codified modern doctrine. Stimulated by defeat in Vietnam and rediscovery of Clausewitz, Army manual Fm-105 and the Marine's DP1-1, *Warfighting* and MCDP 1-2, *Strategy*, are an "easily readable distillation" of Clausewitz's On War. Current doctrine seeks to convey "a more realistic, fluid, organic understanding of the environment (in this case the political context) in which war occurs. The authors emphasize the "nonlinear" nature of war, citing the Clausewitzian trinity and ecological and biological systems as the models most applicable to the understanding of war. Clearly absent from modern doctrine (if not from practice) are the mathematical models, maxims, and obsession with tactics relied on by Vietnam era and Civil War soldiers."⁴³

Civil War historians in their use and examinations of theory and its application make many of the same mistakes made by the generals of the era. T. Harry Williams and David Donald rightly discovered some of the reasons for Federal strategic misfires in Jominian thinking. They suggested that the Civil War "approached Clausewitz's concept of total war," and derided those generals wedded to maneuver and avoidance of battle. While admittedly not endorsing Clausewitz explicitly, in "disposing of Jomini," they perhaps suggest Clausewitz offers a different and better approach to strategy.

⁴² Clausewitz, War, 579.

⁴³ Christopher Bassford, "Nonlinearity in Marine Corps Doctrine," in F. G. Hoffman and Gary Horne, eds., Maneuver Warfare Science, (United States Marine Corps Combat Development Command, 1998) and Alan Beyerchen, "Clausewitz, Nonlinearity, and the Unpredictability of War," International Security 17 no. 93 (Winter, 1992): 59-90.

Clausewitz's strategy is described as "modern" (though he wrote at the same time using the same examples of Frederick and Napoleon), and "total" (Clausewitz uses the term absolute, in a different context). As Northern strategy evolved, it more closely resembled their interpretation of Clausewitz's strategy.⁴⁴

This is "true," but also inaccurate. Clausewitz advocates no strategy. He may be applicable to "modern" wars, but he is not any more modern, per se, than Jomini. He has no "concept of total war," (other than his historical description of Napoleon) and his concept of absolute war represents an ideal unobtainable in real life. For Clausewitz, all wars exist somewhere on a continuum between wars designed to lead to the total defeat of the enemy, suggested by the Napoleonic Wars, and wars for distinctly limited objectives, suggested by Frederick the Great's conquest of Silesia. Clausewitz advocates nothing other than a matching of political ends to an appropriate military means. Williams haphazardly quotes "principles" and uses them in a manner similar to the Jominians he critiques. Grant neglected "the principle of precaution" at Shiloh and "violated the strategic principle of doing one big thing at a time" in his plans for Mobile and Chattanooga. The source of these "principles" (questionable at best) remains unattributed.⁴⁵

Like the McClellans and Hallecks, Donald and Williams ascribe to theory a purpose prescriptive or predictive. If Northern generals suffered from reliance on the outdated and imperfect strategy of Jomini, then they by implication would have benefited

⁴⁴ Williams, "Return," 205, see also David Donald, "Refighting the Civil War," in David Donald ed. Lincoln Reconsidered: Essays on the Civil War Era, (New York: 1956), 88-102.

⁴⁵ Clausewitz, War, 617-637 for wars designed to totally defeat and enemy and 611-613 for wars for a limited aim, both offensive and defensive. T. Harry Williams, Lincoln and His Generals, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1952), 295, 312.

from a better, more modern strategy. If they don't explicitly identify Clausewitz as a possible model, they identify no other military thinker, contemporary to Jomini or otherwise.

Archer Jones travels even further down this road, informing us which individual campaign decisions “violated Jominian rules,” and why Jackson’s Valley campaign is “fully in harmony with Jomini’s principles.” Jones searches Civil War operational history for “interior lines,” and “dispersions in cordons,” enlightening us as to which operations are “in consonance with Jomini.” In a manner similar to Civil War generals, Jones looks for the rules, who broke them, and which generals devised perfect solutions to Civil War operational and strategic problems. Jones concludes the “North won (with minor deviations) through using Jomini’s prescription for victory.” While all of this is interesting and contributes to our understanding of Jomini’s flawed system, it is also largely irrelevant. Absent from Jones’s analysis (as from Jomini’s) are the links between theory, the unique historical and political context of the Civil War and strategy, which render all predictive theory obsolete.⁴⁶

Jones, like many other Civil War authors, focuses excessively on the supposed advantage of “interior lines” or the advantage of the central position, in a similar manner to Jomini or his disciples Halleck and McClellan. Clausewitz, acknowledging the

⁴⁶ Archer Jones, “Jomini and the Strategy of the American Civil War, A Reinterpretation,” Military Affairs, 34 no. 4 (December, 1970): 128-129. See also Jones’ Civil War Command & Strategy: The Process of Victory and Defeat, (New York: Free Press, 1992), 256-259 and Richard E Beringer, Herman Hattaway, Archer Jones, and William N. Still, The Elements of Confederate Defeat: Nationalism, War Aims, and Religion, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1988). While Jones’ later works focus to a greater degree on policy they include application of many Jominian formulas, geometric and otherwise. Hattaway and Jones, How, 705-720.

existence of the concept, found no advantage *per se*, to occupying the central position; instead:

In both strategy and in tactics a convergent attack (by definition an attack on exterior lines in contravention of Jomini) always holds out promise of *increased* results for if it succeeds the enemy is not just beaten; he is virtually cut off.⁴⁷

Clausewitz defines a polarity between interior and exterior lines, but typically regards the value of all such constructs as dependent on political context. Identifying such purely geographical functions as some key to achieve victory (or explain it) defines an absurdity. A Clausewitzian finds a Jominian war of limited risk and maneuver, paying strict attention to lines of communication, interior lines and place objectives perfectly appropriate and proper if the goals of policy warrant it. “The object,” in Clausewitz’s estimation, “may be thought of in numerous gradations, from the conquest of a whole country to that of an insignificant hamlet.” Civil war and secession constituted revolution and its defense or destruction required positive and equally revolutionary action. Lincoln’s intuitional understanding of the links between political context and military acts are evident from statements he made in December of 1861: “I have been anxious that the inevitable conflict for this purpose shall not degenerate into a violent and remorseless revolutionary conflict.” War exists on a spectrum for Lincoln from more “normal,” somewhat limited, forms of war, to “remorseless revolutionary conflict.” Time and the progress of the war itself, demonstrated to Lincoln the degree of conflict required to serve policy. By July of the following year, Lincoln’s awareness of that degree is

⁴⁷ Clausewitz, War, 619.

evident. No longer would the North fight, “with elder-stalk squirts charged with rose water.”⁴⁸

The historians, like the generals, often approach the war according to mediocre and imperfect understandings of theory and its purpose. While criticism (or rehabilitation) of Jomini might be in order, Civil War historians dealing with theory generally develop no clear relationship either between theory and the practice of war or theory and practice of writing of history. Historians typically offer at best a few quotations, taken out of context and irrelevant to theory as a whole to provide support for some minor point regardless of the true spirit and substance of Clausewitz’s thought. If one agrees with Clausewitz that narrative history does something other than critique, then this is surely understandable. While valid theory requires “testing” by history, the narrative history produced by most historians need pass no similar test.⁴⁹

An incident toward the end of Clausewitz’s life illustrates the limitations of theory, the futility of the prescriptive view and Clausewitz’s historicism. Asked to respond to a staff exercise regarding a hypothetical Austrian invasion of Prussia, Clausewitz did so at length and critically. He responded not so much to the subject of the exercise, but to the absurdity of the problem itself, which asked for strategic evaluation without historical or political context:

⁴⁸ Clausewitz, War, 526. McPherson, Trial, 86, 106.

⁴⁹ For two typical examples see Charles P. Roland, “The Generalship of Robert E. Lee,” in Grady McWhiney, ed. Grant Lee, Lincoln and the Radicals, (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), 41-71 and Gary W. Gallager, “Reconsidering Lee’s Revisionists,” Columbiad vol. 4 no. 1, (Spring 2000): 122-136. Both use the same quotation, “Happy is the army in which an untimely boldness frequently manifests itself,” in praise of Lee’s courage and audacity on the battlefield, ignoring the essence of Clausewitz’s argument. Clausewitz distinguishes between battlefield courage (largely tactical and more common) and the moral courage required for strategy. Strategic courage may just as well require restraint as the example of Frederick illustrates. Boldness is “a matter of energetically supporting that higher form of analysis by which genius arrives at a decision.” Clausewitz, War, 190-92, 179-80.

There can be no question of a *purely military* evaluation of a great strategic issue, nor of a purely military scheme to solve it. *War is the continuation of political efforts by other means*. In my view all of strategy rests on this idea, and I believe that whoever refuses to recognize that this must be so does not yet fully understand what really matters. It is this principle that makes the entire history of war comprehensible, which in its absence remains full of the greatest absurdities. How then is it possible to plan a campaign whether for one theater of war or several, without indicating the political condition of the belligerents, and the politics of their relationship to each other?⁵⁰

Like the staff exercise above, Civil War writing describing military events, tactics and strategy without political context as Clausewitz suggests, defines an absurdity. Such accounts render themselves and “the entire history of war” incomprehensible.

Grant, Lee, and the Ghost of Napoleon

He was given to rhapsodies upon both the emperor’s genius and the climactic Napoleonic battle of annihilation—Russel Weigly on Dennis Hart Mahan.

They were always thinking about what Napoleon would do—Grant ⁵¹

Azar Gat, in his book Military Thought in the Nineteenth Century finds Jomini’s influence on all major Civil War generals pervasive, with the exception of “the very mediocre student,” U. S. Grant. Given this we must look for distinct and comprehensible contrasts in the way Grant waged war and the methods of the Jominians. The first distinct divergence involves the formal use of theory and the methods used in its development. While the “intellectual” generals enjoyed differing measures of success,

⁵⁰ Paret, Understanding, 127.

⁵¹ Basil Liddel Hart used the term “Ghost of Napoleon” in his misidentification of Clausewitz as a proponent of total war. The “Ghost of Napoleon,” via Clausewitz, haunted World War I era soldiers, resulting in the slaughter of the trenches. The example of Napoleon directly affected Civil War soldiers. Grant, Memoirs, 186-87: Russel Weigly, The American Way of War, (New York: Macmillan, 1973), 89, describing West Point’s influential instructor before the Civil War. Young, World, II: 352-3.

Grant surpassed them all. His reliance on experience over formal theory, which he never regarded as a necessity, proved superior. Perhaps only Robert E. Lee in the same era truly transcended theory. His thorough knowledge of the “rules” allowed him to break them and flummox his predictable opponents, though his successes remained largely tactical and therefore transitory. Lee smashed each successive army (and of more importance, each successive commander’s will) but Northern political resolve built new armies and found new commanders.

Professor Mahan reigned as president of the Napoleon Club at West Point; McClellan proved an enthusiastic member. Mahan’s legacy defines a contradiction. While battles of annihilation characterize Napoleonic warfare, Mahan exhibited reservations regarding the massive frontal assaults the Emperor required to achieve decisive results: “for the attainment of his ends on the battlefield he has shown a culpable disregard of the soldier’s blood, and has often pursued to excess his attack by masses.” Mahan also found such tactics unsuitable to American citizen soldiers, inadequately trained and disciplined, and altogether too democratic.⁵²

Grant and Lee did not “need” a Jomini or membership in the Napoleon Club at West Point to fight their battles. Many other soldiers enjoyed these or similar experiences and failed at the art of command in the Civil War. Lee’s perception of war, and perhaps his understanding of Jomini reached a greater depth than his fellows. More correctly Lee is truly Napoleonic rather than Jominian. Lee, like the younger Napoleon, was innovative. Napoleonic campaigns, studied in abstract, represented an ideal, not a

⁵² Hagerman, Origins, 8-10 provides a detailed analysis of Mahan’s beliefs and influence.

prescription. Lee's Napoleon taught boldness, surprise and unorthodoxy, not textbook application of a set of rules, even his own.⁵³

Technical innovation confronted Lee with an unsolvable tactical problem. The increased firepower apparent in the Crimea, which Jomini acknowledged but found of little consequence to theory, destroyed Napoleonic style warfare forever. Civil War technology existed in a curious state of imbalance—the rifled musket and rifled artillery with explosive shells greatly increased the power of the defense, with no corresponding advances that favored the offensive (no effective fused artillery shells and few indirect fire weapons). No new weapons or tactics emerged to replace the mass and shock of the Napoleonic infantry attack, rendered obsolete by the range and firepower of the new rifles and artillery. Civil War generals discovered no way to replicate the Napoleonic battlefield, where artillery blasted huge holes in an enemy's line until the shock of an infantry attack on the weakened sections generally broke the cohesion of Napoleon's opponents. This method resulted in the destruction (morally if not physically) of entire armies and often generated decisive political results from a single battle.

The rifled musket, devastating to the massed infantry assault, also proved decisive in suppressing the offensive use of artillery. Attempts to close to shorter ranges in the manner of Napoleon's horse artillery left the guns vulnerable. If entrenched to avoid vulnerability, defenders will have time to entrench also. Unless artillery can catch troops in the open it will be much less effective, firing from long range to avoid rifle fire. All of these factors also affected turning movements, another staple of Napoleonic warfare. Great difficulties arose in sustaining the momentum of a successful flank attack as a

⁵³ McFeely, Grant, 15. Grant did not join the Napoleon club.

relatively small group of disciplined troops could form a new front and slow the advance. Very few examples of decisive turning movements exist on Civil War battlefields.

Paradoxically, lethal rifle fire also limited the effectiveness of advances in artillery technology. While rifled cannon became standard during the course of the war and again out-ranged small arms, the increasingly universal use of entrenchments and fortifications mitigated its effects. The exploding shell also represented a great improvement over the cannon ball, but lack of effective fusing to ensure detonation over the now standard trenches rendered this new technology also indecisive.⁵⁴

Though the Frenchman's Art of War used the example of Napoleon in construction of his theory (as did Clausewitz), his attempts to define a purely scientific method of waging war failed in several respects. Lee avoided to a great degree, many of these failures. Lee never shrunk from risk: "Lee's strokes flashed like lightning" and his audacity rarely failed to bewilder and confuse his opponents.⁵⁵ While Lee mastered nearly all of his opponents on the battlefield itself, he shares with all Civil War generals, a conspicuous lack of innovation off the battlefield. No one developed new methods of command and control enabling the abandonment of the dense formations popular since Frederick. The "empty battlefield" of today is only possible through the use of the radio

⁵⁴ See Weigley, Great, 32-34, for a recent discussion of the tactical problems rendering Napoleonic warfare obsolete in the American context of the 1860's. See David Chandler, Campaigns, for the best description of the Napoleonic method. For a more detailed analysis of Civil War tactics with somewhat different conclusions see Paddy Griffith, Battle Tactics of the Civil War, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989) and McWhiney and Jamieson, Attack.

⁵⁵ Fuller, Personality, 266-67.

and other communications. Use of an “open” order was confined during the Civil War to only small percentages of the armies deployed as skirmishers.⁵⁶

All of this made any Napoleonic-style destruction of entire armies impossible. Lee, for all his greatness on the battlefield, never destroyed an army through his Napoleonic method. Able on most occasions to completely out-maneuver his opponents, he did not possess an instrument capable of producing the shock necessary to accomplish their destruction. He could “wreck” an army on the battlefield (sometimes his own), but he could not press one enough to destroy it. Lee’s search for the climactic battle, Napoleonic and war-winning in its effects, proved unrealizable.⁵⁷

Grant captured three armies during the war in contrast to all other Civil War generals, who captured none. This achievement came through the application of a combination of maneuver, conventional tactics, and siege warfare. Grant’s brilliance, in clear contrast to Lee, rarely found expression on the field of battle itself. Grant is decidedly un-Napoleonic in both his demeanor and his warfighting. Grant eschewed the complicated tactical combinations favored by Lee and Napoleon. Though he always sought destruction of enemy armies, which might be described as Napoleonic, the battle itself represented not the opportunity for such destruction, but rather the fulfillment of a strategic design. Unlike most commanders during the “Age of Battles,” Grant thought in terms of campaigns. Battle did not represent an end in itself, but only a link in a chain of

⁵⁶ Horace Porter, Campaigning With Grant, (New York: Century, 1906), 513, credits Grant with adoption of “a more open order of battle,” to mitigate the effects of recent advances in firepower, in contrast to the traditional European methods used by his peers. Few others credit Grant with any major tactical innovation. McWhiney and Jamieson, Attack, 100-01, details the difficulties in utilizing open-order deployments in the Civil War.

⁵⁷ Fuller, Personality, 192, finds the Army of Northern Virginia incapable of ever pressing an enemy to destruction through pursuit, due to Lee’s poor administrative abilities.

related events achieving a particular operational or strategic goal. Like Grant, Clausewitz, understood that every military act should target in some way the final political goal. Anything else becomes at best superfluous, at worst damaging to the war as a whole:

War cannot be divorced from political life; and when ever this occurs in our thinking about war, the many links that connect the two elements are destroyed and we are left with something pointless and devoid of sense.⁵⁸

Grant's turning movements (the only decisively successful ones of the war) were strategic rather than tactical. While Grant devised no great tactical innovation, and never solved the fundamental problems advancing technology created, he did find a way to capture armies and win wars. Beyond tactics and technology, beyond turning movements and capturing armies, lies policy. Serving policy constitutes the true reason for the existence of an army and for a General Grant. Making war serve policy constitutes the first duty of a soldier and Grant never divorced his actions from politics. Unlike many other Civil War commanders, Grant's actions were never "pointless and devoid of sense."

⁵⁸ Clausewitz, War, 605.

Chapter 6

Military Doctrine and the Intellectual Origins of U. S. Grant

Every age had its own kind of war, its own limiting conditions, and its own peculiar preconceptions—
Clausewitz

Every war I knew anything about had made laws for itself—Grant¹

A book entitled Intellectual Origins of U. S. Grant, would surely be one of the thinnest books ever written. While Grant's intellect itself is not open to question (Clausewitz can find no example of a great commander of low intelligence),² Grant himself clearly owes no debt to specific military thinkers. Even in later life his meager library contained no works on military strategy or military history.³

Familiarity with contemporary military doctrine seems axiomatic for any graduate of West Point. This is not the case. West Point curriculum in the 1830's and 1840's (Grant graduated in 1843) emphasized engineering to the detriment of any comprehensive study of the theory of war. Doctrine (perhaps too strong a word) in Grant's time derived from Dennis Hart Mahan. Mahan, an engineering officer, authored West Point's standard scientific text on the art of war. Mahan referred to Jomini as "my best military friend" and Mahan's "widely circulated notes" based on the study of French texts dominated the

¹Carl von Clausewitz, On War (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 593; John Russel Young, Around the World With General Grant, 2 vols. (New York: American News Company, 1879), II: 351-2, 625.

²Clausewitz, War, 103.

³Louis A. Coolidge, Ulysses S. Grant, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1917), 54.

academy for forty years. Apart from civil and military engineering, distillations of the works of Jomini dominated studies of strategy and tactics.⁴

Christopher Bassford in his book Clausewitz in English details the transmission of Clausewitz's ideas to the United States before the Civil War. Bassford finds Clausewitz "present but not accounted for." Present, in that some of Clausewitz's articles had been translated, not accounted for in that his ideas remained largely unknown, unexamined or misunderstood.⁵

Grant throughout his career never relied on any theoretical work or military manual. While most Civil War generals rode into battle with "a sword in one hand and Jomini in the other," Grant at least in the initial stages of the Vicksburg campaign, took only his toothbrush. When quizzed after the war about the theories of Jomini, Grant proved unequivocal: "He had never paid much attention to that authority."⁶ Grant's unconcerned, indirect rejection of prescriptive theory echoes Clausewitz's explicit rejection: "a positive doctrine is unattainable" and theory need not be a "*manual* for

⁴Azar Gat, Military Thought in the Nineteenth Century, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 18-23. Gat details the influence of Mahan and of Henry Halleck's translations of Jomini, all of which post-dated Grant's tenure at the academy. Gat finds Jomini's influence on all major Civil War generals pervasive, excepting U. S. Grant. James McPherson, Battle Cry of Freedom, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 331-32, questions the significance of Jominian influence on Civil War strategy, as Grant, "the most successful strategist of the war," never read Jomini. Grady McWhinney and Perry D. Jamieson, Attack and Die: Civil War Military Tactics and the Southern Heritage. (University: University of Alabama Press, 1982), 146-53, find the offensive tactics observed during the Mexican War of more importance than Jomini's writings or the teachings of Mahan at West Point. This debate further illustrates that no common doctrine existed. Bernard Brodie, "The Continuing Relevance of On War," in Carl von Clausewitz, On War, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 57.

⁵Christopher Bassford, Clausewitz in English, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) 35, 51. Halleck lists Clausewitz three times in bibliographies of his *Elements of Military Art and Science*, without ever identifying Clausewitz's central thesis or any discussion of his main ideas.

⁶J. D. Hittle, Jomini and his Summary of the Art of War, (Harrisburg, Pa.: Stackpole, 1947), 2; James Arnold, Grant Wins the War: Decision at Vicksburg, (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1997), 122. Coolidge, Grant, 54.

action.” For those seeking “rules” in theory to win wars or battles, Clausewitz directly offered, “rules are not only made for idiots, but are idiotic in themselves.”⁷

Some historians identify a positive advantage in Grant’s lack of book learning:

Had he been so primed he might have ended as another Halleck, his mind perplexed, bemuddled by the hopeless task of reconciling the principles of eighteenth-century geometric strategy with the conditions of the Civil War.⁸

This much said, it would be wrong to characterize Grant as anti-intellectual or uninformed. It is wrong to attribute his achievements to a lack of “study,” although this is demonstrative in a strictly academic sense, given West Point’s lack of formal instruction in strategy or doctrine. Grant “studied” in the actual environment of war and politics. Technical proficiency in handling the large bodies of troops engaged in the Civil War certainly could not have been gained from theory, from instructors at West Point, or from any existing military manual. Even less value could properly be ascribed to Clausewitz’s other substitute for experience, military history. No American ever led bodies of troops approaching the scale of even Grant’s early commands. Grant expressed his awareness of this in a letter to his sister well before his first success at Donelson. Grant pointed out that his army’s numbers surpassed those of Scott’s in the Mexican War.⁹

Sherman, in keeping with the thinking of the day, looked at war as discoverable science and questioned Grant’s familiarity with important works he believed necessary to

⁷Clausewitz, War, 140, 141, 184.

⁸ A. L. Conger, Rise of U. S. Grant, (New York: Century, 1931), 306.

⁹ GP 4: 96.

a successful commander. Sherman in March 1864 “confessed” his reservations with Grant himself:

My only points of doubt were as to your knowledge of grand strategy, and of books of science and history, but I confess your common sense seems to have supplied all this.¹⁰

Even tactical lessons, generally the area of the military art most accessible through books and manuals, provided only limited value: “A book cannot really teach us to do anything.” Changes in the battlefield environment due to advances in technology demonstrated their actual importance only through war itself. No one really solved the major tactical problem during the war on either side, regardless of using books, experience, or any innate creative genius as a guide.¹¹

Grant by his own account felt obliged, however briefly, to utilize Hardee’s manual on tactics. Hardee’s book superseded Scott’s instructions (poorly absorbed by Grant at West Point), but practical considerations soon demonstrated their own limited utility. Grant found Hardee “a mere translation from the French,” and soon abandoned the book in favor of practice. Grant explicitly states in his memoirs, “I never studied the tactics that I used.”¹²

Anticipation of the political dimension of war also presents an impossibility to “learning by the book.” The specific character of a war and the interplay of social and political factors within it defy prediction. Clausewitz’s trinitarian definition of war defines unpredictable political interaction within the country and parallel political

¹⁰ Sherman, Memoirs, I, 400; Joseph T. Glatthar, Partners in Command: The Relationships Between Leaders in the Civil War, (New York: Free Press, 1994), 143.

¹¹ Clausewitz, War, 148.

¹² Ulysses S. Grant, Personal Memoirs of U. S. Grant, (New York: Da Capo Press, 1952), 128-29. Grant ranked himself at the bottom of his class in tactics and drill.

interaction within the army itself. Domestic politics also conditions and influences operations and defines policy. The war itself pushes all of these political actors, constantly creating new and unpredictable political imperatives and relationships. Uncertainty in the time before the Civil War existed in the extreme. As it fractured American society and the country itself, it also fractured the army. No one anticipated such extremes, the extent of Southern resolve or the scale of effort required to overcome it. It is not surprising soldiers within the army neglected to “wargame” a scenario accounting for such events.

Napoleon’s example existed, unique in its own extremity of context, and character, and inapplicable to American practice. Whatever technically one could learn from the example of Napoleon about commanding large armies, his integration of the political and military leadership in one man makes his model’s relevance to a democratic country unconvincing. Arguably the “Age of Battles,” in which a single engagement often decided major issues in major wars, ended with Napoleon, though generals North and South sought such decision early in the conflict.¹³

The example of the Great Napoleon provided only limited utility for Grant and other observers, given the particular conditions of a democratic America. De Tocqueville, alluded to the contrast between the democratic method of making war and the more formal monarchical European system:

Great generals are always sure to spring up. A long war produces upon a democratic army the same effects that revolution produces upon a

¹³ Russell Weigley, The Age of Battles: The Quest for Decisive Warfare from Breitenfeld to Waterloo, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), xii-xiii, questions if such battles historically actually achieved the decisive results attributed to them. Clausewitz finds examples of such decisiveness, but points out that in most wars “destruction tends to be a gradual process,” as the political object “can no longer be achieved by a single tremendous act of war” see Clausewitz, War, 91, 227.

people; it breaks through regulations and allows extraordinary men to rise above the common level.¹⁴

De Tocqueville's observation seems applicable to the rise of U. S. Grant, whose story developed along lines inconceivable in a monarchical system. Grant, speaking after the war, attributed Napoleon's success to "making war in his own way," putting him in a category apart from his changeless opponents. The same could be said of Grant himself, whose uniqueness as a military man grew out of his democratic experience.¹⁵

Grant also weighed in on the inapplicability of any doctrine (especially European) in an American context:

I don't underrate the value of military knowledge, but if men make war in slavish observances of rules, they will fail. No rules will apply to conditions of war as different as those which exist in Europe and America¹⁶

Grant understood the limits to theory and devised his own method of study and learning. This preference for experience over formal learning reinforces Grant's reputation as a practical man. Benefits may accrue from high standing in one's class at West Point and familiarity with books of military history, but they never supply adequate information about war, each unique in character and each with its own "rules." From these practical lessons, "and every engagement was a lesson, and not merely a victory or a defeat—he built up his art of war." Grant, with no theoretical models to fall back on,

¹⁴ Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America, (New York: Knopf 1945), 2:278.

¹⁵ Grant may have studied more than is commonly believed. Long after the war Grant extemporaneously treated his companions to a detailed description of "all of Napoleon's campaigns, from Marengo down to Leipsic, speaking of each battle in a most minute matter—as thoroughly learned as a problem in mathematics." The "lecture" purportedly then reached back to the wars of Frederick the Great, the campaigns of the Thirty Years War and those of Julius Caesar. This surprised his listeners, who rarely heard Grant speak on the art of war, "a subject to which he had an aversion." See J. F. C. Fuller, Grant and Lee: A Study in Personality and Generalship, (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1957), 67-68.

¹⁶Young, World, II: 352-3.

looked to his own logic and experience as a teacher, as “every war I knew anything about had made laws for itself.”¹⁷

Jomini and the American Civil War

Pity the soldier who is supposed to crawl among these scraps of rules, not good enough for genius, which genius can ignore or laugh at—Clausewitz

He appears to have been his own law, his text book being the war itself—J. F. C. Fuller¹⁸

There is a trend among scholars to see Jomini and Clausewitz as polar opposites. Some use the terms Clausewitzian or Jominian as epithets. In fact some congruence exists in their respective theories. Michael Handel finds them “mostly in agreement on the fundamental issues.”¹⁹ Jomini “borrowed” extensively from On War in his later work, leading some to identify a parallelism in their approach. The two theorists read each other’s works, shared personal experience in the Napoleonic wars and a common interest in the wars of Frederick the Great. Despite these commonalities each theorist enjoys very different receptions by many observers.²⁰

Closer examination of Jomini may tend to “rehabilitate” his work, especially if one looks at the more mature thinker of The Summary of the Art of War rather than his less

¹⁷ Fuller, Personality, 82.

¹⁸ Clausewitz, 136. This is an oblique reference by Clausewitz to Jomini’s synthetic rules, which are “absolutely useless.” J. F. C. Fuller, The Generalship of Ulysses S. Grant, (New York: Da Capo Press, 1929), 185.

¹⁹ Michael I. Handel, Masters of War: Classical Strategic Thought, (Portland: Frank Cass, 1996), 3.

²⁰ Christopher Bassford, “Jomini and Clausewitz: Their Interaction,” Consortium on Revolutionary Europe, 1750-1850: Proceedings. 22 (February, 1993), discusses some of the points of similarity and details reasons for their very different receptions.

sophisticated (and less Clausewitzian) early works.²¹ Others remain less forgiving. John Shy finds a basic flaw in Jomini's commitment to "reductionism and prescription." For our purposes the key is his reception among all of the leading generals of the Civil War. If Clausewitz is right and the purpose of theory is to "train one's mind," then the mode of thinking of the Jominians, however misguided when tested against Jomini's actual writings, provides a proper focus of study. Jomini "by isolating strategy from its political and social context," helped train the minds of Civil War soldiers to separate the political and military aspects of conflict, "a mode of thinking about war that continues to haunt us."²²

George McClellan, writing in the periodical Galaxy in 1869, illustrates his esteem for the French theorist (shared by nearly all Civil War generals) through his statement:

Jomini was the ablest of military writers, and the first author in any age who gathered from the campaigns of the greatest general (i.e. Napoleon), the true principles of war and expressed them in clear and intelligible language."²³

Reliance on theory derivative of French experience is understandable given the towering, almost transcendent figure of Napoleon. Because of this focus on Napoleon, soldiers who valued theory found themselves dependent on 18th century models, already

²¹ Bassford points out Jomini clearly benefited from his reading of Clausewitz. After Clausewitz's death Jomini added and emphasized a "sixth and essential branch" to his Summary of the Art of War, "*Diplomacy in its relation to war*," after reading On War. Jomini suggests considering statesmanship, strategy, grand tactics and logistics in combination and effectively promotes the political origins of a war and concedes "different kinds of war influence in some degree the nature and extent of the efforts and operations necessary for the proposed end." Jomini, Art, 11-12. Civil War soldiers generally relied on translations and condensations of his earlier works.

²² An overriding characteristic of Jomini's writings, when viewed as a whole, is their inconsistency and ambiguity. See John Shy, "Jomini," in Peter Paret ed. The Makers of Modern Strategy, (Princeton: Princeton University Press) 143-185 who identifies four major weaknesses in Jomini's work.

²³Department of Military Art and Engineering, USMA, Jomini, Clausewitz and Schlieffen, (New York: West Point, 1954), 2.

carried to their logical extreme and already exhausted by the emperor himself. Innovative and original in his own time (Clausewitz described Napoleon as “the god of war himself”) by the end of his career generals such as Blucher and Wellington to a great extent also “discovered” the Napoleonic method and developed effective counters to it.²⁴

Jomini’s interpretation of the Napoleonic wars rejected historical and social context in the interest of constructing a “scientific” theory, true for all times and circumstances.²⁵ In doing so he left unanalyzed the forces of political revolution driving Napoleon’s military revolution. The revolutionary context clearly could not be duplicated in other wars. The politics of the revolution stimulated and drove many of the tactical innovations present in French arms (such as attacking in column instead of line). In Jomini’s defense, the political concerns of his decidedly unrevolutionary masters limited his ability to praise openly or even acknowledge the revolutionary origins of Napoleon’s triumphs.²⁶

Clausewitz again provides the contrast, finding French success directly attributable to the effects of the revolution. Since Bonaparte, war

Again became the concern of the people as a whole, took on an entirely different character, or rather closely approached its true character, its absolute perfection. Their seemed no end to the resources mobilized.²⁷

²⁴ David Chandler, *The Campaigns of Napoleon*, (New York: Macmillan Company, 1966), believes Napoleon purposely declined to impart in any systematic way his methods, even to his own marshals, in order to maintain his own supremacy.

²⁵ Shy, “Jomini,” 143-185 is the best evaluation of Jominian theory to date. See especially p. 144-146.

²⁶ See Gunther E. Rothenberg, *The Art of Warfare in the Age of Napoleon*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), 15 and Vagt’s, *Militarism*, 115 for descriptions of the revolutionary origins of French Revolutionary tactics.

²⁷ Clausewitz, *War*, 515.

Jomini also rejected the idea that changes in technology materially affected his conclusions in Summary of the Art of War. Evidence of some of the power of the rifled musket, the explosive artillery shell, and armored warships emerged during the Crimean War. Jomini observed these exponential changes in battlefield lethality but found no reason to change his conclusions: “This contest cannot influence in respect the great combinations of war, nor even the tactics of battles.”²⁸

Civil War soldiers relying on an interpretation of war devoid of the dynamics of history, politics, or changing technology suffered. Application of Jominian methods in a changing, real-world environment also largely failed. An obsession with “interior lines,” “geographic movement points,” or any of Jomini’s other mathematical/theoretical pseudo scientific constructs impeded prosecution of the war. Removal of historical and political context from theory produced a similar disconnect in the military strategy pursued early in the war. This represents less an explicit act on the part of Civil War generals than a reflection of a particular method of thinking peculiar to this time.

Strategy does not represent a solvable mathematical equation or engineering problem. Most Civil War generals attempted to a greater or lesser extent to make it so. The campaigns of generals with the “slows,” McClellan, Halleck, Rosecrans, and, later in the war, Thomas, reflect this method of thinking. Each planned and waited for the ideal situation, the last delivery of troops or supplies, until the events of war, or opportunity, had passed them by. Each sought to apply a mechanistic formula and meet specific

²⁸ Edward Hagerman, The American Civil War and the Origins of Modern Warfare, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 18. Jomini also predicted the extensive use of fortifications at Sevastapol were an aberration that would not be repeated. While no modern writer uses Jominian theory to explain or understand nuclear combat or modern terror techniques Clausewitz remains applicable. See Major Frank Sobchak, “Clausewitz: ‘On Afghanistan,’” Military Review 85 (2005): 89-91, enumerable books and articles exist on Clausewitz and nuclear weapons. See Brodie, Missile, and Richard Lebow “Clausewitz and Nuclear Crisis Stability,” Political Science Quarterly, 103 (Spring, 1988): 81-110, for example.

material or geographic conditions before acting, often divorced from real-world political and military needs and considerations.

Bruce Catton sums up this syndrome, which applied to Halleck's defective "lost opportunity" strategy pursued in the West after Shiloh. Instead of fighting, Halleck fortified strategic points, occupied territory and obsessed over questions of supply:

The books from which he had gained his strategic wisdom had somehow failed to teach him that the destruction of the last sizable Confederate army in the West would solve all of those problems for him.²⁹

Occupation of Corinth followed victory at Shiloh, the Navy seized New Orleans, destroyed Confederate naval units and Memphis fell. Instead of uniting his forces and destroying Beauregard (soon replaced by Bragg), Halleck consolidated his gains, and pondered the occupation of "key" cities and territory. Distracted by guerillas, logistics and administration, he repaired railroads, dispersed his forces and in so doing forgot to make war. No decisive battle in the West occurred, leaving the Confederates free to refit, raid union communications, and fortify the Mississippi.

Different in context and content, but no less indicative of "linear" thinking is the case of George Thomas. As well as seeking the perfect plan, he also sought the perfect instrument to achieve his goals. Colonel Henry Stone of Thomas's staff admiringly said of Thomas: "He realized too keenly the importance of victory to allow anything that might secure it to be neglected." Stone betrays his own and Thomas's lack of understanding of the true purpose of battle, stating, "compared with the destruction of Hood's army nothing else was of any account." However desirable "victory" in battle and the destruction of Hood's army, destruction in and of itself guarantees nothing. Grant's

²⁹ Bruce Catton, Grant Moves South, (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1960), 278.

strategy required Thomas's army be unleashed in the interior of the Confederacy *ala* Sherman, and required it as rapidly as possible.³⁰

After interminable delays to re-equip (especially his cavalry) Thomas did deliver a crushing tactical victory at Nashville, completely wrecking Hood's army. This carefully orchestrated and technically well-organized demolition of Hood reaped no commensurate strategic advantage. Sherman out-maneuvered Hood, or rather Hood out-maneuvered himself strategically, months before his actual destruction. The strategic construct designed by Grant and Sherman rendered both Thomas and Hood almost moot to the course of the war before their battle took place. Hood accomplished his own irrelevance by moving North rather than continuing to confront Sherman. Hood mistakenly waited at Nashville for his own demolition while Thomas re-equipped. Certainly his self-destructive assault at Franklin achieved results far beyond those Thomas could have inflicted offensively in the same time-period. Thomas's continued delays allowed Hood time to fortify, requiring yet more delays to ensure the success of the set-piece battle he desired. If Hood moved north or merely stepped back from Nashville the set-piece process must necessarily start over. Stanton remarked to Grant of his and Lincoln's concerns: "This looks like the McClellan and Rosecrans strategy of do nothing and let the rebels raid the country."³¹

After Nashville, Thomas true to form, wanted to wait until spring to pursue Hood's shattered army—by that time Sherman and Grant obviously would have won the war, rendering Thomas completely irrelevant. Responsibility for the final victory of Northern arms in any case devolves principally to Sherman and Grant. Thomas's

³⁰ Fuller, *Generalship*, 327.

³¹ Hattaway and Jones, *How*, 649.

reluctance to act ensured he played no part in the final dismemberment of the Confederacy. Grant found him “too ponderous in his preparations and equipments to move through a country rapidly enough to live off it,” in the manner of Sherman or Sheridan. Though an excellent tactician and fighter, he failed to tailor those excellent tactics to Grant’s overall strategy to win the war. Thomas, in J. F. C. Fuller’s correct estimation, strategically remained “a man of parochial vision.”³²

On the Confederate side Joe Johnston’s performance before Atlanta illustrates a similar manner of thinking. Politically Atlanta required a great battle. Johnston through his own inaction lost command to the reckless Hood. Johnston’s perpetual search for the perfect tactical opportunity for an attack on Sherman proved unrealistic. Unaware of or unresponsive to the political needs of his nation, his strategy failed to serve effectively the cause of Southern independence. Grant after the war identified Johnston’s “Fabian” strategy as the correct one. His removal due to political miscalculation left Johnston without a command to pursue that correct strategy.³³

³² Fuller, Generalship, 337, 168. GP 13: 273. Hattaway and Jones, How, 653 find that Hood “completed the destruction of his own army” by moving North and through ill-advised assaults on Northern entrenchments. Hattaway and Jones include an admiring evaluation of Thomas, focusing on his tactical achievements. Marszalek, Commander, 216. McPherson, Trial, 252. Thomas enjoys an undeserved reputation for greatness among many Civil War historians. Parish, American, 483, offers the following evaluation of Thomas at Nashville: “he came nearer than any other general in the Civil War to the complete destruction of an opposing army,” apparently forgetting Grant’s total destruction of Confederate armies at Donelson, Vicksburg and Appomattox. Geoffrey Perret, A Country Made by War, (New York: Random House, 1989), 248, 251, goes even farther, saying of 60 major battles only Thomas “pulled off what no other army commander achieved in the Civil War—the battle of annihilation.” McPherson, Cry, 815, reports that upon Hood’s resignation about half of his original 40,000 men remained. Many of the “annihilated” 20,000 served with Johnston upon his recall to command.

³³ Some critics disagree on Johnston’s intentions. Russel Weigley, A Great Civil War, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 363, believes Johnston understood politically that Atlanta required a battle and planned to fight one. Grant’s own well-known assessment of Johnston’s strategy as essentially correct is hard to refute, except for its divorcement from Confederate political reality. See Grant, Memoirs, 482-483. Clausewitz’s history of Napoleon’s Russian campaign on this point is instructive. A pointless diversion from the correct Russian strategy of retreat and attrition, “Kutusov would certainly not have fought the battle of Borodino, which he probably did not expect to win, if it had not been pressed upon him by the court, the army and the whole country.” Borodino represented a political necessity, given the

Grant summed up these generals who, “were working out problems of an ideal character, problems that would have looked well on a blackboard.”³⁴ Neglecting the practical and the essential, they floundered on both the military and political imperatives of the war that did not conform to their textbook solutions. Grant echoes Lincoln, who in 1864 told Grant:

That while the armies were sitting down waiting for opportunities to turn up which might, perhaps, be more favorable from a strictly military point of view, the government was spending millions of dollars every day; that there was a limit to the sinews of war, and a time might be reached when the spirits and resources of the people would become exhausted.

In this Lincoln demonstrates his understanding of Southern strategy, the limits of Northern political capital, and the necessity to link military action to its political consequences. Delay served Southern strategy, however unfavorable an individual Northern army’s material or tactical circumstance. Grant, using the example of his Vicksburg campaign, expressed the futility of waging war divorced from its political context or according to rules or maxims divined by past theorists:

If the Vicksburg campaign meant anything, in a military point of view, it was that there are no fixed laws of war, which are not subject to the conditions of the country, the climate, and the habits of the people. The laws of successful war in one generation would insure defeat in another.³⁵

significance of the “great prize (Moscow)” Napoleon acquired as its result. A correct strategy requires great finesse and political sensitivity in its application. Johnston at best failed to communicate to his government his intention to risk his army in a battle for the great prize of Atlanta. Carl von Clausewitz, *Historical and Political Writings*, Peter Paret, ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 141.

³⁴ Young, *World*, II:352-3

³⁵ *Ibid*, 625.

Grant broadly includes “the conditions of the country” and “habits of the people,” thinking in terms similar to Clausewitz’s definition of policy as “all interests of the community.”

Clausewitz also expressed familiarity with generals seeking the “fixed laws of war” identified by Grant. His critique of both von Bulow and of Jomini points out the pitfalls of their methodology, dependent on mathematical or scientific thinking and form. Such generals operated with “scraps of rules . . . idiotic in themselves . . . divorced from moral values.”³⁶ Grant succeeded in part through his ability to think in ways not taught at West Point. Unlike mathematics, engineering and other subjects at “The Point,” in strategy and in war there is no quantifiable “right” answer.

The applicability of the “theoretical” Jomini to real life problems exists. A Prussian officer reported Jomini’s advice to the Tsar during the Dresden campaign in 1813 completely impractical, to the point that “no one ever took him seriously again.” Clausewitz critiqued (from his own personal knowledge) officers in the 1812 campaign in Russia, “lost in the most recent ideas of all, those of Jomini,” who never thought things through for themselves.³⁷

T. Harry Williams is correct in his assessment of Jomini’s thinking, and by implication that of his many disciples:

In attempting to introduce rationality and rules into war, he deflected attention from its violent nature and made it seem like a game or

³⁶ Clausewitz, War, 135-136, see Clausewitz’s Carl von Bulow essay and also, 134-140 for a description and critique of prescriptive doctrine and Jominian style of thinking about war. See 184 for the absurdity of quantifying or divining rules to govern psychological factors of spirit or will.

³⁷ Gordan A. Craig, “Problems of Coalition Warfare: The Military Alliance Against Napoleon, 1813-1814,” in Harry R. Borowski ed., The Harmon Memoiral Lectures in Military History, 1959-1987, (Washington, D. C: Office of Air Force History, 1988), 329. Clausewitz, Historical, 134.

a geometric exercise, in which maneuver became more important than battle.³⁸

Grant, unlike Sherman, never looked at war as a game. Brooks Simpson carefully documents Grant's abhorrence of war.³⁹ We will speculate that Robert E. Lee surely enjoyed the "game" element in war; he certainly was good at it. Lee continually formulated and executed brilliant tactical combinations. He repeatedly outthought, outfought, outmaneuvered, and disoriented "those people," comprising the Northern enemy. In an oft-quoted observation after Fredericksburg, Lee identified a potential "fondness" for war. The "gamesman" in Lee felt elation, pride and redemption after a successful battle. The moral man in Lee understood those feelings to be inappropriate.⁴⁰ If Grant experienced a similar exhilaration in victory, it is certainly not reflected in his simple dispatch after Appomattox:

Gen. Lee surrendered the Army of Northern Va this afternoon on terms proposed by myself. The accompanying correspondence will show the conditions fully.⁴¹

Jomini looked at war, held it aloof from the real world, and "found" an ideal he believed applicable for all time. Clausewitz looked at ideal war, unlimited and perfect in conception, removed it from perfection and found a grim and complex reality. Clausewitz describes absolute war, or war in abstract, with no logical reason existing to limit the scale of violence applied in order to secure

³⁸ T. Harry Williams, "The Return of Jomini—Some thoughts on Recent Civil War Writing," *Military Affairs*, v.9 No.4 (December, 1975): 204.

³⁹ Brooks Simpson, *Ulysses S. Grant: Triumph over Adversity, 1822-1865*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000), 528, includes 20 different references to Grant's personal reactions to the brutality of war.

⁴⁰ McPhearson, *Cry*, 572.

⁴¹ Grant, *Memoirs*, 559.

victory. All commanders should keep the concept of absolute war in mind in determining a war's purpose and the appropriateness of means used to achieve that purpose.⁴²

In last quarter of the 20th century, the authors of U. S. Army and Marine Corps manuals codified modern doctrine. Stimulated by defeat in Vietnam and rediscovery of Clausewitz, Army manual Fm-105 and the Marine's DP1-1, *Warfighting* and MCDP 1-2, *Strategy*, are an "easily readable distillation" of Clausewitz's On War. Current doctrine seeks to convey "a more realistic, fluid, organic understanding of the environment (in this case the political context) in which war occurs. The authors emphasize the "nonlinear" nature of war, citing the Clausewitzian trinity and ecological and biological systems as the models most applicable to the understanding of war. Clearly absent from modern doctrine (if not from practice) are the mathematical models, maxims, and obsession with tactics relied on by Vietnam era and Civil War soldiers."⁴³

Civil War historians in their use and examinations of theory and its application make many of the same mistakes made by the generals of the era. T. Harry Williams and David Donald rightly discovered some of the reasons for Federal strategic misfires in Jominian thinking. They suggested that the Civil War "approached Clausewitz's concept of total war," and derided those generals wedded to maneuver and avoidance of battle. While admittedly not endorsing Clausewitz explicitly, in "disposing of Jomini," they perhaps suggest Clausewitz offers a different and better approach to strategy.

⁴² Clausewitz, War, 579.

⁴³ Christopher Bassford, "Nonlinearity in Marine Corps Doctrine," in F. G. Hoffman and Gary Horne, eds., Maneuver Warfare Science, (United States Marine Corps Combat Development Command, 1998) and Alan Beyerchen, "Clausewitz, Nonlinearity, and the Unpredictability of War," International Security 17 no. 93 (Winter, 1992): 59-90.

Clausewitz's strategy is described as "modern" (though he wrote at the same time using the same examples of Frederick and Napoleon), and "total" (Clausewitz uses the term absolute, in a different context). As Northern strategy evolved, it more closely resembled their interpretation of Clausewitz's strategy.⁴⁴

This is "true," but also inaccurate. Clausewitz advocates no strategy. He may be applicable to "modern" wars, but he is not any more modern, per se, than Jomini. He has no "concept of total war," (other than his historical description of Napoleon) and his concept of absolute war represents an ideal unobtainable in real life. For Clausewitz, all wars exist somewhere on a continuum between wars designed to lead to the total defeat of the enemy, suggested by the Napoleonic Wars, and wars for distinctly limited objectives, suggested by Frederick the Great's conquest of Silesia. Clausewitz advocates nothing other than a matching of political ends to an appropriate military means. Williams haphazardly quotes "principles" and uses them in a manner similar to the Jominians he critiques. Grant neglected "the principle of precaution" at Shiloh and "violated the strategic principle of doing one big thing at a time" in his plans for Mobile and Chattanooga. The source of these "principles" (questionable at best) remains unattributed.⁴⁵

Like the McClellans and Hallecks, Donald and Williams ascribe to theory a purpose prescriptive or predictive. If Northern generals suffered from reliance on the outdated and imperfect strategy of Jomini, then they by implication would have benefited

⁴⁴ Williams, "Return," 205, see also David Donald, "Refighting the Civil War," in David Donald ed. Lincoln Reconsidered: Essays on the Civil War Era, (New York: 1956), 88-102.

⁴⁵ Clausewitz, War, 617-637 for wars designed to totally defeat and enemy and 611-613 for wars for a limited aim, both offensive and defensive. T. Harry Williams, Lincoln and His Generals, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1952), 295, 312.

from a better, more modern strategy. If they don't explicitly identify Clausewitz as a possible model, they identify no other military thinker, contemporary to Jomini or otherwise.

Archer Jones travels even further down this road, informing us which individual campaign decisions “violated Jominian rules,” and why Jackson’s Valley campaign is “fully in harmony with Jomini’s principles.” Jones searches Civil War operational history for “interior lines,” and “dispersions in cordons,” enlightening us as to which operations are “in consonance with Jomini.” In a manner similar to Civil War generals, Jones looks for the rules, who broke them, and which generals devised perfect solutions to Civil War operational and strategic problems. Jones concludes the “North won (with minor deviations) through using Jomini’s prescription for victory.” While all of this is interesting and contributes to our understanding of Jomini’s flawed system, it is also largely irrelevant. Absent from Jones’s analysis (as from Jomini’s) are the links between theory, the unique historical and political context of the Civil War and strategy, which render all predictive theory obsolete.⁴⁶

Jones, like many other Civil War authors, focuses excessively on the supposed advantage of “interior lines” or the advantage of the central position, in a similar manner to Jomini or his disciples Halleck and McClellan. Clausewitz, acknowledging the

⁴⁶ Archer Jones, “Jomini and the Strategy of the American Civil War, A Reinterpretation,” Military Affairs, 34 no. 4 (December, 1970): 128-129. See also Jones’ Civil War Command & Strategy: The Process of Victory and Defeat, (New York: Free Press, 1992), 256-259 and Richard E Beringer, Herman Hattaway, Archer Jones, and William N. Still, The Elements of Confederate Defeat: Nationalism, War Aims, and Religion, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1988). While Jones’ later works focus to a greater degree on policy they include application of many Jominian formulas, geometric and otherwise. Hattaway and Jones, How, 705-720.

existence of the concept, found no advantage *per se*, to occupying the central position; instead:

In both strategy and in tactics a convergent attack (by definition an attack on exterior lines in contravention of Jomini) always holds out promise of *increased* results for if it succeeds the enemy is not just beaten; he is virtually cut off.⁴⁷

Clausewitz defines a polarity between interior and exterior lines, but typically regards the value of all such constructs as dependent on political context. Identifying such purely geographical functions as some key to achieve victory (or explain it) defines an absurdity. A Clausewitzian finds a Jominian war of limited risk and maneuver, paying strict attention to lines of communication, interior lines and place objectives perfectly appropriate and proper if the goals of policy warrant it. “The object,” in Clausewitz’s estimation, “may be thought of in numerous gradations, from the conquest of a whole country to that of an insignificant hamlet.” Civil war and secession constituted revolution and its defense or destruction required positive and equally revolutionary action. Lincoln’s intuitional understanding of the links between political context and military acts are evident from statements he made in December of 1861: “I have been anxious that the inevitable conflict for this purpose shall not degenerate into a violent and remorseless revolutionary conflict.” War exists on a spectrum for Lincoln from more “normal,” somewhat limited, forms of war, to “remorseless revolutionary conflict.” Time and the progress of the war itself, demonstrated to Lincoln the degree of conflict required to serve policy. By July of the following year, Lincoln’s awareness of that degree is

⁴⁷ Clausewitz, War, 619.

evident. No longer would the North fight, “with elder-stalk squirts charged with rose water.”⁴⁸

The historians, like the generals, often approach the war according to mediocre and imperfect understandings of theory and its purpose. While criticism (or rehabilitation) of Jomini might be in order, Civil War historians dealing with theory generally develop no clear relationship either between theory and the practice of war or theory and practice of writing of history. Historians typically offer at best a few quotations, taken out of context and irrelevant to theory as a whole to provide support for some minor point regardless of the true spirit and substance of Clausewitz’s thought. If one agrees with Clausewitz that narrative history does something other than critique, then this is surely understandable. While valid theory requires “testing” by history, the narrative history produced by most historians need pass no similar test.⁴⁹

An incident toward the end of Clausewitz’s life illustrates the limitations of theory, the futility of the prescriptive view and Clausewitz’s historicism. Asked to respond to a staff exercise regarding a hypothetical Austrian invasion of Prussia, Clausewitz did so at length and critically. He responded not so much to the subject of the exercise, but to the absurdity of the problem itself, which asked for strategic evaluation without historical or political context:

⁴⁸ Clausewitz, War, 526. McPherson, Trial, 86, 106.

⁴⁹ For two typical examples see Charles P. Roland, “The Generalship of Robert E. Lee,” in Grady McWhiney, ed. Grant Lee, Lincoln and the Radicals, (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), 41-71 and Gary W. Gallager, “Reconsidering Lee’s Revisionists,” Columbiad vol. 4 no. 1, (Spring 2000): 122-136. Both use the same quotation, “Happy is the army in which an untimely boldness frequently manifests itself,” in praise of Lee’s courage and audacity on the battlefield, ignoring the essence of Clausewitz’s argument. Clausewitz distinguishes between battlefield courage (largely tactical and more common) and the moral courage required for strategy. Strategic courage may just as well require restraint as the example of Frederick illustrates. Boldness is “a matter of energetically supporting that higher form of analysis by which genius arrives at a decision.” Clausewitz, War, 190-92, 179-80.

There can be no question of a *purely military* evaluation of a great strategic issue, nor of a purely military scheme to solve it. *War is the continuation of political efforts by other means*. In my view all of strategy rests on this idea, and I believe that whoever refuses to recognize that this must be so does not yet fully understand what really matters. It is this principle that makes the entire history of war comprehensible, which in its absence remains full of the greatest absurdities. How then is it possible to plan a campaign whether for one theater of war or several, without indicating the political condition of the belligerents, and the politics of their relationship to each other?⁵⁰

Like the staff exercise above, Civil War writing describing military events, tactics and strategy without political context as Clausewitz suggests, defines an absurdity. Such accounts render themselves and “the entire history of war” incomprehensible.

Grant, Lee, and the Ghost of Napoleon

He was given to rhapsodies upon both the emperor’s genius and the climactic Napoleonic battle of annihilation—Russel Weigly on Dennis Hart Mahan.

They were always thinking about what Napoleon would do—Grant ⁵¹

Azar Gat, in his book Military Thought in the Nineteenth Century finds Jomini’s influence on all major Civil War generals pervasive, with the exception of “the very mediocre student,” U. S. Grant. Given this we must look for distinct and comprehensible contrasts in the way Grant waged war and the methods of the Jominians. The first distinct divergence involves the formal use of theory and the methods used in its development. While the “intellectual” generals enjoyed differing measures of success,

⁵⁰ Paret, Understanding, 127.

⁵¹ Basil Liddel Hart used the term “Ghost of Napoleon” in his misidentification of Clausewitz as a proponent of total war. The “Ghost of Napoleon,” via Clausewitz, haunted World War I era soldiers, resulting in the slaughter of the trenches. The example of Napoleon directly affected Civil War soldiers. Grant, Memoirs, 186-87: Russel Weigly, The American Way of War, (New York: Macmillan, 1973), 89, describing West Point’s influential instructor before the Civil War. Young, World, II: 352-3.

Grant surpassed them all. His reliance on experience over formal theory, which he never regarded as a necessity, proved superior. Perhaps only Robert E. Lee in the same era truly transcended theory. His thorough knowledge of the “rules” allowed him to break them and flummox his predictable opponents, though his successes remained largely tactical and therefore transitory. Lee smashed each successive army (and of more importance, each successive commander’s will) but Northern political resolve built new armies and found new commanders.

Professor Mahan reigned as president of the Napoleon Club at West Point; McClellan proved an enthusiastic member. Mahan’s legacy defines a contradiction. While battles of annihilation characterize Napoleonic warfare, Mahan exhibited reservations regarding the massive frontal assaults the Emperor required to achieve decisive results: “for the attainment of his ends on the battlefield he has shown a culpable disregard of the soldier’s blood, and has often pursued to excess his attack by masses.” Mahan also found such tactics unsuitable to American citizen soldiers, inadequately trained and disciplined, and altogether too democratic.⁵²

Grant and Lee did not “need” a Jomini or membership in the Napoleon Club at West Point to fight their battles. Many other soldiers enjoyed these or similar experiences and failed at the art of command in the Civil War. Lee’s perception of war, and perhaps his understanding of Jomini reached a greater depth than his fellows. More correctly Lee is truly Napoleonic rather than Jominian. Lee, like the younger Napoleon, was innovative. Napoleonic campaigns, studied in abstract, represented an ideal, not a

⁵² Hagerman, Origins, 8-10 provides a detailed analysis of Mahan’s beliefs and influence.

prescription. Lee's Napoleon taught boldness, surprise and unorthodoxy, not textbook application of a set of rules, even his own.⁵³

Technical innovation confronted Lee with an unsolvable tactical problem. The increased firepower apparent in the Crimea, which Jomini acknowledged but found of little consequence to theory, destroyed Napoleonic style warfare forever. Civil War technology existed in a curious state of imbalance—the rifled musket and rifled artillery with explosive shells greatly increased the power of the defense, with no corresponding advances that favored the offensive (no effective fused artillery shells and few indirect fire weapons). No new weapons or tactics emerged to replace the mass and shock of the Napoleonic infantry attack, rendered obsolete by the range and firepower of the new rifles and artillery. Civil War generals discovered no way to replicate the Napoleonic battlefield, where artillery blasted huge holes in an enemy's line until the shock of an infantry attack on the weakened sections generally broke the cohesion of Napoleon's opponents. This method resulted in the destruction (morally if not physically) of entire armies and often generated decisive political results from a single battle.

The rifled musket, devastating to the massed infantry assault, also proved decisive in suppressing the offensive use of artillery. Attempts to close to shorter ranges in the manner of Napoleon's horse artillery left the guns vulnerable. If entrenched to avoid vulnerability, defenders will have time to entrench also. Unless artillery can catch troops in the open it will be much less effective, firing from long range to avoid rifle fire. All of these factors also affected turning movements, another staple of Napoleonic warfare. Great difficulties arose in sustaining the momentum of a successful flank attack as a

⁵³ McFeely, Grant, 15. Grant did not join the Napoleon club.

relatively small group of disciplined troops could form a new front and slow the advance. Very few examples of decisive turning movements exist on Civil War battlefields.

Paradoxically, lethal rifle fire also limited the effectiveness of advances in artillery technology. While rifled cannon became standard during the course of the war and again out-ranged small arms, the increasingly universal use of entrenchments and fortifications mitigated its effects. The exploding shell also represented a great improvement over the cannon ball, but lack of effective fusing to ensure detonation over the now standard trenches rendered this new technology also indecisive.⁵⁴

Though the Frenchman's Art of War used the example of Napoleon in construction of his theory (as did Clausewitz), his attempts to define a purely scientific method of waging war failed in several respects. Lee avoided to a great degree, many of these failures. Lee never shrunk from risk: "Lee's strokes flashed like lightning" and his audacity rarely failed to bewilder and confuse his opponents.⁵⁵ While Lee mastered nearly all of his opponents on the battlefield itself, he shares with all Civil War generals, a conspicuous lack of innovation off the battlefield. No one developed new methods of command and control enabling the abandonment of the dense formations popular since Frederick. The "empty battlefield" of today is only possible through the use of the radio

⁵⁴ See Weigley, Great, 32-34, for a recent discussion of the tactical problems rendering Napoleonic warfare obsolete in the American context of the 1860's. See David Chandler, Campaigns, for the best description of the Napoleonic method. For a more detailed analysis of Civil War tactics with somewhat different conclusions see Paddy Griffith, Battle Tactics of the Civil War, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989) and McWhiney and Jamieson, Attack.

⁵⁵ Fuller, Personality, 266-67.

and other communications. Use of an “open” order was confined during the Civil War to only small percentages of the armies deployed as skirmishers.⁵⁶

All of this made any Napoleonic-style destruction of entire armies impossible. Lee, for all his greatness on the battlefield, never destroyed an army through his Napoleonic method. Able on most occasions to completely out-maneuver his opponents, he did not possess an instrument capable of producing the shock necessary to accomplish their destruction. He could “wreck” an army on the battlefield (sometimes his own), but he could not press one enough to destroy it. Lee’s search for the climactic battle, Napoleonic and war-winning in its effects, proved unrealizable.⁵⁷

Grant captured three armies during the war in contrast to all other Civil War generals, who captured none. This achievement came through the application of a combination of maneuver, conventional tactics, and siege warfare. Grant’s brilliance, in clear contrast to Lee, rarely found expression on the field of battle itself. Grant is decidedly un-Napoleonic in both his demeanor and his warfighting. Grant eschewed the complicated tactical combinations favored by Lee and Napoleon. Though he always sought destruction of enemy armies, which might be described as Napoleonic, the battle itself represented not the opportunity for such destruction, but rather the fulfillment of a strategic design. Unlike most commanders during the “Age of Battles,” Grant thought in terms of campaigns. Battle did not represent an end in itself, but only a link in a chain of

⁵⁶ Horace Porter, Campaigning With Grant, (New York: Century, 1906), 513, credits Grant with adoption of “a more open order of battle,” to mitigate the effects of recent advances in firepower, in contrast to the traditional European methods used by his peers. Few others credit Grant with any major tactical innovation. McWhiney and Jamieson, Attack, 100-01, details the difficulties in utilizing open-order deployments in the Civil War.

⁵⁷ Fuller, Personality, 192, finds the Army of Northern Virginia incapable of ever pressing an enemy to destruction through pursuit, due to Lee’s poor administrative abilities.

related events achieving a particular operational or strategic goal. Like Grant, Clausewitz, understood that every military act should target in some way the final political goal. Anything else becomes at best superfluous, at worst damaging to the war as a whole:

War cannot be divorced from political life; and when ever this occurs in our thinking about war, the many links that connect the two elements are destroyed and we are left with something pointless and devoid of sense.⁵⁸

Grant's turning movements (the only decisively successful ones of the war) were strategic rather than tactical. While Grant devised no great tactical innovation, and never solved the fundamental problems advancing technology created, he did find a way to capture armies and win wars. Beyond tactics and technology, beyond turning movements and capturing armies, lies policy. Serving policy constitutes the true reason for the existence of an army and for a General Grant. Making war serve policy constitutes the first duty of a soldier and Grant never divorced his actions from politics. Unlike many other Civil War commanders, Grant's actions were never "pointless and devoid of sense."

⁵⁸ Clausewitz, War, 605.

Chapter 7

Where Policy Meets Combat: Centers of Gravity, Friction, and Moral Forces in War

A strategy without a center of gravity is like a man without a character—Von Hindenburg

I never admired the character of the first Napoleon—Grant

Battle is a collision between two centers of gravity—Clausewitz¹

Apart from most Civil War soldiers' obsession with tactics and with Napoleon stands General Grant. Grant understood fighting serves a purpose; it is a means and not an end. Victory (or failure) on the battlefield does not define victory or defeat in the war. Grant's career includes a significant number of tactical reverses and Grant suffers when compared to Lee (and perhaps to others) as a tactician. It is testimony to Grant's strategic abilities that neither his own tactical limitations nor the failures of his subordinates derailed his strategic purposes. Grant proved superior to Lee in that he suffered multiple battlefield setbacks and yet ultimately prevailed. At Belmont an initial success ended with a Confederate counter-attack. At Shiloh and in the Wilderness Grant and his army endured vicious Southern attacks and experienced significantly greater damage than their opponents, yet both battles ultimately yielded considerable strategic advantages. At Fort Donalson, Grant's initial assault miscarried and Confederate attacks threatened to break the siege. Grant's Overland Campaign and the Siege of Petersburg included significant and

¹ Von Hindenburg's paraphrase of Clausewitz quoted in Paul Carell Hitler Moves East 1941-1943, (New York: Little Brown & Company, 1965), 283; Ulysses S. Grant, Personal Memoirs of U. S. Grant, (New York: Da Capo Press, 1952), 587; Carl von Clausewitz, On War (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 489.

bloody catastrophes, Cold Harbor and the Crater among them. Yet Grant's correct strategy, directed against Southern centers of gravity, conquered Lee's superior use of his superior instrument, the Army of Northern Virginia.

For Clausewitz, military action at every level must serve policy. Besting an enemy on the field is, of course, advantageous, but such victories may or may not serve policy or win wars. There are situations when fighting a battle (even a successful one) may in itself be counter productive. Clausewitz described this irony:

Strategy decides the time when, the place where, and the forces with which the engagement is to be fought. Once the tactical encounter has taken place and the result—be it victory or defeat—is assured, strategy will use it to serve the object of the war.²

Grant bests all other Civil War soldiers in using engagements, be they “victories” or “defeats,” for the object of war. The problem is a complex one. Defining policy at the point of bloodshed (the engagement) and coupling the engagement further to a campaign and multiple campaigns to the achievement of the object of war defines a further complexity. In order to provide some sort of guide to mastering such a problem Clausewitz uses the concept of the center of gravity. “The blind natural force of violence, hatred, and enmity among the masses of people,” Clausewitz identified in his trinitarian definition of war, requires direction. Policy defines the goal and soldiers struggle to achieve it through military action, through the use of the engagement. The difficulty lies in determining how killing, wounding, and capturing soldiers, occupying territory or even destroying armies creates significant “war winning” political change. Then as now, most soldiers and scholars fail to distinguish between two essentially distinct military acts, killing and victory. Understandably, a military success, in and of

² Clausewitz, War, 194.

itself, often generates great political change, but even a brief examination of the historical record reveals many exceptions to the “rule” that theory cannot ignore.³

Clausewitz begins by asking a simple question: “what exactly does ‘defeat’ signify?” In multiple examples from the Napoleonic and French Revolutionary wars, he illustrates the impossibility of an answer to his simple question. Instead, keeping the dominant characteristics of both belligerents in mind, “a certain center of gravity develops, the hub of all power and movement on which everything depends.” Defining the center of gravity defines the proper target of military operations, “the point against which all our energies should be directed.” Clausewitz suggests three rather obvious possibilities, derived from general experiences and typically qualifies each: Destruction of an enemy’s army, “*if it is at all significant*”; Seizure of his capital, “*if is not only the center of administration, but also that of social, professional and political activity*”; Defeat of a principle ally, “*if that ally is more powerful than he.*”⁴

From these qualifications, often ignored by battle-obsessed disciples of the master, Clausewitz implies cases when these three obvious objectives fail to constitute true centers of gravity. As historical and political circumstances differ in every conflict, centers of gravity differ also. Absent from the Clausewitz’s list of possible centers of gravity are the items obsessed over by Grant’s contemporaries; places (other than a capital, with qualifications), communications, position in an enemy’s flank or rear, and

³ William S. McFeely, *Grant: A Biography*, (New York: W. W. Norton, 1981), 78, credits Grant with a superior understanding of the simple notion that “to make war is to kill.” While “true,” Grant’s superiority stems from his ability to make something out of a battle beyond mere killing.

⁴ Clausewitz, *War*, 595-96. Controversy exists over the true meaning of these passages, given different translations of the original text and interpretations of the true definition of “center of gravity.” See for example Richard Iron. “What Clausewitz (really) meant by ‘Center of Gravity’,” *Defense Studies* 3 (Autumn 2001): 109-112.

most significantly no mention is made of attacking an enemy's weakness. Clausewitz contradicts the multitude of writers and soldiers who define the art of strategy as one of matching one's strength to an enemy's weakness (i.e., Liddell Hart's theory of indirect approach, Archer Jones's definition of strategy). Instead, "the victor, in other words, must strike with all his strength and not just against a fraction of the enemy's. Not by taking the easy way but by constantly seeking out the enemy's power."⁵

Grant always sought his enemy's power. Early in the war, soon after the battle of Belmont, Grant replied to a staff officer who in the best Jominian tradition advocated the use of maneuver directed at the enemy's rear to force Confederate abandonment of Columbus, Missouri:

Better to attack and capture the entire force where they are. Why allow them to withdraw and follow and fight them in the interior of Mississippi or Alabama under greater disadvantages?⁶

Grant's understanding mirrors Clausewitz's. Merely accomplishing the occupation of territory or places defines no accomplishment. "To occupy land before his armies are defeated should be considered a necessary evil." Such place objects constitute no enemy center of gravity, no source of enemy power and are therefore an irrelevance or liability to winning the war. "Offensive war requires above all a quick, irresistible decision," the occupation of territory or places constitutes a diversion.⁷

⁵Kenneth L. Davison, "Clausewitz and the Indirect Approach: Misreading the Master," Airpower Journal 39 (Winter, 1988): 42-52. Clausewitz, War, 596. Clausewitz of course understood that you could target power indirectly, and achieve positive results, even if no fighting actually occurs. Grant's North Carolina plan aimed at Lee's powerful army indirectly through its logistics. Sherman's marches later in the war also targeted Lee's power indirectly.

⁶ Geoffrey Perret, Ulysses S. Grant: Soldier and President, (New York: Random House, 1997.), 157.

⁷ Clausewitz, War, 92, 598-99.

Grant intuitively sought such irresistible decisions as he targeted enemy power, the decisive point rather than weakness for its own sake. Grant as a colonel sought his opposites' regiments; Grant as brigadier general sought his opposites' divisions; Grant as general-in-chief sought Lee's army, the moral underpinning of the rebellion. Grant's targeting extended beyond the material to Southern power morally and politically. Sherman's March demonstrated the inability of the Confederate government to protect its citizens and prevent the deprivation of its territory. Grant's contemporaries sought strategic points, geographic positions, interior lines, personal glory, political advancement, and other irrelevancies. Grant targeted his enemy's will. All centers of gravity by definition include in some way the will to resist. The war "cannot be considered to have ended so long as the enemy's *will* has not been broken." Even given the destruction of armies, the occupation of capitals and the laying waste of the countryside, "the weakest party must possess some way of making the enemy conscious of its presence, some means of threatening him."⁸

Clausewitz suggests a thought process, two "tasks" for the strategist and method descriptive of Grant's war-winning technique:

The first task, then, in planning for a war is to identify the enemy's centers of gravity, and if possible trace them back to a single one. The second task is to ensure that the forces to be used against that point are concentrated for the main offensive.⁹

Grant's planning conformed to Clausewitz's concept in its essentials. Sherman, using the term "true objective," remarked on Grant's method: "He fixes in his mind the true objective and abandons all minor ones." Grant struck at Lee's army directly and at the

⁸ Clausewitz, *War*, 90, 613.

⁹ *Ibid*, 619.

political life of the state indirectly through Sherman.¹⁰ Both operations targeted the same center of gravity, Southern political will to continue the war. With Lee's army pinned and worn down and Union columns roaming seemingly at will through Georgia and the Carolinas, few Confederates saw a means to continue the war effectively.

Clausewitz's description of a proper strategy to conquer Russia given its vast size (it cannot be formally occupied) seems applicable to the South in 1864-65: "Only internal weakness, only workings of disunity can bring a country of that kind to ruin. To strike at these weaknesses in its political life it is necessary to thrust into the heart of the state." Grant applied similar reasoning in plans for operations to close out the war. Grant advocated operations against Mobile (cancelled), Raleigh (cancelled), the Shenandoah Valley/Lynchburg (stillborn), Petersburg (stillborn), Meridian (executed), Georgia/South Carolina (executed) and the raids of Stoneman and Wilson (too late to be effective). While political constraints accomplished diversions from Grant's main offensives, Grant concentrated everything possible toward a single center of gravity. Bank's Red River expedition and especially Bank's fumbling in its execution prevented timely attacks on Mobile. Halleck and Lincoln rejected Grant's Raleigh plan, and incompetence and delays sabotaged other expeditions, but in the main, for the first time in the war, Union armies operated in concert "toward a common center."

Though not explicitly stated, in Clausewitz's formulation all centers of gravity are really political, even if they appear "military." If the "balance" of a center of gravity tips, political change accomplishing the aims of the war occurs. An army wrecked or destroyed often generates great political change; therefore, some of Clausewitz's quotations suggest

¹⁰ Gene Edward Smith, Grant, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), 15; Clausewitz, War, 627.

to some the pursuit of decisive battles of annihilation regardless of the political context. “Destruction of the enemy force is the overriding principle of war” and “the major battle is therefore to be regarded as concentrated war, as the center of gravity of the entire campaign.” These quotations from Book IV of On War deal with the engagement. Strategy, Clausewitz assumes, determined the centers of gravity and decided destruction of enemy forces appropriate to the character of the war. Clausewitz in this context defines the proper conduct of the engagement, not its use for strategy.¹¹

Further examples of possible centers of gravity illustrate the subtlety of Clausewitz’s thinking. In irregular war or “popular uprisings,” the center of gravity lies not in the “concentrated war” of climactic battle but in the rather mundane “personalities of the leaders and public opinion.” In the case of domestic strife, the capital generally constitutes the center of gravity. In an alliance the center of gravity lies in the community of interest. Understandably, in the cases of Alexander, Gustavus Adolphus, Charles the XII and Frederick the Great, the center of gravity resided with their armies. So the collision of centers of gravity, the “concentrated war” Clausewitz described, might take place through dissemination of ideological tracts (public opinion) or through covert actions (assassination of a personality) in the context of a popular uprising. Diverse groups may properly collide over possession of the seat of government to resolve civil strife, and alliances may dissolve as changes in power relationships change the community of interests. Also often in European history great issues may be decided by epic and annihilating clashes between great armies.¹²

¹¹ Clausewitz, War, 258.

¹² *Ibid*, 596.

Friction

Every war is rich in unique episodes. Each is an uncharted sea, full of reefs—Clausewitz

No operational plan extends with any certainty beyond the first encounter with the main body of the enemy—von Moltke

Everything in war is very simple, but the simplest thing is difficult—Clausewitz¹³

Clausewitz's statement "everything in war is very simple, but the simplest thing is difficult" introduces his concept of friction. A nineteenth-century version of "Murphy's law" or the popular W.W.II expression S.N.A.F.U., friction "distinguishes real war from war on paper." Clausewitz conceived war as part of the social relations of man. In war he perceived a vast military machine composed of individuals, individuals who invariably screw-up. Friction destroys the formulations of armchair generals who see only easy solutions. It also sabotages "scientific" formulations of war, as execution of any plan "always falls short of the intended goal."¹⁴

Grant recognized this concept and his military strategy (and personal equilibrium) dealt with it. Three of the five armies Grant set in motion in the spring of 1864 "fell short of the intended goal." Fully two-thirds of Grant's plan failed, a victim of friction whose "effects cannot be measured." Grant ultimately succeeded through application of Clausewitz's remedy: "Iron willpower can overcome this friction; it pulverizes every

¹³ Clausewitz, War, 119,120. Helmuth von Moltke, quoted in William A. Cohen, Wisdom of the Generals, (Prentice Hall Press: Paramus, 2001), 117.

¹⁴Clausewitz, War, 119.

obstacle, but of course it wears down the machine as well.”¹⁵ J. F. C. Fuller could have included Sigel and Banks in his description of the danger to Grant due to friction:

Grant’s subordinates missed opportunity after opportunity, Butler, Smith, Meade and Sheridan, each in turn failed to take advantage of circumstances which seldom occur in war, until at length Grant’s strategy was almost overwhelmed by impatient popular opinion.¹⁶

Grant’s subordinates continually frustrated his plans to end the war in 1864. It is a testament to Grant’s abilities that he eventually succeeded without totally wearing down his machine in the process. Sherman summed up Grant’s ability to overcome friction applicable to the operational prosecution of the war: “If his plan works wrong, he is never disconcerted, but promptly devises a new one, and is sure he will win in the end.”¹⁷

Friction existed in the army, through-out the government and among the citizens of the North as well. Grant recognized this, accommodating the limitations imposed by national politics (retention of political generals), establishing a good relationship with government (his affinity for Lincoln) and through his relations within the armed forces (retention of Meade, coordination with the navy). In this recognition Grant understood Clausewitz’s innovation, the concept of a “remarkable” trinity.¹⁸ The “trinity” defines a relationship, less between the physical bodies of a nation’s army, people and government than in the mix of emotions, chance and rationality characterizing all wars. In making war

¹⁵Ibid, 120, 119.

¹⁶ J. F. C. Fuller, *The Generalship of Ulyssess S. Grant*, (New York: Da Capo Press, 1929), 363.

¹⁷ James F. Rusling, *Men and Things I saw in Civil War Days*, (New York: Eaton and Mains, 1899), 146.

¹⁸ Sometimes translated as a “strange,” or “paradoxical” trinity. See Raymond Aron, “Clausewitz’s Conceptual System,” *Armed Forces and Society*, 39 (November, 1974): 49-59, Clausewitz, *War*, 89.

all interact, each contributing in its own manner to the prosecution of the war and each relationship possessing tremendous potential for complexity and friction.

In overcoming friction, as in determining centers of gravity, Grant proved a great simplifier. Joseph T. Glatthaar contrasted Grant with Sherman, noting, “Grant comprehended problems in all their simplicity; Sherman grasped them in all their complexity.” Grant’s ability to see essentials among masses of distractions, false information, rumors and irrelevances is a quality particular to a great strategist. “He possessed an uncanny knack of zeroing in on the critical factors” Clausewitz observed, “it takes a powerful mind to drive his army to the limit,” and retain it as a willing instrument. Grant often drove his army to its limits, directing it at essentials and overcame the immense friction generated by war.¹⁹

Moral Factors in War

Truth in itself is rarely sufficient to make men act—Clausewitz

In battle the moral is to the physical as three is to one—Napoleon

On might say that the physical seem little more than the wooden hilt, while moral factors are the precious metal, the real weapon, the finely honed blade—Clausewitz²⁰

Clausewitz, always skeptical of the purely material evaluations of his contemporaries Jomini and von Bulow, suggests theory demands an analysis of moral factors also: “Every engagement is a bloody test of physical and moral strength.

¹⁹ Joseph T. Glatthaar, Partners in Command: The Relationships Between Leaders in the Civil War, (New York: Free Press, 1994), 137; Clausewitz, War, 115.

²⁰ Clausewitz, War, 112, 184-85; David Chandler, Campaigns of Napoleon, (New York: Macmillan Company, 1966), 155.

Whoever has the greater sum of both left at the end is the victor.” Such an analysis begins, as with all things Clausewitzian, with the political context of the war, with “the spirit that permeates war as a whole.” Clausewitz correlates moral factors with his definition of policy, “as representative of all interests of the community” He illustrates the complexity of these interests, using his trinitarian definition of war. Apart from physical considerations, the spirit of an army, a general and government, as well as the temper of the population all condition and define war-making. Clausewitz’s analysis of moral factors stemmed from experience with the revolutionary French, whose untrained but highly motivated soldiers proved superior to the better armed and trained and professionally led Prussians. The revolution had made war “the concern of the people as a whole” and given the “depth of feeling generally aroused . . . war had broken loose in all its elemental fury.”²¹

If moral factors sometimes stimulated war’s elemental fury, application of Clausewitz’s formulation to the phenomenon in the American Civil War illustrates moral factors also limiting its prosecution. Lincoln (representative of a government fully committed to prosecution of the war) felt obligated to dismiss a certain Major John J. Key, (representative of officers in the Army of the Potomac less committed to emancipation than Lincoln) for “silly treasonable talk.” Key explained the logic of McClellan’s failure to pursue and destroy Lee after Antietam:

That is not the game. The object is that neither army shall get much advantage of the other; that both shall be kept in the field till they are exhausted, when we will make a compromise and save slavery.²²

²¹ Clausewitz, War, 231, 592-93.

²² Stephen W. Sears, Controversies and Commanders: Dispatches From the Army of the Potomac, (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), 134-35.

Whatever the correctness of Lincoln's strategy, the level of training and morale of its troops, the army leadership's actions (or in this case lack of action) made policy as assuredly as its government. The spirit of treason or at best marginal commitment to war aims (the lack of "passion" among the people) sabotaged the rational element of policy and negatively influenced the ability of the army to make war effectively.

While Napoleon allegedly quantified the relationship of moral to physical factors as three to one in importance, Clausewitz suggests an equal ratio while assigning surprisingly different functions to each. The physical factors necessary to wage war comprise the "wooden hilt" of the sword of war; moral factors "the real weapon, the finely honed blade." In this assessment material factors correspond roughly to tactics, moral factors to strategy. Moral factors define the will and equilibrium of a unit of any size, from an individual soldier to the spirit of a nation; from the example just mentioned the Union fought with questionable moral commitment on the part of some of its people.²³

Moral factors in battle cannot be quantified though they most assuredly exist. As moral factors are not readily observable and compressive knowledge of them is impossible, Clausewitz "prefers to treat the subject in an incomplete and impressionistic manner." Estimating moral factors and integrating them into a plan of a battle or a campaign (or analyzing them after the fact) poses a difficult task. Estimation requires imagination to "fill in" incompleteness and intuition to turn impressionistic understanding

²³ Clausewitz, *War*, 231, 184-85, 605-06. J. F. C. Fuller, *Grant and Lee: A Study in Personality and Generalship*, (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1957), 7, finds psychological factors "seven-eighths of the history of war." As previously related, modern authors often substitute "psychological" for moral factors in war in a Clausewitzian sense.

of moral factors into usable information for the waging of war. Grant's "estimation" of the moral factors driving the Southern war effort and his judgments generally proved correct. Like Lee, Grant repeatedly gauged the mettle of opposing commanders, the mood of soldiers and civilians (both his own and the enemy's) and integrated that information into his warmaking.²⁴

Charles A. Dana credited Grant with "a judgment that was judicial in its comprehensiveness and wisdom." Grant's military evaluations always include the moral element. In discussing the effects of a battle Grant naturally mentions casualties inflicted, while ascribing more significance to the moral effects. At the battle of Belmont, Grant finds the confidence the troops gained more important than the losses inflicted or suffered. The victories at Vicksburg and Gettysburg "lifted a great load of anxiety from the minds of the President, his Cabinet and the loyal people all over the North," and Grant contends from that point on "the *morale* was with the supporters of Union ever after." While mentioning the numbers of prisoners he captured, Grant spends more time on the psychological effects of the battle on the paroled prisoners, as well as on the Confederacy as a whole. In describing a general, a similar tendency to focus on a general's spirit or other intangibles rather than material factors also exists. In describing Meade, for example, Grant omits any reference to his material achievements at Gettysburg or elsewhere. Instead Grant chooses to discuss his personality, his relationship with superiors, and his fearful temper. Clausewitz judged generals in a similar manner, finding in the 1814 campaign against Napoleon "Blucher's spirit made his army more important than the Austrian, even though weaker," In late 1863, Grant

²⁴ Clausewitz, War, 185.

evaluated events of the war as a whole significantly declining to list Vicksburg or any other battle or campaign as most decisive. Grant identified Emancipation as the greatest blow yet delivered to the Confederacy, due to its moral effects.²⁵

Whether adopting the Napoleonic ratio of three to one or Clausewitz's fifty-fifty proposition with conditions, the magnitude of moral factors remains significant though its perception incomplete or impressionistic as Clausewitz suggests. Judgment and intuition, rather than the "brilliance" of any material calculation determines their usefulness. Grant's strong mind proved effective. In either evaluating the spirit of an enemy or in driving his own army to its limits Grant's sense of balance and perspective enabled his victories.

²⁵Charles A. Dana, Recollections of the Civil War, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 61. Clausewitz, War, 163. Grant, Memoirs, 297-98, 581. Grant declines to mention the material factor at Gettysburg. He also finds his parole of Vicksburg's garrison more detrimental to the South than their surrender and imprisonment. Clausewitz, War, 163. John Y. Simon, *et al.*, editors Papers of Ulysses S. Grant. Vols., 1-22, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press: 1967— I, 9: 196.

Chapter 9

Grant in Mexico—Politics, Leadership, Tactics and the Social Nature of War—Between Wars

What Grant learned or didn't learn at West Point pales in comparison with the practical lessons learned and observations made during the war with Mexico. Grant benefited from first-hand immersion in many technical aspects of war, gaining experience in operations, tactics, logistics and leadership. Apart from practical knowledge, Grant critiqued the war on many levels. His observations and comments on the war reflect the principle theoretical ideas that comprise the heart of Clausewitzian theory. Grant's writings exhibit a certain detachment throughout. His descriptive letters written home read almost as if he was not actually a participant in a bloody and difficult war, but on an amazing and thrilling excursion to a curious and exotic land. An astute observer of people, politics, society and combat itself, Grant's response to Mexico reveals a thoughtful and maturing witness, whose experiences served to formulate much of his views on war in general. Grant's critique extends from the practical to the moral and political, and conditioned all of his later thinking about war.

In his memoirs, a similar detachment exists, along with a spirited critique of the strategic implications of American policy, the reciprocity of domestic party and army politics and Grant's own participation in the conflict. Grant's critique is not evident in any of his letters at the time or in the accounts of others. Scholars generally take his

writings and statements made after the war regarding his views at the time at face value.¹ More correctly, Grant's analysis many years after the event represent the reflections of a former General-in-Chief and former President. The young soldier can be excused for not expressing his views (perhaps not fully formed at the time) forcefully or for not taking the more radical step of resignation. The mature Grant recognized that as a soldier, he himself qualified as the instrument of a policy determined by others. His participation represented complicity in the prosecution of (what he believed was) an aggressive and immoral war. After his retirement from public life, Grant beat himself up for not resigning rather than serve in an immoral war, attributing his failure to do so to a lack of moral courage. He may also have been beating himself up for his own naiveté, as he did not at the time thoroughly understand the implications of the war with Mexico. The young Grant failed to divine (to the satisfaction of the mature Grant) the war's true political context, his individual culpability/responsibility and the consequences for his country. Of greater interest is his intuitional understanding of Clausewitz's central thesis defining war as an extension of policy, his recognition of effects of the social structure of a state on its army and the political dimension of high command.

¹ Brooks Simpson, *Ulysses S. Grant: Triumph over Adversity, 1822-1865*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000), 30, and Geoffrey Perret, *Ulysses S. Grant: Soldier and President*, (New York: Random House, 1997.), 50, 53, alone among Grant's major biographers remark on the absence of such criticisms from Grant's contemporary correspondence. Perret questions Grant's critique long after the event, finding his memory "uncontaminated by history."

Morality and the Origins of an Unholy War

I do not think there was ever a more wicked war than that waged by the United States on Mexico. I was a youngster—I had not moral courage enough to resign.

The Mexican war was a political war—a war of conquest which must be carried to its successful issue, or the political object would be unattained.

We were sent to provoke a fight—Grant²

Grant and his fellow officers vigorously debated the political wisdom of Texas annexation and Polk's intentions regarding California and New Mexico. The domestic questions of North/South rivalry and the extension of slavery, both inextricably bound-up with the politics of annexation figured prominently in the debate. The debate became more heated as the more sagacious soldiers realized they might soon transform from individuals soldiers into the "true political instrument" described by Clausewitz. Those who wielded the instrument sought conquest and the instrument itself weighed in on the propriety of their actions.³

Through out the debate Grant remained skeptical of the moral foundation driving Texas annexation, especially the rejection of the Nueces River as the border with Mexico. Grant found the threat of force his army represented constituted "hypocrisy" given the explanations offered by his government. Grant elaborates in his memoirs:

² John Russell Young, Around the World With General Grant, (New York: American News Company, 1879), II: 477-78, Ulysses S. Grant, Personal Memoirs of U. S. Grant, (New York: Da Capo Press, 1952), 56-57, 30.

³ Lloyd Lewis, Captain Sam Grant, (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1950), 109, 120-121, 124.

The occupation, separation and annexation were, from the inception of the movement to its final consummation, a conspiracy to acquire territory out of which slave states might be formed.⁴

We cannot know, given lack of any clear statement by Grant at the time, the true depth of his dissatisfaction with his government. Some of Grant's statements appear to rationalize rather than critique U. S. policy, as the poorer classes in Mexico "are much better pleased with our form of government than their own; in fact they would be willing to see us push our claims beyond the Rio Grande." In any event Grant chose, like many of his fellows who also opposed the war, to "follow the flag." This is probably fortunate as Grant himself recognized the political costs to an individual who opposes his country's efforts during wartime. Grant found it better for one to advocate "war, pestilence, and famine," rather than to act as obstructionist to a war (whether right or wrong) already in progress. In this Grant echoes Lincoln, who opposed the war on grounds similar to Grant.⁵

In any event in later life Grant's thinking is clear. In a phrase reminiscent of Clausewitz, Grant felt that the valuable empire sought by the United States, "might have been obtained by other means," in this case means short of war. The country's and Grant's participation defined an immoral use of force, especially reprehensible when war is so terrible that "no reason short of a defense of the national honor and integrity can justify it." Immoral policy bred immoral strategy and those who carried it out shared in the responsibility. In his memoirs Grant unreservedly identified both the Mexican War

⁴ John Y. Simon, *et al.*, editors Papers of Ulysses S. Grant. Vols., 1-22, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press: 1967— 97) 1:57, Grant, Memoirs, 23.

⁵ *Ibid*, 30.

and the Civil War as “unholy” undertakings, despite the bravery exhibited by their misguided participants.⁶

Like everything else in Clausewitz’s writings, speculations regarding the moral and ethical ramifications of his thought are passionate and diverse. The implications of Clausewitz’s central thesis itself enjoy frequent misunderstanding. Seeing war as an extension of politics led some to label Clausewitz a militarist, mistaking war for politics or believing war somehow a “normal” phenomenon. In fact, Clausewitz viewed politics as a restraining and “civilizing” force in war, without which no logical limits to violence exist. Though Clausewitz does describe in some detail some of the horrors of war, he seems to some at best “amoral,” about its use.⁷

Peter Paret identifies with Clausewitz a non-ideological approach to war and politics. While he hated the excesses of the French Revolution, he described Napoleon as “the god of war himself” and never let his own political judgments derail his quest to define a theory of war. He logically assumes nations act to promote self-interest. Clausewitz, with some notable exceptions, reserved expression of personal and contemporary political beliefs for forums other than On War. Theory cannot describe or anticipate all political or moral contexts, so defining just or unjust wars defines a futility. Again Clausewitz’s central thesis provides assistance and also defines Grant’s logic in opposing the war with Mexico. Clearly if a nation’s policy is “immoral,” however one chooses to define the term, a war based on its extension must be immoral also. While soldiers and civilians debated the relative merits of U. S. participation in the war, events

⁶Grant, Memoirs, 24, 20. Young, World, II:165.

⁷Paul Cornish, “Clausewitz and the Ethics of Armed Force: Five Propositions?” Journal of Military Ethics,

soon outpaced discussion. Grant and his colleagues went off to Mexico to provoke a fight.⁸

Politics and Friction During the War With Mexico

Politics dictated the first actions of the Zachary Taylor's army and provide the historian (as well as Grant) a clear example of the seamless web existing between policy, tactics, operations and strategy. Taylor's deployments on the Nueces River and subsequent advance to the Rio Grande offers no lesson in the tactical or operational art and signaled no implementation of any grand strategic design to assail the Mexican army. The advance of Taylor's small army constituted a provocation and defined a policy, as U. S. domestic politics required a Mexican assault on her troops as a pretext for war. In Grant's words, "it was essential that Mexico should commence it." In a similar manner a few years latter and in a quite different political context, Lincoln preferred that Southerners "should commence it;" Hence the attack on Fort Sumter. Grant characterized the advance to the Rio Grande cynically: "it became necessary to approach to within a convenient distance to be struck." Thus Grant's first tactical deployment defined itself in terms of policy: the actions taken served no military plan or tactical design, but existed merely for their domestic political utility.⁹

⁸ Peter Paret, *Clausewitz and the State*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 73. Roger Parkinson, *Clausewitz: a Biography*, (New York: Stein & Day, 1979), 73. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 583. Azar Gat, "Clausewitz's Political and Ethical World View," *Political Studies* 37 (1989): 97-106, questions Clausewitz's ability to remain neutral or unideological given the "limited framework of the absolutist state."

⁹ Grant, *Memoirs*, 30.

Grant participated in most of the key battles of the war. He received his baptism of fire at Palo Alto and Resaca de la Palma, unknowingly leading a charge “over ground that had been charged over before.” At Monterey, Grant charged with his regiment, though ordered to stay in camp as is proper given his job as quartermaster. After Winfield Scott assumed command, Grant fought at Vera Cruz and participated with distinction in all the battles leading to fall of Mexico City. Grant requested to relief from his position as quartermaster: “I *must* and *will* accompany my regiment in battle,” but found his request denied.¹⁰

Clausewitz identified violence, hatred and the passions of the people as first category in his trinitarian definition of war. Grant saw some of the danger of these passions left unrestrained or ignored in Mexico. Grant stated “some of the volunteers and about all of the Texans seem to think it perfectly right to impose upon the people of a conquered city to any extent, and even to murder them.” Grant felt the army “strange” in using weak means to prevent the frequent murders and also marveled at how much the perpetrators seemed to enjoy the acts of violence. In the Civil War Grant found himself confronted by the specter of “people’s war,” with the passions and hatred of the people aroused. Grant sought always to diminish the unrestrained violence of both the irregulars confronting him and the responses of his own soldiers to civilian depredation.¹¹ Always an astute observer of men, the Mexican War exposed Grant to personalities, politics and bloodshed in the decidedly non-theoretical context of real war. His observations on

¹⁰Grant, Memoirs, 44, 46. GP 1:134-35.

¹¹ Ibid.

leadership provided competing examples of the ideal commander in war, and the political context in which they operate.

Zachary Taylor and the Unpronounceable Man

It is true that we normally regard the plain, efficient soldier as the very opposite of the contemplative scholar—Clausewitz

He puts me in mind of old Taylor, and sometimes I fancy he models himself on old Zac—General Meade on U. S. Grant¹²

Grant's military thought (and his undemonstrative dress and over-all demeanor), are not found in books, but partly in the example of Zachary Taylor. Grant observed (in contrast to Winfield Scott), "Taylor never made any great show or parade, either of uniform or retinue." Grant related his admiration of Taylor:

General Taylor was not an officer to trouble the administration much with his demands, but was inclined to the best he could with the means given him...No soldier could face either danger or responsibility more calmly than he. These are qualities more rarely found than genius or physical courage¹³

Grant's summation of his two principle commanders during the Mexican War is concise and illuminating: "Both men were pleasant to serve under—Taylor was pleasant to serve with."¹⁴ Grant emulated Taylor, consciously or unconsciously. While it may be impossible to quantify the degree of emulation (versus Grant's natural inclinations) a connection exists. Grant's Mexican War experience, under both Taylor and Scott, exposed him to differing styles of command. Scott "assimilated the strategic ideas of

¹² Bruce Catton, Grant Moves South, (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1960), labeled the unremarkable and plain Grant "the unpronounceable man." Clausewitz, War, 110; George Meade, Life and Letters of George Gordon Meade, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1913), 189,191.

¹³ Grant, Memoirs, 47.

¹⁴ Ibid, 67.

Jomini, devoid of his caution about turning maneuvers.” Though not a West Point graduate, Scott studied warfare and cultivated the image of a professional soldier. Zachary Taylor favored coming to grips with the enemy, the simple and direct frontal assault, and declined cultivation of the image of an intellectual soldier.¹⁵

Grant’s admired both, but his own portrayal of Taylor (and presumably of qualities he associates with the ideal commander) more closely parallels characteristics Clausewitz identified as indicative of military genius. Clausewitz values the “inquiring rather than the creative mind, the comprehensive rather than the specialized approach, the calm rather than the excitable head, and the courage to take responsibility.” In Grant we find the presence of all these characteristics and perhaps the most illustrative example of some of them.¹⁶

Significantly, Clausewitz prefers a strong mind rather than a brilliant one, inviting comparisons of Grant with the “brilliant” (“I can do it all”) but ineffective McClellan.¹⁷ No one mistook the “plain and efficient” Grant (or Taylor) for the “contemplative scholar.” Sherman felt superior to Grant in his knowledge of theory, military history and tactics, but acknowledged his inferiority in force of will and calmness of character:

I am a damned sight smarter than Grant; I know more about war, military history, strategy, and grand tactics than he does; I know more about organization, supply, and administration and about everything else than he does; but I’ll tell you where he beats me and where he beats the world. He don’t care a damn for what the enemy does out of his sight. But it scares the hell out of me.¹⁸

¹⁵Edward Hagerman, The American Civil War and the Origins of Modern Warfare, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 15.

¹⁶Ibid, 112, 101.

¹⁷Clausewitz, War, 103.

¹⁸Joseph T. Glatthar, Partners in Command: The Relationships Between Leaders in the Civil War, (New York: Free Press, 1994), 138.

Clausewitz describes the practical emotionally detached Grant perfectly in his preference for “the calm, rather than the excitable head.” Clausewitz valued the study of military history as the only alternative to actual experience in war. While useful, the study of military theory and military history only provides an inferior substitute to actual practice. “In the art of war experience counts more than any amount of abstract truth”¹⁹ Clausewitz’s distrust of book learning led his translator to write, “the expressed aim of these hundreds of pages of vast erudition is to impress on the mind of the reader the futility of book-learning.”²⁰

Grant’s encounters in the Mexican War proved illuminating. Grant’s utilized Clausewitz’s ideal, personal experience and observation in war, rather than the imperfect substitute of formal study as his model. As valuable as formal study can be, Grant could learn his craft only through war itself. Grant, like Clausewitz, understood that “knowledge must become capability.”²¹ Capability came from practice, each of Grant’s learning experiences, beginning with those in Mexico, provided a link in a chain leading to his emergence as the preeminent strategist of his time.

Firing All Day, Personal Courage, the Frontal Assault and Cutting Loose

¹⁹Clausewitz, War, 164.

²⁰O. J. Matthijs Jolles, “Introduction,” in Carl von Clausewitz, On War, (New York: Modern Library, 1943), xxii.

²¹Clausewitz, War, 147.

Scott is lost. He cannot capture Mexico City and he cannot fall back on his base—The Duke of Wellington

I had but little to do except to see to having the Pork and Beans rolled about—Grant²²

Grant's demonstrative lack of theoretical underpinnings drove his reliance on practical observation and example. If we see positive influences contributing to Grant's success in the examples of Scott and Taylor, we also find failures. Grant observed no tactical innovations in the course of the Mexican War. The Minie ball and percussion cap made no appearance. The war demonstrated the power of the defense, the utility of entrenchments and the losses frontal assaults entailed, concepts apparent to all. The tactical changes due to technology belonged to the future. While many learned these and other lessons from there Mexican experience:

Grant, Bragg, Albert S. Johnston, Jackson, Beauregard, Lee and Jefferson Davis, went into the Civil War as orthodox advocates of the frontal assault.²³

The Mexican War saw little change in what came to be known in more modern times as “the cult of the bayonet.” The success of American frontal attacks, in spite of their attendant casualties, did little to stimulate new thinking on tactical matters. The use of the bayonet (not mentioned by Grant), at Churubusco reinforced orthodoxy. Success encouraged the lack of tactical innovation, given the fact of the relative inefficiency and inaccuracy of the smoothbore musket. A fundamentally fraudulent picture of the nature of modern war emerged from the Mexican experience. The next war exhibited little

²² Jean Edward Smith, Grant, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), 127; GP 1: 129 .

²³ Hagerman, Origins, 16.

resemblance to the Mexican War, requiring a reevaluation of the “lessons learned in blood,” in 1848.

Grant’s documented personal affinity for Taylor perhaps does not extend to his actual views on the tactical conduct of battles, and even less to strategy. Grant, McClellan and other junior officers, viewed the frontal assaults attempted during the war with decidedly mixed emotions. At Monterey, Taylor’s proposed double envelopment misfired. Muddled frontal attacks ensued in which Grant participated, in spite of orders to stay with his mule train. Grant watched as “one-third of the force engaged were killed or wounded in the space of a few minutes.” Grant and his fellows redeemed the chaos and confusion through personal bravery. Grant’s performance at Monterey established his courage under fire.²⁴

At Chapultepec (this time with Scott commanding), American forces suffered fully 25% casualties in another (successful) frontal attack. This result found the professional officers present “nearly unanimous” in their condemnation. But throughout the war the frontal attack succeeded, albeit with tremendous casualties. The success of the frontal assault did nothing, of course, to discourage its use in by both sides in the Civil War itself, despite the casualties involved.²⁵

The reasons for this misunderstanding of the effectiveness of the frontal assault seem clear. The superior power of the defensive, already recognized by Clausewitz received further reinforcement by new technology. While during the Mexican war in Grant’s words, “at a distance of a few hundred yards a man might fire at you all day

²⁴ Grant, Memoirs, 52.

²⁵ Hagerman, Origins, 15-16.

without your finding out,” by the end of the Civil War rifled technology applied to both small arms and artillery clearly trumped even the most courageous direct assault.²⁶

The Mexican War presented two contrasting methods of warfighting. Tactically, both commanders (Scott and Taylor) often resorted to the frontal attack. Taylor especially resorted to direct methods in his campaigns extending to the strategic sphere. Scott strategically presents another story. His abandonment of his base at Vera Cruz prompted the Duke of Wellington’s famous reaction “Scott is lost.” The amphibious landing, cutting loose from his communication and the subsequent march to and capture of Mexico City, are models of innovation and sagacity. Grant emulated Scott’s cutting loose from his logistical base in the Civil War. To Grant the quartermaster, “rolling about Pork and Beans,” at Vera Cruz, the concept of abandoning a formal supply line proved especially intriguing. Scott perhaps provided Grant with other lessons as well. After the surrender of the garrison at Vera Cruz, Scott paroled the Mexican soldiers, allowing officers to retain side arms and ordered the Americans to refrain from taunts and jeers. Grant pursued a similar course at Vicksburg.²⁷

Though not loath tactically to launch direct and bloody frontal assaults, Grant strategically throughout his career, preferred maneuver. Grant’s masterpiece, the Vicksburg campaign, involved very few direct attacks, apart from assaults on fragments of the Confederate army and the city itself. Grant’s own abandonment of his supply lines, “cutting loose” from any reliance on a formal, traditional line of supply owes

²⁶ Grant, Memoirs, 44; Grady McWhiney and Perry D. Jamieson, Attack and Die: Civil War Tactics and the Southern Heritage, (University, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1982), 153-59.

²⁷GP 1:129, 39.

something to Scott's strategic method. Taylor's methods find reflection in Grant's directness and willingness to fight as well as in his undemonstrative dress and manner.²⁸

From these origins in the Mexican War we discover and account for two seemingly contradictory elements present in Grant's strategy. We see Taylor, in Grant's impatience to get at the enemy; in the "I can't spare this man, he fights," of Lincoln's evaluation, and perhaps also less admirably we see Taylor in Grant at Cold Harbor. We see Scott in Grant's performance during the Vicksburg and Chattanooga campaigns. Largely through maneuver, and loosing fewer troops in a whole series of battles than Lee lost at the single battle of Gettysburg, Grant destroyed one entire army and wrecked another. Scott's winning of the war through targeting Mexico City offered another set of lessons. Scott's getting to the city through maneuver, abandoning his formal supply base, all seems daring and innovative, but the direct conquest of the capital proved decisive, as Scott "believed that Mexican political life centered upon the City of Mexico." Capture of such a significant political object paralyzed the country. Scott and Taylor both targeted power, though they utilized different methods.²⁹

Grant's own evaluation shows his essential understanding of each general, and accounts for each man's contribution to Grant's view of war:

The contrast between the two was very marked. But with their opposite characteristics, both were great and successful soldiers; both were patriotic and upright in all their dealings.³⁰

²⁸ Though Grant in his memoirs excuses the frontal assaults on Vicksburg's fortifications as necessary for reasons of troop moral, they demonstrate his willingness to fight tactically ala Taylor, the success of the campaign itself worked through strategic maneuver more indicative of Scott.

²⁹ Brooks Simpson, *Ulysses S. Grant: Triumph over Adversity, 1822-1865*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000), 463; Russel Weigly, *The American Way of War*, (New York: Macmillan, 1973), 74.

³⁰ Grant, *Memoirs*, 66-67.

Grant recognized two very different types of successful soldiers, showing flexibility in his approach absent in many military men who value uniformity and singularity of method. This recognition helped Grant. If Grant intellectually was no Robert E. Lee, if he projected few of the martial qualities present in a Winfield Scott, if he lacked the charisma of a McClellan, he could be a Zachary Taylor. We find in this openness an appreciation of the change and diversity also evidence of Grant's essentially undogmatic approach to war and leadership.

Grant's experience under fire revealed great physical courage and emotional detachment. Grant wrote to Julia Dent: "There is no great sport in having bullets flying about one in every direction but I find they have less horror when among them than when in anticipation." Grant offered a further observation: "You want to know what my feelings were on the field of battle! I do not know that I felt any peculiar sensation. War seems much less horrible to persons engaged in it than to those who read of battles." Grant did acknowledge fright on one occasion: "I did not feel a sensation of fear until nearly the close of the firing a ball struck close by me killing one man instantly, it knocked Capt. Page's Jaw entirely off." Grant, like Clausewitz distinguished between physical courage, and the moral courage generated by the responsibility of command. Grant admired Taylor for both these qualities³¹

Polk, The Army and Domestic Politics

³¹GP 1:85, 86, 94-98; Grant, Memoirs, 47.

Education of a sort also devolved to Grant in the political sphere during the Mexican War. President Polk worried about creating war heroes, who might be potential rivals for his job. His replacement of Taylor in spite of his success in the opening battles of the war introduced Grant first hand to some of the intricacies and injustices of the domestic political dimension of war at the highest levels.³²

Winning the war and loosing the Presidency held little appeal, either for Polk or his party. Taylor, Scott, and others would use their Mexican War victories to great effect politically, Taylor ascending to the White House itself. Polk played a difficult game. Polk's policy required victories, but victories elevating others to high office paradoxically might derail the very policies those victories served. First displacing Taylor, Polk attempted to bypass Scott through promotion of Senator Thomas Hart Benton. Congress refused the appointment. After the end of active hostilities, but before the signing of the peace Polk supplanted Scott with Butler. Grant viewed all of this maneuvering with distaste, both for its injustice to Taylor and Scott, for Polk's implementation of an annexationist foreign policy and for his failure to provide Scott with the troops promised to prosecute the war. Grant also took special note of infighting taking place within the army itself. Generals Pillow, Worth and Colonel Duncan intrigued against Scott, in order to advance their own careers. Grant found this type of action occurring between brother officers equally distasteful.³³

³² Ibid, 57. Grant's lucid analysis of the politics of Scott's accession to command after the war may not match his understanding at the time. He did accept the Whig interpretation of Polk's attempted manipulation of the army to achieve political purposes to his own advantage. See Lewis, Captain, 191.

³³ Lewis, Captain, 273. Grant, Memoirs, 58, 86-87.

Grant also resented the appointment of less qualified volunteer officers to the command of regiments, summoned to service for their political connections or through them. Grant spoke of resigning in protest, considering Polk's actions an insult to the army. During the Civil War, Grant confronted all of these problems observed during the Mexican War in some manner. Lincoln also preferred to appoint no general with presidential ambitions, the Army of the Potomac's generals conspired and maneuvered against each other and incompetent political generals often supplanted or outranked professionals.³⁴

Victory, Unintended Consequences and the Moral Dimension of War

Grant's understanding of the linkage of politics and war led him to make other connections between strategy and politics upon victory. Grant found a unique moral dimension to politics and war. In doing so he identified disastrous results for the United States in its "winning" of the war with Mexico. The war and especially the "forced annexation" of Mexican territory constituted "transgressions," for which we received "our punishment in the most sanguinary and expensive war in modern times." For Grant the military advantage gained in Mexico defined no victory at all as its political results led to bloody civil war. The chance and probability in war Clausewitz identified extends beyond the obvious risks of the battlefield to the realm of politics.³⁵

³⁴ GP 1:97-98, 124.

³⁵ Ibid, 24.

War is an extension of policy. Annexationist, immoral policy defined an annexationist, immoral war. The link for Grant is explicit; politics defines the nature of its extension, war. Victory is not defined by physical destruction of an enemy; it is defined by its political (in this case disastrous) consequences. Clausewitz defines Grant's logic:

Politics is the womb in which war develops—where its outlines exist in their hidden rudimentary form, like the characteristics of living creatures in their embryos.³⁶

Grant saw immoral, ill-defined or corrupt politics breeding immoral, ill-defined and corrupt strategy. The aggressive war gave the United States new territory. The resulting conflict over the extension of slavery into that new territory provided the catalyst plunging the country into Civil War. Grant felt this result demonstrative historically and in a moralistic sense demonstrates justice. The U. S. “paid” for its immoral policy in Mexico and for the crime of slavery through the overwhelming destructiveness of the Civil War. Lincoln's second inaugural address echoes Grant's views in its identification of the Civil War as a punishment for the monstrous crime of slavery. The “religious tone of this address was so strong that it turned attention away from an underlying intellectual and political architecture that owed little to religion.”³⁷

Technically (in terms of tactics and logistics), politically (both domestic and international), socially (in the composition of the belligerent states) and morally, Grant's actions and style of command in the Civil War, and indeed his understanding of war itself, stems from what he learned the Mexican War.

³⁶ Clausewitz, War, 149.

³⁷ Geoffrey Perrett, Lincoln's War: The Untold Story of America's greatest President as Commander and Chief, (New York: Random House, 2004) 398.

Heroic Failure and Hardscrabble Farm

I worked very hard, never losing a day because of bad weather—Grant

He remained Grant, simple, determined, undefeatable—Allan Nevins³⁸

Mistakenly many of Grant's biographers find in his failures between wars evidence of an incompetent and defective other, non-warrior Grant. Grant did fail repeatedly, but his reaction to failure proves more enlightening than the failures themselves. After the Mexican War Grant enjoyed four years of "acceptable" continued service in the army as quartermaster of the Fourth Infantry Regiment. While on garrison duty in California things for Grant unraveled. The Gold Rush economy drove an inflation destroying the value of his meager, if regular, army pay. Financial necessity drove Grant's moonlighting to supplement his wages and provide for a growing family. He rented land and farmed, hoping to cash in on high prices paid in San Francisco, only to see his crop destroyed by flood. He speculated with other officers in the ice business only to see the market destroyed when others proved quicker. An investment in hogs also failed, as did a partnership in a boarding house. Grant broke a "temperance pledge" and began drinking as his depression deepened with continued separation from his family. George McClellan witnessed him drunk and failed to forget it when general-in-chief.³⁹

³⁸ Allan Nevins, "Preface" in John Y. Simon, ed., Papers of Ulysses S. Grant, vol.1, 1837-1861, (Carbondale and Edwardville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967), xx.

³⁹ Grant, Memoirs, 52. Simpson, Triumph, 57-58.

Under circumstances still unclear Grant resigned and returned to his family. Grant proceeded to fail again at everything he tried. Grant “struggled ineptly, even pathetically,” farmed his own land, built a house he nicknamed “Hardscrabble,” hauled firewood, and managed his in-law’s affairs including some thirty slaves. The Panic of 1857, the ensuing depression, unpaid loans and malaria drove Grant out of business. He next entered into a real-estate partnership, failed, and swallowing his pride, went to work for his father as a clerk in his leather-goods store. He was, in the words of an acquaintance “the most obscure man in St Lewis.”⁴⁰

Grant persevered, exhibiting a faith in his abilities and values though assaulted and repeatedly defeated by the markets, bad luck, the dishonesty of others and his own depression. During the war Sherman identified Grant’s chief characteristic as “the simple faith in success,” which he likened to “the faith a Christian has in a Savior.” Nothing broke him or changed his essential strength of character. Though confronted with poverty himself, he purchased and returned to a destitute laborer a mule seized for auction due to non-payment of a debt. As the debt remained unpaid, three times Grant repeated the process. Grant remained a fighter stating: “I am going to have that old mule even if I have to buy it once a week all summer.” In the next war Grant offered a similar better known boast offering, “to fight it out” with Robert E. Lee “if takes all summer.”⁴¹

The process of failure taught Grant lessons his successes in Mexico could not. Even when one is “correct” in his actions and evaluations, chance and probability often

⁴⁰ William S. McFeely, Grant: A Biography, (New York: W. W. Norton, 1981), 61; Perret, Soldier, 110. J. F. C. Fuller, Grant and Lee: A Study in Personality and Generalship, (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1957), 59.

⁴¹ Ibid, 111. The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, (Washington D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1880—1901), hereafter cited as OR, XXXII, 3, p.58. Catton, Command, 223.

ruin the best of plans, made and carried out with vigor and courage in peace as in war. Failure taught him determination, patience and a form of moral courage quite different from the battlefield courage he displayed in Mexico. A coming war presented Grant with new opportunity for struggle. He responded to these new challenges as he did to all challenges, simple, determined and undefeatable. Allan Nevins perceptively, and accompanied by few other historians, saw progress in Grant rather than failure during this period. Grant's "heroism on his Hardscrabble farm excelled that he had exhibited as a young officer at Monterey."⁴²

⁴² Nevins, "Forward," xx.

Chapter 10

The Coming of the War to Shiloh

It was very much discussed whether the South would set up a separate government, the corner-stone of which should be, protection of the “Divine” institution of slavery—Grant

Its foundations are laid, its cornerstone rests, upon the great truth, that slavery is his natural and normal condition. Our new government is based on this great moral truth—Alexander Stephens¹

Grant devotes several pages in his memoirs discussing secession, his views of it, its contradictions, and the views of the “fathers,” who would have opposed it in the shape it assumed. Grant’s conclusions and the language used in his memoirs written many years after the events of 1860, paraphrase Confederate Vice President Alexander Stephens. Grant identifies the “Divine” institution of slavery as the driving force of secession and its protection the “corner-stone” of the new Confederate government. Stephens found “great philosophical and moral truth,” in the “cornerstone” of his new government, the belief in the correctness slavery.

As is the case with the Mexican War, it is difficult to know to what extent the mature Grant’s views, as presented in his memoirs, reveal his feelings at the time. The course of the war itself and years of reflection conditioned and clarified Grant’s opinions and provided both the moral and political basis for his justification of the war and his participation in it. Grant’s contemporary writings do clearly demonstrate his opposition to

¹Ulysses S. Grant, Personal Memoirs of U. S. Grant, (New York: Da Capo Press, 1952), 109; James M. McPherson, Battle Cry of Freedom, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 244.

secession in principle: “there are but two parties now, Traitors and Patriots, and I want hereafter to be ranked with latter.” Grant also saw in secession “the doom of slavery,” but falls short of identifying slavery as a “corner-stone,” of the Confederacy as he does in his memoirs.²

Still less does the Grant of 1860 identify slavery as a center of gravity of the rebellion, as a target worthy of direct military or political action. The Grant of the summer of 1863 finds slavery, the “cornerstone of the Confederacy” Stephens identified, “already knocked out.” Secession and war designed to protect Southern institutions paradoxically assured their destruction. Grant’s description of this phenomenon provides a perfect illustration of Clausewitz’s observations on the unintended and unpredictable nature of war. Chance and probability pervade military actions and the passions of the people often operate outside the rational element of policy.³

Slavery’s imminent demise stemmed not from overt action (most Northerners, including Grant opposed direct abolition through war), but from Northern inaction. According to Grant, during a war the North would (and in fact did) “refuse for all time to give it (slavery) protection,” as long as the South remained separate. Without passive Northern acquiescence to the institution and its enforcement, slavery ultimately becomes, if through no other way, economically untenable: “they will depreciate so rapidly in

² John Y. Simon, *et al.*, editors Papers of Ulysses S. Grant, Vols., 1-22, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press: 1967— I. 97) 2:6-7 Hereafter abbreviated as GP; See William S. McFeely, Grant: A Biography, (New York: W. W. Norton, 1981), 71-73, for contradictions or “shifts” in Grant’s political beliefs at the time and Lloyd Lewis, Captain Sam Grant, (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1950), 381-387, for Grant’s indecision on some the personalities and politics of the election of 1860.

³GP 9:217-218. Two of the three elements in Clausewitz’s trinitarian definition of war, are unpredictable, Carl von Clausewitz, On War (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 85-86, 89, 101-02. Chance and passion make their own laws, and are never absent from war. Therefore war is a gamble, “all information and assumptions are open to doubt,” and “the commander finds that things are not as he expected.”

value that nobody will want to own them,” and slavery “will never disturb this country again.” During the course of the war itself, “reality had a way of surpassing policy,” as the destruction of slavery and the use of Blacks in support of the Union war effort in a variety of roles preceded official guidelines and the Emancipation Proclamation.⁴

Grant found weakness and contradiction in Southern nationalism and efforts to create a viable state. Like the slave, the lower classes of the South also “needed emancipation.” Most Southerners owned no slaves, but found themselves “allowed the ballot so long as they cast it according to direction” given by the slave owners. Grant also distinguishes between social equality and emancipation, while Southerners, “who ought to have known better,” found them analogous. Even given the end of slavery “people are just as free to avoid social intimacy with the blacks as ever they were.”⁵ Some modern scholars agree with Grant that slavery and privilege provided a poor basis for Southern nationalism, and “only slavery gave the South its distinct identity.” Retaining that identity as the war progressed proved less and less appetizing to large (especially non-slave holding) elements of Confederate society as the Union applied greater and greater pressure on the South.⁶

The politics of States Rights, like the politics of its social system, defined another weakness. Identified by Southern apologists after the fact as the wars primary cause, States Rights prevented the true cooperation and mobilization of resources necessary to

⁴ GP 2: 20-22. McPhearson, Cry, 564.

⁵Ulysses S. Grant, Personal Memoirs of U. S. Grant, (New York: Da Capo Press, 1952), 109, 113, 114; McPherson, Cry, 244.

⁶ Richard E. Beringer, Herman Hattaway, Archer Jones, and William N. Still, The Elements of Confederate Defeat: Nationalism, War Aims, and Religion (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1988), 23-31, 25.

fight a revolutionary war. States Rights and the doctrine of nullification interfered with military operations and prevented effective and efficient mobilization of Southern resources. J. F. C. Fuller identified “the dry rot” of States Rights as the controlling factor in Southern strategy, “not only the cause of the war, but also the prime cause of the Confederate downfall.” Each state demanded protection causing obstructionism and an undesirable dispersal of Confederate military power. By the third year of the war some Southerners found the draft “military despotism” and economic devastation accompanying the war a greater threat than reunion. Clausewitz always found political weakness in alliances as allies never share an identical community of interest, and suggests that this weakness often defines a center of gravity. While individual Confederate states were theoretically not “independent,” the secessionist states of 1860 carried the right of secession with them into their new nation. “Political unity is a matter of degree,” and on a practical level assertion of the doctrine of nullification interfered directly with military operations and prevented Davis from welding together a truly coherent and unified nation.⁷

Grant grasped much of the true dynamic of the political context of 1860, the nature of Northern resolve and the sources of Southern weakness. Though in practice he failed to take his own council, he warned Northern friends of the nature of the coming war: “each side underestimates the other and overestimates himself.” The South also

⁷ See Joseph T. Glatthaar, General Lee’s Army: From Victory to Collapse, (New York: Free Press, 2008), 97, for a detailed description of how the doctrine of nullification affected specific military acts ordered by Richmond. Edward Hagerman, The American Civil War and the Origins of Modern Warfare, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 290, reports that South Carolinian troops facing Sherman would not leave the state to pursue him. J. F. C. Fuller, Grant and Lee: A Study in Personality and Generalship, (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1957), 29, 35, also finds “Davis’s ship of state wrecked” on the policy of State’s rights, and “incapable of establishing united effort.” McPhearson, Cry, 695-96; Clausewitz, War, 596.

underestimated Northern commitment and its military abilities. Lincoln called for 75,000 volunteers to suppress the rebellion. In Grant's judgment, "ten or twenty times 75,000," could be raised from Northerners of all political stripes. The act of secession helped unify the North: Grant, a Democrat, agreed to drill the Galena Wide Awakes, a Republican marching society.⁸

As a private citizen, Grant expressed dismay at prospect of disunion, stating:

It made my blood run cold to hear friends of mine, Southern men—as many of my friends were—deliberately discuss the dissolution of the Union as though it were a tariff bill.⁹

As a former soldier, Grant felt obligated to offer his services to his country, being trained in military matters at the nation's expense, and he felt a special contempt for those soldiers who now talked openly of disloyalty and acted contrary to their oath:

When I read of officers of the army and navy, educated by the government at West Point and Annapolis, and under a solemn vow to be defenders of the flag against all foes whatsoever, throwing up their commissions, going South and taking service under the banner of treason, it fills me with indignation.¹⁰

Grant also wanted a better job, but chose not cultivate favor through asking for politicians to intercede for him. Grant declared he felt "perfectly sickened at the political wire pulling" found in the lobbying displayed by many less qualified to serve the new volunteer army.¹¹ Grant later in the war expressed another more astute reason for asking

⁸ Brooks Simpson, Let Us Have Peace, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 9; GP 2:3-4, 107, 115; Grant, Memoirs, 109.

⁹ Simpson, Peace, 7.

¹⁰ Bruce Catton, Grant Moves South, (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1960), 27.

¹¹ GP 2:21-22.

for nothing for himself. If he had obtained command through personal or political influence, he:

Would have feared to undertake any plan of my own conception, and would probably have awaited direct orders from my distant superiors. Persons obtaining important commands by application of political influence are apt to keep a written record of complaints and predictions of defeat, which are shown in case of disaster. Somebody must be responsible for their failures.¹²

Clausewitz drew a similar conclusion. Men “who normally follow the initiative of others, tend to lose self-confidence when they reach the scene of action.” It is better for a commander to act on his own initiative without the influence of others, as “self-reliance is his best defense against the pressures of the moment.” Responsibility for his ascension to command rested with the political authority. The President as Commander-in-Chief chooses (or should choose) his commanders for their political utility. Grant wanted his political utility derivative of his military skills, the ability to win victories. Another man might possess other characteristics useful to the President in the complicated business of fighting the war, but for Grant from this point on, “my responsibility ended with doing the best I knew how.”¹³

In this we see Grant’s comprehension that power and influence cuts two ways. While he might initially benefit from the cultivation of political influence off the battlefield, such an appointment carried with it debt and obligations Grant preferred not to pay. In this realization Grant demonstrates practicality in recognizing his military talents as his greatest asset and is Clausewitzian in his logic of deferring to political

¹² Grant, *Memoirs*, 239.

¹³ Clausewitz, *War*, 118. Grant, *Memoirs*, 239. Grant may be referring specifically to his appointment to command of the Army of the Tennessee.

authority. Another reason exists for Grant's attitude. Grant knew failure. High rank gained through unwarranted political appointment demonstrated nothing to Grant or to the world. Promotion resulting from actions on the battlefield proved Grant had earned and deserved his success.

Drill, Volunteers, and the Populist's Touch

If deserters were whipped or executed even in peacetime, it seemed a small matter to use the cane or the flat of the sword on soldiers who were awkward at drill—Peter Paret

The drums were hard for Ulysses' feet to follow, having no ear whatever for rhythm or music, he had trouble keeping step either with marching men or with companions on a sidewalk—Lloyd Lewis¹⁴

Grant's appointment to a better job, colonel of the 21st Illinois, came at the behest of Illinois Governor Richard Yates, in June of 1861. The 21st, like other volunteer formations, elected its officers. In this case their original choice proved problematic; the regiment reportedly refused to serve under their original choice in any capacity. Grant's command, while "political," stemmed from proven professional ability as a graduate of West Point and as veteran of the Mexican War.¹⁵

Grant's understanding of the political context of the war applied to the attitudes and motivations of his soldiers. The men by no means understood military discipline, military culture or proper deportment towards either officers or each other. Colonel Grant, greeted good naturedly by a sentry with, "Howdy, colonel?" took the soldier's weapon, presented arms to the sentry and remarked "that is the way to say 'How do you

¹⁴ Peter Paret, York and the Era of Prussian Military Reforms 1807-1815. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), 18; Lewis, Captain, 63.

¹⁵ GP: 2. 42, See also Ibid, note 43, by John Y. Simon.

do' to your colonel." More serious breaches of discipline occurred. Some guards deserted their posts, slipping out of camp in the perennial search by soldiers for food and women. Grant responded in a general order: "this is an offence against all military rule and law. In time of war the punishment of this is death," but Grant continued, saying he was not disposed to visit the guilty with the full rigor of the law, "believing that the men of his command, now in confinement for this offence, were ignorant of the magnitude of it," and warning that repetition of the offense will not be tolerated.¹⁶

Grant's conduct towards his recruits reaped significant rewards. Grant's men were not professional soldiers and Grant handled them in a manner appropriate to their circumstance as volunteers and citizens of a democratic country. Grant exhibited patience and tact while teaching the kind of discipline necessary to forge an effective instrument of policy. In this he echoes Clausewitz, who observed and critiqued the relations between army and the people as part of the reform movement arising from Prussian defeat at the hands of Napoleon in 1806. Prussian methods and the Prussian army reflected the absolutism of the Prussian state and proved unable to compete with the revolutionary methods of the highly motivated and more democratic French. Frederick's army had consisted of:

Demoralized men, often the dregs of society, press ganged foreigners and prisoners of war, unwilling peasants and unreliable mercenaries, the whole motley crew held together by violent brutal discipline and ferocious punishments.¹⁷

In Clausewitz's Prussia, a great gap existed between the State, which effectively excluded much of its population from participation in its political life, and the army,

¹⁶ Horace Porter, Campaigning With Grant, (New York: Century, 1906), 67; GP 2 :48.

¹⁷ Leonard Krieger, The German Idea of Freedom (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), 21.

which excluded both the peasantry and *bourgeoisie* from its higher command. From analysis of these conditions Clausewitz acknowledged in his trinitarian definition of war the unique contributions of the army, people and state to warmaking. Much of the work of the reformers involved narrowing the gaps between these groups. The reformers, of course found it difficult to foster a sense of nationalism in an army consisting of draftees and mercenaries. Clausewitz's influential memorandum, "Guidelines for the Reorganization of the Army," suggested admittance to the officer corps of the *bourgeoisie*, conscription without exemption, an end to corporal punishment and proposed making all soldiers eligible for promotion regardless of class.¹⁸

American-style democracy generated no similar gap between Grant's volunteers, the state, the army and the cause they served.¹⁹ No class requirements existed for promotion and Grant's methods evidence a genuine concern for the welfare of his troops and an understanding of their needs and desires. While the mass of the population in Prussia regarded "the army as an alien establishment serving the king rather than the land," Grant's soldiers seemed to look upon him (and the army in general) as "a friendly partner of theirs." They saw Grant:

not as an arbitrary commander. As he passes by, the private soldiers feel as free to greet him as they would address one of their neighbors when meeting him at home . . . the soldiers when meeting him are never embarrassed by the thought that they are talking to a great general.²⁰

¹⁸ Gordon A. Craig, *The Politics of the Prussian Army: 1640-1945*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 20-24; Roger Parkinson, *Clausewitz: a Biography* (New York: Stein & Day, 1979), 86.

¹⁹ The question of the status of former slaves as participants in the army and the reordering of society following their emancipation arose later in the war. A great gap of course existed between freed slaves and the rest of American society, North as well as South.

²⁰ Quoted in Catton, *South*, 391.

Grant's plain dress and unpretentious style, in the manner of Zachary Taylor contributed to this: "there was nothing in his manner to suggest that there was any gulf between him and the men who were winning his victories." How much of his style and demeanor constituted affectation and how much actually defined Grant remains an open question. In a sense it mirrors Grant's reluctance to lobby politically for an appointment to command. Just as he wanted promotions and appointments reflective of his military ability, he also wanted to gain the respect and trust of his troops through his actions. Obedience and respect gained through spectacle and the trappings of command might prove fragile under fire or in defeat. While other successful commanders in the Civil War used methods different from Grant's, few got better results. Grant never enjoyed the kind of adulation by his soldiers reserved for a McClellan or a Lee, but he never suffered from their distrust or derision.²¹

Grant understood his instrument. In the Prussian army in Clausewitz's time "the drill of the parade ground actually was used on the battlefield," and the relentless drill stifled the initiative of soldier and officer alike: "Clausewitz drilled it and drilled it until he was sick of it." Grant, personally awkward at drill, "near the foot of the class," at West Point, also questioned its utility. A reduction of excessive drill accompanied his taking command. Grant compared European armies to his own in his memoirs: "The armies of

²¹ Porter, *Campaigning*, 515; Geoffrey Perret, *Ulysses S. Grant: Soldier and President*, (New York: Random House, 1997.), 255, finds Grant's dress and demeanor a genuine reflection of the man. Jean Edward Smith, *Grant*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), 233, finds that Grant's style "reflected conscious choice." Herman Hattaway and Archer Jones, *How the North Won*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1983), 370, speculate that Grant nurtured his image as a hard drinker to impress the troops. Bruce Catton, *Grant Takes Command*, (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1968), 159-60, points out that McClellan's staff officers preceded his arrival, warning the troops that they were expected to give him a warm reception.

Europe are machines: the men are brave, but the majority have very little interest in the contest in which they are called upon to take part.”²²

The automatons in Europe, French Marshall de Saxe admiringly observed, “can take on life only through the voices of their officers.” Grant had no interest in commanding machines:

Our armies were composed of men who were able to read, men who knew what they were fighting for, and so necessarily must have been more than equal to men who fought merely because they were brave and because they were thoroughly drilled.²³

Clausewitz suggested some reasons for this phenomenon observed and critiqued by Grant. Tactics itself generates a peculiar structure, given the components of the armed forces. Organization and battlefield actions became systematized, and armies were “transformed by their formations and orders of battle into automata.” Such armies discharged “their activity like pieces of clockwork, set off by a mere word of command.” War in actual practice rejects such systems and finds in them an “irreconcilable conflict.”²⁴

This type of control of the battlefield reflected the political domination of Prussian absolutism. The reforms Clausewitz and his fellows advocated and rising nationalism democratized the army to some extent allowing the nation to “grow out of its present condition of childhood, in which an overbearing government wishes to control

²² Gunther Rothenberg, *The Art of Warfare in the Age of Napoleon*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), 15; Parkinson, *Clausewitz*, 30; Grant, *Memoirs*, 557.

²³ Paret, *York*, 18; Grant, *Memoirs*, 557.

²⁴ Clausewitz, *War*, 133-34.

the people.” More democracy enabled the Prussian state to confront the more democratic French, and unify the country in a way not possible before the reforms.²⁵

Some professionals in the Union army undoubtedly wished for less democracy and more control over its irrepressible volunteers. Late in the war when an officer indignantly complained to General Meade, then commander of the Army of the Potomac, that some of the soldiers shouted irreverent epithets at him, Meade exclaimed, “Well what of that? How can I prevent it? Why, I hear that, when I rode out the other day, some of the men called me a ‘d—n’ old goggle-eyed snapping turtle,’ and I can’t even stop that.”²⁶

The stresses of war revealed some “gaps” in the Union army as a whole. Civilians in and out of the armed forces evidenced a healthy skepticism toward professional soldiers whose pedantry, rules and arcane knowledge often suffered in comparison to the practical minded volunteers. A division existed within the army and distrust of the West Pointers grew with the casualty lists as the professionals (especially those in the eastern army) failed. Party and factional criteria also measured operations, with Democrats supporting McClellan’s strategy, Republicans questioning it. Professional soldiers in turn distrusted the so-called political generals, appointed to command for reasons other than their military ability. Though Grant did attend West Point, his demeanor, dress and above all his actions revealed a man realistic and unpretentious, a Westerner with probably more

²⁵ Parkinson, Clausewitz, 100, quoting Baron vom Stien, a civilian leader of the Prussian reform movement.

²⁶ Porter, Campaigning, 248.

in common with many of the volunteers he commanded than with some of the eastern officers.²⁷

Grant's concern for his troops extended to matters beyond the purely military. On one occasion Grant rode past an Ohio regiment in a column on the march. Discovering that his horse spattered the soldiers with mud, he left the road, working his way through the dense underbrush surrounding the narrow road until reaching the head of the column. In a letter to Lincoln in December of 1861, Grant asked for appointment of a Catholic Chaplain of the army at large. Catholic soldiers, "as defenders of their country, being equally entitled to moral advice with all others," deserve the same consideration as the Protestant majority. While the utility of such actions are impossible to quantify, suffice it to say Grant's kindnesses and concern contributed positively to his art of war.²⁸

Throughout the conflict Grant's understanding and consideration of the views of his soldiers often drove decisions on the battlefield. An army is a social unit and its effective use requires mutual respect and harmony among its soldiers and officers. The choice to volunteer constitutes a profound political act. Grant's soldiers wished to make war, as did Grant. Grant's natural aggressiveness and a general desire to get on with the war equalled that of his soldiers. Grant's first engagement, the battle at Belmont, reflect this desire. Grant always maintained that his wish to bloody the troops compelled his attack on the Confederate camp: "I did not see how I could maintain discipline, or retain the confidence of my command, without an effort to do something." Grant also attributed

²⁷ Fuller, *Generalship*, 257, reports for example that Benjamin Butler refused to take advice from "West Point men," even in technical matters of tactics and engineering.

²⁸ Hattaway and Jones, *How*, 468; Catton, *South*, 310; GP 3:301; For a discussion in some detail of Grant's religious views see Mark Perry, *Grant and Twain: The Story of an American Friendship*, (New York: Random House, 2004), 178-184.

his decision to make assaults (unsuccessfully) on Vicksburg to the troops' belief in their ability to take the fortifications, thereby preventing the need for a lengthy siege.²⁹

Late in the war Grant as General-in-Chief still managed to maintain the atmosphere of intimacy he first evidenced as Colonel of a regiment. Porter reports that the skeptical soldiers of the Army of the Potomac accepted Grant by the time of the withdrawal from the North Anna River. The men engaged the General freely in conversation, not in an attempt to gain undue familiarity, but as “expressions of genuine sentiment of soldierly fellowship.” The army and their commander remained partners, united in their efforts to win the war.³⁰

Boldness, Chaos and the Mark of a Hero

From that event until the close of the war, I never experienced trepidation upon confronting the enemy—Grant

Given the same amount of intelligence, timidity will do a thousand time more damage in war than audacity—Clausewitz³¹

Confederate raiders determined Grant's first aggressive move. Grant's superiors ordered action against the irregular forces of Colonel Tom Harris, reportedly encamped in a dry creek bed near Florida, Missouri. As Grant's regiment of a thousand men made a twenty-five mile approach march through territory abandoned by its civilian and military inhabitants, Grant's apprehension and sense of isolation increased. Having proven

²⁹ Catton, *South*, 74-81. Grant, *Memoirs*, 139, 277.

³⁰ Porter, *Campaigning*, 154.

³¹ Grant, *Memoirs*, 127. Clausewitz, *War*, 190-92.

himself under fire following the orders of others, the responsibility of independent command unsettled him: “I had not the moral courage to halt and consider what to do.” . Lack of moral courage on this occasion proved a positive boon for Grant. Arriving at Harris’s now abandoned camp he realized his enemy “had as much reason to fear my forces as I his.” Subsequent information revealed Harris in a new position some forty miles distant, having left the creek bed days earlier upon hearing of Grant’s intentions. Grant never forgot this lesson. The courage the individual exhibited in Mexico became the courage of the many, as Grant directed ever-larger armies throughout the war, and “never experienced trepidation upon confronting the enemy.”³²

Grant description of his behavior during the approach march to Florida mirrors Clausewitz’s own observations regarding moral courage. Grant knew from his Mexican War experience he possessed the personal boldness and physical courage of the battlefield. During that war Grant significantly noted “the fearful responsibility” Zachary Taylor must have endured in commanding his line of three thousand men. Commanding others required something more than commanding oneself and his own doubts momentarily overwhelmed him. Clausewitz remarked that at higher levels, command becomes “less a matter of personal sacrifice” and more a concern “for the safety of others and for a common purpose.” After Florida, Grant understood personally the distinction Clausewitz identified that Grant had only observed in Mexico.³³

³² Ibid, 126-27.

³³ Grant, Memoirs, 44. Clausewitz, War, 190.

Sherman (who like Grant possessed great physical courage) also understood the difference and offered this candid evaluation of his own crisis of nerves suffered early in the war. Sherman attributed his “recovery,” a reassertion of moral courage, to Grant:

Until you won at Donalson I confess I was almost cowed by the terrible array of anarchical elements that presented themselves at every point; but that victory admitted the ray of light which I have followed ever since.³⁴

In a similar formulation Clausewitz identified two qualities indispensable to a successful commander, specifically the ability to divine some measure of reality given the uncertainty, danger and emotional pressures of war:

*First, an intellect that, even in the darkest hour, retains some glimmerings of the inner light which leads to truth; and second, the courage to follow this faint light wherever it may lead.*³⁵

Sherman’s further evaluation provides vivid conformation of Clausewitz’s preference for a commander with a strong rather than a brilliant mind and a practical description of why this is so. Later in the war Sherman used himself as an example to demonstrate why boldness trumps intellect and why Grant’s methods proved superior to his own:

I am more nervous than he is. I am more likely to change my orders or countermarch my command than he is. He uses such information as he has according to his best judgment; he issues his orders and does his level best to carry them out without much reference to what is going on about him and, so far, experience seems to have fully justified him.³⁶

³⁴ Glatthaar, Partners, 141.

³⁵ Clausewitz, War, 102.

³⁶ Glatthaar, Partners, 139.

Grant's actions bring order out of chaos and apart from Grant's natural aggressiveness inaction "did nothing for Grant or the Union cause." If Sherman's personal demons found release in following Grant's "ray of light," revealed at Donalson, Grant also sought redemption for his own past failures through action in war. Bold action served Grant personally, the Union cause nationally and defines Grant's character.³⁷

Grant's biographers suggest Grant on occasion allowed his self-confidence to exert too much influence over his decision-making after Florida. During Grant's next offensive move, the strike downriver at Belmont, Grant allowed his forces to loot the Confederate camp while some of his officers offered inspirational speeches. Meanwhile the rebels recovered, sent reinforcements by steamer and temporarily surrounding Grant's regiments. A counter-attack on his forces during the siege at Fort Donalson broke his investments and his enemy nearly escaped. At Shiloh Grant flirted with disaster due to his misreading of Confederate capabilities and intentions.³⁸

Does this "self-confidence" represent a flaw in Grant's Generalship? Clausewitz favors boldness over inaction, and forgives mistakes due to boldness. "Timidity (rather than logic) is the root of prudence in most men." War's unpredictability, danger and cost define Clausewitz's logic. Only action assures a measure of control over the disorder and uncertainty of war, and only positive action achieves the aims of a conflict. In his discussion, Clausewitz observes that many soldiers show, "dash and determination as

³⁷ Michael B. Ballard, U. S. Grant: The Making of a General, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 14, examines this personal desire of Grant, apart from his war strategy.

³⁸ Simpson, Triumph, 103, cites the Donalson example; Catton, South, 223-25 notes contradictory evidence regarding Grant at Shiloh. Smith, Grant, 131 finds Grant's boldness led him to only think about what he was going to do to the enemy and ignore what the enemy might do, leading to crisis at Belmont, Donalson and Shiloh. Fuller, Generalship, 100, attributes surprise at Shiloh to "over-confidence," due to easy victories at Henry and Donalson.

junior officers,” but prove mediocre and vacillating in high command. He distinguishes between battlefield or physical courage and the less common quality of moral courage required for high command. This roughly corresponds to and might be labeled tactical courage and strategic courage. Both are desirable, the first driven by emotion and circumstance (the heat of battle) and is rarely decisive; the second, of greater importance, defines a contradiction. Strategy requires intellect while boldness “is a quality of temperament.” Intellect by definition restrains and conditions temperament. Those able to fuse courage to planning and to the application of military means over space and time are clearly operating in a realm apart from the brave fighter emboldened by necessity or driven by the blood-lust and passion of the battlefield. Rational purpose and sober reflection (i.e., brilliance) tends to diminish boldness: “it takes more strength of will to make an important decision in strategy than in tactics.” Clausewitz therefore reserves his highest praise for boldness at the highest levels of command, where the need for rational purpose is also greatest. So while the bravery at any level is admirable, “boldness governed by superior intellect is the mark of a hero.”³⁹

Did some of Grant’s actions reveal “overconfidence?” Did Grant ignore or marginalize threats jeopardizing the outcome of some of his battles? Certainly. But the alternatives to Grant’s aggressiveness seem less desirable. As boldness is missing from most men, especially at the higher levels of command, “it is a genuinely creative force,” driving events on its own. Identifying boldness or over-confidence as a flaw in Grant’s

³⁹ Clausewitz, *War*, 190-92, 178. Clausewitz’s observations bring to mind the cases of “Fightin’ Joe Hooker,” Burnside, Pope and others, who failed, being promoted beyond their level of boldness or competence. Perret, *Soldier*, 195-96 applies this to Buell, who in Mexico “was dashing and bold,” but “the weight of an army command made him ponderous,” evident due to his poor performance at Shiloh. Clausewitz quotes a French proverb: “the same man who shines at the second level is eclipsed at the top,” to illustrate this trend. In 20th century America, businessmen labeled this phenomenon, “The Peter Principle,” applicable to leadership in both the military and business.

generalship and character seems incorrect. A more “reasoned” and less self-confident Grant would not have even conceived of the risky move south of Vicksburg and the abandonment of his communications during the campaign; less confidence would have prohibited Sherman’s March, with all its risks in cutting loose from any supply line with Hood’s undefeated army still intact in his rear; a less bold Grant might have abandoned his Overland Campaign after the great casualties suffered in the Wilderness. Grant would not have been Grant without his self-confidence and natural inclination to take risks that on occasion proved unfounded. Also Grant’s confidence and moral courage proved contagious. Sherman remarked to Grant: “you go into battle without hesitation, as at Chattanooga—no doubts, no reserve; and I tell you this is what made us act with confidence.”⁴⁰

Belmont—Chaos and Boldness in Practice

We had cut our way in and could cut our way out just as well—Grant

They were growing impatient, at lying idle so long, almost in hearing to the guns of the enemy they had volunteered to fight against —Grant

Skirmish! Hell and damnation! I’d like to know what he calls a *Battle*—General Leonidas Polk⁴¹

Grant’s experience at Florida left him aggressive and anxious to get on with the war, an attitude inline with the feelings of his troops. With 20,000 men, “most of them under good drill,” Grant desired action. “What I want is to advance.” Despite the

⁴⁰ Clausewitz further finds blunders due to boldness, “a laudable error,” and only condemns boldness taken “when it defiantly ignores an expressed command.” “Deliberate caution” matches boldness in its own right, “and is just as powerful and effective, but such cases are rare.” Clausewitz, War, 190. Conger, Rise, xvii.

⁴¹ Grant, Memoirs, 138-39. Fuller, Generalship, 104.

dispersion of his forces in multiple garrisons, Grant asked permission to attack “the southern Gibraltar” of Columbus, Missouri. Denied this, Grant turned instructions to make a diversion in aid of operations against Jeff Thompson into a regular battle.

Descending downriver with five regiments, Grant’s troops debarked at Belmont, home to five Confederate regiments. Grant’s troops drove their enemy for several hours, eventually reaching and burning their camp.⁴²

Here things began to unravel, as officers and men alike looted and discipline dissolved. The Southerners recovered, landed reinforcements, separating the Union troops from their transports. Some of Grant’s officers believed “that to be surrounded was to be placed in a hopeless position,” and advocated surrender. Grant calmly ordered his troops to “cut our way out” and fight their way back to their boats. Grant shepherded his regiments to the landing, boarding only after assuring himself of the location of the enemy and safety of everyone else.⁴³

Materially as an engagement Belmont amounted to little in terms of numbers engaged and casualties compared to later battles, but Grant’s description of the engagement as a “skirmish” in a note to General Polk proposing a prisoner exchange dismayed him. Belmont included sharp fighting, each side suffering about 500 casualties. Strategically Belmont accomplished little. As Catton points out, inaccurate intelligence stimulated Northern action so the claims of Grant that without the battle, “Colonel Oglesby would have been captured or destroyed with this three thousand men” fails to ring true. Instead Belmont represents an important early step in the development

⁴² Grant, Memoirs, 138; GP 3:63-64; McPherson, Cry, 396.

⁴³ Grant, Memoirs, 141; Catton, South, 79.

of Grant and his army. Having “bloodied” his command (and himself as a commander) from that time on his troops acquired “a confidence . . . in themselves that did not desert them through the war.” Grant and his army “bonded,” at Belmont, to use a modern term, gaining confidence not just in themselves but also in each other.⁴⁴

Of greater importance, Grant demonstrated his (and the country’s) desire to get on with the war. Probably through intuition, Grant realized that action for its own sake defined the “cure” for the chaos that so affected Sherman and must affect others. Given uncertainty in war, the play of “chance and probability” affecting all military operations and the “blind natural force of violence” unleashed by combat, action provides the only available method of control. “Those commanders who dictated how, when, and where to engage the enemy had tremendous advantages.” Logically a commander who acts exercises more control over his own destiny (and that of his enemy) than one who waits. Clausewitz lists several explanations for this phenomenon, first among them “the fear and indecision native to the human mind,” which creates a “permanent tendency toward delay.” Aversion to physical danger and the moral responsibility of command inhibits action at all levels in war. These forces (as well as indifferent politics) turn war itself into something “tame and half-hearted.” Clausewitz contrasts this type of war to that of Bonaparte, “where warfare attained the unlimited degree of energy that we consider to be its elementary law.”⁴⁵

Grant displayed no “permanent tendency” to delay or indecision, either due to fear or half-hearted politics. Grant and his volunteers understood why they fought and

⁴⁴ Catton, South, 80; Grant, Memoirs, 143; Conger, Rise, 99-101.

⁴⁵ Clausewitz, War, 89; Glatthaar, Partners, 138; Clausewitz, War, 216-17.

did so with great energy. Grant's actions (and energy) as a commander at every level stands in stark contrast to the chronic inaction exhibited by many of his contemporaries. Thinking of Grant, Fuller offered the following: "It often happens in war that the man of energy is the man of destiny. He is like a hurricane—he is the true thunderbolt of war."⁴⁶

Grant commented on his methods in response to a staff officer's query regarding the correctness of one of his decisions. Grant agreed with the officer, he really could not with any certainty defend his decision, but offered the following:

In war anything is better than indecision. We must decide. If I am wrong we shall soon find it out, and can do the other thing. But not to decide wastes both time and money, and may ruin everything.⁴⁷

Grant rarely if ever exhibited fear, either of enemy fire or of the responsibility of command. At Belmont Grant "turned a demonstration into a battle for no better reason than that he did not like to make empty gestures." Like Clausewitz, Grant knew the engagement offers the only mechanism for progress in war, battle comprises the only act war can offer policy. After Belmont Grant again attempted to turn another of Halleck's orders for a demonstration into action: "I wonder if General Halleck would object to another 'skirmish' like Belmont." Halleck did object, ordering Grant not to bring on an engagement and no new "skirmish" took place.⁴⁸

Horatio Nelson advised his commanders of his methods before attacking the French fleet at Trafalgar: "No Captain can do very wrong if he places his Ship alongside

⁴⁶ Fuller, Generalship, 191.

⁴⁷ Simpson, Triumph, 249; Fuller, Personality, 280, discusses Clausewitz's reasoning ,concludeing, "probably the commonest error in generalship is indecision."

⁴⁸ Clausewitz, War, 95, 97, identifies only one "means," to the ends in war, "combat." This is true "even if no actual fighting occurs." Combat also includes actions far "removed from the brute discharge of hatred and enmity of a physical encounter." Perret, Soldier, 157.

that of an Enemy.”⁴⁹ Grant in a similar construction described his general philosophy of offensive war:

The art of war is simple enough. Find out where your enemy is. Get at him as soon as you can. Strike at him as hard as you can and as often as you can, and keep moving on.⁵⁰

Other phenomenon also emerged at Belmont. From this early stage Grant seeks the enemy’s destruction, but leaves the minutia of tactical decisions to subordinates. Grant telegraphed Colonel Oglesby before the battle: “The object is to destroy this (enemy) force and the method of doing it is left largely to your discretion.” Immediately after Belmont Grant ordered Oglesby to pursue the Rebel forces under Jeff Thompson and if found, to destroy them also. Grant leaves the route of pursuit and technique of destruction to Oglesby. Perhaps aware of the superiority of strategy to tactics, Grant declines to intervene in the details of the specific methods used for the carrying out of his orders. In this Grant anticipates modern “mission” tactics, which leaves a commander free to choose a mode of combat appropriate the mission. Subordinates are expected to use personal initiative, adapt to changing circumstances and focus on the achieving the substance of the goal rather than adhere to detailed orders. From his first battle, Grant the strategist does not “micro-manage” the tactics of the men in command on the field.⁵¹

Northern reaction to Belmont tended toward the negative. Generally the press felt the battle unnecessary and indecisive. Halleck felt Belmont an unwanted distraction, “an

⁴⁹ David Howarth, Trafalgar: The Nelson Touch, (New York: Atheneum, 1969), 73. Nelson specifically gave these orders in his memorandum to his captains before the annihilating battle of Trafalgar.

⁵⁰ Fuller, Personality, 78; GP2: 102-06.

⁵¹ Michael B. Ballard, U. S. Grant: The Making of a General, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 17-21; A. L. Conger, Rise of U. S. Grant, (New York: Century, 1931), 230-31; GP 2:102-06. Conger contrasts Grants methods with those of his mentor, C. F. Smith, who favored strict adherence to the specifics rather than the spirit of orders.

example of how not to make war.” The engagement left the enemy in possession of the battlefield, allowing them a “legitimate” claim to victory. Fortuitously Grant’s command in the West allowed more independence, as distances were too great for the micro-management often practiced in the East. In the East his tendency to take initiative without orders “would likely not be tolerated.” Grant felt some officers in that theatre lost their jobs due to just such excessive oversight. Grant benefited throughout the war from the fact of his Western deployment. Grant clearly benefited politically from Belmont in one respect: the battle “delighted Lincoln, who desperately desired action—any action.”⁵²

Two Rivers and Two Fortresses—Henry, Donalson and Unconditional Surrender Grant

Every one in the army has a plan, yet of thousands who have their plans there may not be a man capable of executing any one of them successfully—A. L. Conger

Take any number of outstanding men, some noted for intellect, other for their acumen, still others for boldness or tenacity of will: not one may possess the combination of qualities needed to make a greater than average commander—Clausewitz

Grant made a pretty fair fight for a Drunken man—J. R. Jones⁵³

Benjamin Franklin Cooling identifies fourteen “clairvoyants,” who advocated or contributed to the plan of attack made on the twin fortresses of Henry and Donalson. In the midst of the clairvoyants we find Admiral Porter (whose contribution proved essential) and Grant’s boss Henry Halleck who, in the presence of William T. Sherman, purportedly circled the forts on the map, remarking, “that’s the true line of operations.”

⁵² Perret, *Soldier*, 156-57. Hattaway and Jones, *How*, 52.

⁵³ Conger, *Rise*, 298. Clausewitz, *War*, 178. Simpson, *Triumph*, 119.

Grant blandly remarked to Washburn after the victory: “I see the credit of attacking the enemy by the way of the Tennessee and Cumberland is variously attributed.” Of the fourteen, only Grant acts, demonstrating the veracity of Clausewitz’s observations and descriptions regarding “genius” in war. Tactical choices are generally somewhat limited, often obvious and easy in their conception but require genius that pulverizes all obstacles and carries inspiration through to its fruition. Clausewitz reserves admiration for the “ultimate success of the whole.”⁵⁴

The move was obvious. “Maps clearly indicating the Union opportunities presented by the rivers were easily understood by soldiers with even limited formal military training.” Grant ordered a reconnaissance by General Smith, which confirmed “views I had previously held, that the true line of operations for us was up the Tennessee and Cumberland rivers.” Southerners also understood the importance of the area, built two forts in the area and started a third (Fort Henry being poorly sited and vulnerable to flooding). If many recognized the importance of the Forts only Grant pushed it and transformed the idea into reality. The strong mind—able to drive and carry out an operation—proved more important than the brilliant one, which conceives of the idea but takes no action. Two of the clairvoyants, Halleck and Buell, had their own commands but neither got their troops into action. In the words of Colonel William P. Johnston (son of Albert Sidney), “Grant made it, as it made Grant.”⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Benjamin Franklin Cooling, Forts Henry and Donelson: The Key to the Confederate Heartland (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1987) 66. William T. Sherman, Memoirs of William T. Sherman (New York: Library of America: 1990), 238; GP 4:409. Clausewitz, War, 119; 177.

⁵⁵ Ballard, Making, 29-30. Grant, Memoirs, 147. Fuller, Personality, 144. Some critics disagree. Simpson, Triumph, 118, suggests that the building of the forts themselves might have attracted Union attention. Archer Jones, How, 64-77, attributes success to Halleck’s conception and planning, as well as his choice of the aggressive Grant to carry it out.

The launching of a river war requires inter-service cooperation. Flag officer Andrew Hull Foote, the naval clairvoyant, “agreed with me perfectly as to the feasibility of the campaign up the Tennessee,” and lent his voice to Grant’s requests to Halleck for action against the forts. Grant and Foote’s informal and personal collaboration proved fortuitous, as no institutional framework for such a partnership existed. Cooperation throughout the war defines Grant and contributes to his success. Grant established a political culture in his commands in the West characterized by a sense of partnership and common action against a common enemy. The Western armies would suffer little of the divisiveness evident in the Army of the Potomac.⁵⁶

Grant moved south in early February of 1862. His tactical combinations misfired as Ft. Henry fell to Foote’s gunboats before his troops, delayed by lack of roads, dense forest and high water even reached the fort. Grant’s investment of Donalson a few days later, again delayed by terrain and bad weather, proved successful enough though subsequent probing attacks (some not ordered by Grant) misfired and were repulsed with heavy losses. The next day Foote’s flotilla attacked and was routed. The day after disaster struck the Union right and by noon the counter-attacking Confederates broke the siege and opened the road to Nashville and beyond.⁵⁷

Grant’s response demonstrates his coolness under pressure. He organized his own attack on the now-weakened Confederate left; re-organized and stabilized his right and resealed the siege. Grant left the Confederates with no options except surrender. In a

⁵⁶McPherson, *Cry*, 392. Nominally under Halleck’s orders, Foote’s relationship with Grant was between equals. For Grant’s ability to foster cooperation with the Navy, see Glatthaar, *Partners*, 163-189. For relations in the Army of the Potomac, see Catton, *Command*, 165-66, 326-345.

⁵⁷ Grant requested that additional troops be sent up the Tennessee for Ft. Henry’s defense. Grant feared a southern counter-attack on Henry from Confederates outside the area. The unanticipated counter-attack from troops inside Donalson achieved tactical surprise. See Catton, *South*, 152; O R VII, 1, p. 604.

sense this engagement marked a replay of Belmont: an initial success, followed by a crisis and its mastery. This pattern repeated itself often in the war, as circumstance, the actions (or inactions) of others or Grant's own misperceptions threatened to derail his designs. The pattern is deceptive. Grant's correct strategy allowed for unforeseen circumstances of weather, terrain and tactical reverses. His personal intervention often proved decisive in mastering a crisis, as part of the process of a strong mind carrying through its designs. "He had the genius to meet with each contingency, even a contingency produced by his own grave blunder."⁵⁸

Grant's education in command continued as he learned to master each engagement. Through his experiences at Belmont, Donalson, and later Shiloh, he reached a conclusion regarding the nature of battle reminiscent of Clausewitz's concept of the "culminating point of victory." General Badeau related Grant's observations:

I have often heard him declare that there comes a time, in every hard-fought battle, when both armies are nearly or quite exhausted, and it seems impossible for either to do more: this he believed the tuning-point; whichever after first renews the fight is sure to win.⁵⁹

Clausewitz finds that most engagements follow this pattern, though he also applies the concept strategically, to a campaign, a theatre or to an entire war. Predictably Clausewitz describes the myriad of situations conditioning the reaching of a point of decision. The culminating point of victory defines a psychological rather than a physical turning point. Resistance in some form is always possible as long as the political will

⁵⁸Howard C. Westwood quoted in McFeely, Grant, 115.

⁵⁹ Adam Badeau, Military History of U. S. Grant, (New York: D, Appleton and Company, 1881) p. 85.

exists. At Donalson, the Confederate commanders (with the exception of Forest) lost the will to continue.⁶⁰

“Man’s inhumanity to man—Makes countless thousands mourn,” Grant atypically quoted the poetry of Robert Burns after viewing the carnage after his counter-attack at Donalson.⁶¹ Though not as bloody as subsequent battles, Grant expected a siege at Donalson rather than the fluid battle that transpired. He declined to throw his generally raw troops at fortifications. While perhaps not yet fully aware of the technological advances making offensive warfare even more costly and difficult, his tactics of siege seem correct given his uncertainty about the numbers and quality of the enemy and his entrenchment. Throughout the war all of Grant’s great strategic offensives contained a tactical siege component defensive in nature. This unlikely “innovation” took advantage of the innate tactical superiority of the defensive, and “rescued” his troops from the casualties of the direct assault.⁶² At Donalson Grant effectively demonstrated the proper conduct of the so-called offensive-defensive method of warfare. Grant maneuvered offensively and decisively strategically, leaving the enemy to attack his positions tactically or lose. That Grant believed a Confederate counter-stroke more likely at Ft. Henry than from inside Donalson (as did Halleck, who ordered him to fortify Henry) in no way detracts from his correct strategy. While never loath to press a direct assault,

⁶⁰ Clausewitz, War, 566-73.

⁶¹ Catton, South, 173,.

⁶² Hagerman, Origins, 162-63, details Grant’s use or neglect of field fortifications as part of siege warfare at Donalson. Grant’s use of entrenchments tactically mirrored that of most commanders in the Civil War, becoming ubiquitous both offensively and defensively by 1864. Grant’s use of entrenchments (a tactical device) strengthened his strategy of the offensive/defensive. Fuller, Personality, 270, questions both Grant and Lee’s understanding of the offensive use of entrenchments.

Grant repeated the offensive use of siege tactics at Vicksburg and Petersburg later in the war.⁶³

The first of Grant's significant engagements produced striking results. Using Clausewitzian criteria to evaluate "the effects of victory," we begin with effects on the instruments, the armies themselves. Materially, Grant's victory at Donelson, often marginalized because of the smaller numbers of troops involved, proved superior to any of Lee's triumphs. Grant's 15,000 (raised to 27,000 by the end of the campaign) captured and destroyed a Southern army, imposing losses of some 16,623 prisoners, killed and wounded at a cost of some 2,886 casualties. By way of comparison at Chancellorsville, Lee's "masterpiece of audacity," 59,000 Confederates inflicted losses on the Union of 16,845 men in exchange for a loss of 13,000. Clausewitz suggests looking to the number of prisoners in any evaluation of an engagement. Their number indicates the true extent of victory, the "tangible evidence of its scale," as little difference often exists in the numbers of killed and wounded between loser and victor. Prisoners indicate failure beyond the material, the loss of moral equilibrium and coherence of an army. Loss of moral equilibrium and coherence proved a non-issue as Grant captured the entire Confederate force. Grant noted Donelson's surrender comprised "largest bag of prisoners

⁶³Grant, Memoirs, 154; Catton, South, 152. Longstreet believed the adoption of offensive-defensive by Lee and the Confederacy (especially during the Gettysburg campaign) the proper method to conduct the war. Lee generally operated on the "defensive-offensive." Strategically the South defended, but Lee usually opted for the tactical offensive. See McPherson, Cry, 408, for threats to Crump's landing, 471-76 for Lee's use of offensive tactics and strategy. See Edwin B. Coddington, The Gettysburg Campaign: a Study in Command, (New York: Scribner's, 1968), 9-11 for a discussion of Longstreet's views.

of war in American history,” and also noted corresponding heavy loss of morale on the state of Southern arms.⁶⁴

Clausewitz next asks for an evaluation of the engagement’s effects on the belligerent states. In the North, Grant’s famous demand for unconditional surrender fired the imagination of the home front, made Grant a hero, and gave him a promotion and a new name, “Unconditional Surrender Grant.” His triumph mitigated the effects of stalemate in the east and his directness provided a sharp contrast to the indecisive maneuverings of McClellan’s Army of the Potomac. Turning south, “the effect on morale in Dixie was devastating,” as Albert Sidney Johnson evacuated Nashville, Columbus and Kentucky and most of Tennessee came under Union control.⁶⁵

Clausewitz’s third component in defining victory regards the effects of a battle on the future course of the war. Union occupation of the areas evacuated deprived the South of some 50,000 potential recruits, and removed a significant number of troops from the battlefield. Grant’s operations opened the interior of the South to further invasion along the river lines, just as he hypothesized when lobbying for his attack. The Union moves also broke the Memphis and Charleston Railroad, enabled operations aimed at Vicksburg down the Mississippi and “the Confederate defensive line in the west had been shattered once and for all.” Taken together all of these events define a great strategic benefit to the

⁶⁴Lt. Col. Joseph B. Mitchell, Decisive Battles of the Civil War, (New York: G. P Putnam & Sons, 1955) omits Donalson from the 14 battles he considers decisive. Fuller, Study, 191; General Sir James Marshall-Cornwall, Grant as Military Commander, (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1995), 61. Lee inflicted more casualties on Union forces only at Antietam, Gettysburg (and possibly the Wilderness) but they cannot be counted as “victories,” politically in any sense of the word. Controversy exists regarding casualties of all Civil War Battles. Grady McWhiney and Perry D. Jamieson, Attack and Die: Civil War Tactics and the Southern Heritage, (University, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1982), 19, lists Federal losses at Chancellorsville as only 11,116—2,000 less than Lee’s. Douglas Southall Freeman, Lee, (New York: Scribners, 1961), 303 lists Lee’s losses slightly higher. Clausewitz, War, 232-33. Catton, South, 184.

⁶⁵ Smith, Grant, 165. McPherson, Cry, 402-3

North for further prosecution of the war. J. F. C. Fuller saw the west most significant to the defense of Virginia, and finds “no other battle during the war affected such results or opened out such possibilities.”⁶⁶

Northerners civilian and military enjoyed a valuable and significant boost in commitment and confidence while Southerners despaired over the loss of an army, Tennessee and Kentucky. Most significantly Donalson’s fall forced Confederate strategists to confront the central question of the war: does the center of gravity of the rebellion lie in Virginia or in the West? This question and Southern strategy remained in flux throughout the conflict.⁶⁷

Von Schlieffen dryly identified the necessary components of decisive battle: “a Hannibal is needed on one side, an a Terentius Varro on the other.” Donalson proved decisive, but Schlieffen had it wrong; Hannibal’s great triumph at Cannae, upon which Schlieffen modeled his theory of war, proved indecisive. Hannibal won the battles and lost the war. Effective leadership might diminish the tactical dimensions of Grant’s victory through saving most of the Confederate army, but the forts’ defense required a greater commitment to defeat Grant’s strategy. Grant knew General Pillow in command inside the fort from the Mexican War and his evaluation conditioned his actions during the siege: “When we knew the name of the general opposing we knew enough about him to make our plans accordingly.” If Grant benefited from poor tactical leadership inside Fort Donalson, he also defeated A. S. Johnston’s strategy outside. Even escape of the

⁶⁶ Smith, Grant, 165; Grant, Memoirs, 146; Catton, South, 181; Fuller, Personality, 144. Fuller lists 170,000 potential recruits lost to the South.

⁶⁷ McPhearson, Cry, 402.

entire garrison from the cauldron of Donalson leaves the Southern center still pierced, Nashville still out-flanked and the River lines still open to attack.⁶⁸

A Question of Surprise: Shiloh

We did not fortify our camps against an attack, because we had no orders to do so, and because such a course would have made our raw men timid—Sherman

During the turmoil, his activity and generalship appear to have been quite wonderful—J. F. C. Fuller

It would be a mistake to regard surprise as a key element of success in war—Clausewitz⁶⁹

Grant did receive orders from Halleck before the battle of Shiloh to fortify. Early in the war Grant (and many others) believed that “drill and discipline is more necessary for the men than fortifications.” At Ironton in August of 1861, Grant stated, “I am not fortifying here at all” and he claimed to “have forgotten all about” that branch of the service. Grant lamented his lack of an engineering officer and explains he did not wish to gain what he termed “a Pillow notoriety” (in the Mexican War General Pillow famously constructed an abatis with the ditch on the *inside*) by building defective fortifications. After the fall of Fort Henry Halleck, dispatched picks and spades, instructing Grant to impress the slaves of local secessionists, fortify and await reinforcements before attacking Donalson. By then McPherson, an excellent engineer had joined Grant’s

⁶⁸ Hattaway and Jones, How, 683. Most writers question Johnston’s half-measures, neither defending Donalson with his entire force nor concentrating for a counter-stroke elsewhere. Parret, Soldier, 164-65 suggests Grant overextended himself after taking Fort Henry, leaving Cairo vulnerable to attack. GP: 28:419.

⁶⁹ Sherman, Memoirs, I 249; Fuller, Generalship, 111-113.

command. Grant preferred to “keep moving on,” declining to entrench as ordered. Grant’s apparent distain for fortification continued until Shiloh.⁷⁰

In March of 1862, Albert Sidney Johnston amalgamated his forces with those of Bragg and Beauregard and launched them against Grant and Buell. Johnston sought to defeat each in turn and reverse of the verdict of Fort Donalson, changing the course of the war in the West. The plan “looked beautiful on paper,” but the inexperienced troops and their commanders generated too much friction to efficiently carry it out. The Confederate approach march towards Shiloh proved blundering and defective, as did Union dispositions, intelligence and security. The Southerners straggled, fired their weapons to see if they functioned when wet, and became disorganized and unmanageable. Their commanders proved barley able to concentrate their numbers and surprise Grant. Johnston’s delayed attack barely reached Grant before the arrival of Buell.⁷¹

The uneven composition of the Southern army generated a bizarre method of tactical deployment on the part of the Confederates, curiously based on Napoleon’s blueprint for Waterloo. Better to have Bragg’s inexperienced men follow Polk’s and Breckenridge’s better-prepared troops and attack in echelon. While units might become mingled, the veterans would encourage the novices in the attack. The Confederates hammered the Union forces all day and achieved a tactical and moral ascendancy over their opponents, many of whom fled the field. Most of the soldiers present believed the Southerner’s success signaled a major victory. But North and South alike stumbled and blundered into battle at Shiloh and Grant later questioned claims of superior Southern

⁷⁰ Catton, South, 212; GP:2, 129; Smith, Grant, 150-52.

⁷¹ Hattaway and Jones, How, 165-66.

strategy, generalship and tactical prowess: “the particular skill claimed I could not and still cannot see.”⁷²

General Buell arrived and asked of Grant’s plans for retreat. Grant answered that he still believed he could win. After the surrender of some 2,500 men under General Prentiss, Grant replied to the correspondent Cadwalader’s suggestion that the day was lost: “Oh no, they can’t break our lines tonight—it is too late. Tomorrow we shall attack them with fresh troops and drive them, of course.” General McPhearson also believed the army defeated and quizzed Grant, “Shall I make preparations for retreat?” Grant responded “Retreat? No. I propose to attack at daylight and whip them.” One of the army’s surgeons questioned Grant: “General, things are going decidedly against us today.” Grant answered “Not at all, sir. We are whipping them there now.” Towards the end of the day, Sherman, whose raw division nearly collapsed, felt the best course was “to put the river between us and the enemy and recuperate.” Instead of stating his opinion directly Sherman cautiously said, “well, Grant, we’ve had the devil’s own day, haven’t we?” Grant countered, “Lick ‘em tomorrow though.”⁷³

Southern officers apparently felt the same way as their Union counterparts. Beauregard informed his superiors that “(we) gained a complete victory, driving the enemy from every position.” General Hardee that night also failed to recognize the danger and went to sleep.⁷⁴

⁷² Smith, Grant, 187, finds Johnston and most West Pointers mesmerized by the reputation of the Emperor. Grant, Memoirs, 189-190.

⁷³ Simpson, Triumph, 132; Catton, South, 238-42; Grant, Memoirs, 179, generously excuses Buell’s suggestion of retreat as he witnessed at his arrival the thousands of stragglers at the rear of the Union army. Grant makes no mention of any other officer’s suggestions to retreat.

⁷⁴ OR I, X, p. 384, 518; Smith, Grant, 201.

Shiloh illustrates the decisive moral advantage stemming from Grant's leadership. Thinking tactically all of the Union commanders on record believed the reverses they suffered constituted a clear defeat and that they should retreat. Most of the Union common soldiers felt the same way as Buell, Sherman, and McPherson. The Southern leadership made a similar judgment. Grant, clearer in his perception of the battle, visited each of his divisional commanders "before any reinforcements had reached the field (i.e., the forces of Wallace and Buell)" and instructed each of them to make arrangements for an attack in the early morning "with their entire divisions."⁷⁵

After the first day at Shiloh, Grant spent a terrible night in the rain, exposed to the wounded and dying as well as the elements. If he evidenced an emotional detachment during the Battle of Shiloh reminiscent of his experience in Mexico, it ended with the actual fighting. He quoted no poetry as after Donalson, instead finding the sight of the wounded and dying "more unendurable than encountering the enemy's fire."⁷⁶

Grant did attack at daylight, did drive them, whip them and lick 'em, as he predicted the day before. Grant's judgment proves his sense of balance and his ability to see the true moral and physical situation through the fog of war. Grant seemed less affected by the timing of the Confederate attack than anyone else. He remained unimpressed by the number of stragglers sheltering beneath the bluff and the mixed ability of the "green" divisions of Sherman and Prentiss to fight. Grant sensed the

⁷⁵ Grant, *Memoirs*, 181; Perrot, *Soldier*, 192, believes Grant's actions throughout the first day at Shiloh indicate his intention to achieve a double-envelopment reminiscent of Cannae, directing Wallace's division to attack on his right and Nelson's (first to arrive from Buell's command) on his left. Neither proved able to get his unit into action on that day, robbing Grant of his battle of annihilation.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

moment the Southern attack spent itself, “the culminating point of victory,” seized the initiative, and won the battle.

The Northern Press, Strategic Surprise, A Defeat and a Victory

There can be no doubt to our army being surprised, it was worse, we were astonished—Colonel J. E. Smith

If the enemy had sent word when and how they would attack we could not have been better prepared—Grant

Tactical initiative can rarely be expanded into a major victory, but a strategic one has often brought the whole war to an end at a stroke—Clausewitz⁷⁷

Most of Grant’s biographers find his assertions of preparedness at Shiloh at worst disingenuous and at best a over-reaction to the patently false reporting by some elements of the Northern press. Grant’s own words seem on the surface preposterous, Grant’s absence at the beginning of the battle proof enough of his surprise. As always finding “truth” proves a little more complicated.

Grant wrote his wife Julia before Shiloh saying that he soon expected victory in the biggest battle of the war. Grant also dispatched batteries to Crump’s Landing, believing an attack on a portion of his forces at that quarter imminent. He also directed W. H. L. Wallace to send reinforcements to Crump’s if necessary. Grant expected the arrival of Buell’s forces momentarily, making repulse of any Southern thrust even more likely. Grant also ordered his excellent engineer officer to lie out a defensive line, which remained unfortified. Sherman, McPherson and C. F. Smith all lobbied against

⁷⁷ Catton, South, 259; GP 5:73-74; Clausewitz, War, 363.

entrenchments for Grant's raw troops, each favored increased drill. Grant agreed due to his experience in the Mexican War. Grant expected a fight, clearly at Corinth (if brought on by himself) or at Crump's Landing (if brought on by the Confederates). The Union troops were in the process of concentrating, an advantage defensively or as prologue to attacking Corinth.⁷⁸

Theory harmonizes the seemingly contradictory accounts of Union surprise at Shiloh. Clausewitz differentiates between tactics and strategy, between the engagement itself and its use for strategy and between tactical and strategic surprise. Tactically, when the actual engagement arrived it "astonished" or "stunned" the Union troops in its timing, ferocity and location. Strategically Grant expected a confrontation, desired one, sought to bring it on through his own initiative and responded to it when it came with cool professionalism. If no engagement occurs through Union initiative, Grant's thinking is clear: "If they come to attack us, we can whip them, as I have more than twice as many troops as I had at Fort Donalson." Grant said all of this without even acknowledging the imminent arrival of Buell. When the actual fighting began Grant responded in a dispatch to Buell: "I have been looking for this but did not expect the attack to be made before Monday or Tuesday." In summation, Grant suffered tactical surprise at Shiloh.

Clausewitz describes tactical surprise such as occurred Shiloh (and surprise generally) as limited in scale and effect. As well as identifying limitation, Clausewitz cites examples (Napoleon against Blucher in 1814 on the Marne, and Frederick's at Liegnitz in 1760) attributing surprise in both cases merely to "fortunate coincidence." The "cunning" of a commander in war, like the false admiration critics reserve for an

⁷⁸ GP 5: 9-12; Simpson, Triumph, 130, 128; Parret, Soldier, 185; Catton, South, 219; Conger, Rise, 221, 243.

attack on the flank or rear, “have so little strategic value that they are used only if a ready-made opportunity presents itself.”⁷⁹

Clausewitz continues:

Yet however much one longs to see opposing generals vie with one another in craft, cleverness, and cunning, the fact remains that these qualities do not figure prominently in the history of war. Rarely do they stand out amid the welter of events and circumstances.⁸⁰

Grant responded to his critics in his memoirs and is correct in his denigration of both Confederate tactical and strategic designs at Shiloh. Surprise or no, Johnston’s 40,000 Confederates lacked the offensive power to *destroy* Grant’s 40,000, let alone Buell’s army, also close at hand. Grant, like Clausewitz, never “looked for genius in places where it does not and cannot exist (in tactics).” However great the initial alarm and tactical success generated at Shiloh, however close the Confederates came to reaching the river, a critic finds it difficult to forecast decisive tactical or strategic Confederate benefit from the battle. Johnston’s original design posited driving in Grant’s left, separating him from the Tennessee River and pinning him against Owl Creek. Johnston presumed such a course must force Grant’s surrender. Even if Johnston drove Grant (which he did) and separated Grant from the river (which proved beyond his strength), Buell’s intact force still remained close at hand. Even out-maneuvered Grant’s army still possessed great defensive power and Grant’s character argues against surrender. The only destruction of armies in the entire course of the war occurred with Grant in command after maneuver and siege, not from direct attacks driving people into rivers. However great the surprise (pretty good at Shiloh) and cunning the tactical combinations (the “Waterloo”

⁷⁹ Clausewitz, War, 198-203; Conger, Rise, 221, 243.

⁸⁰ Clausewitz, War, 202.

deployment here served Johnston about as well as it served Napoleon) tactical surprise failed to overturn Grant's correct aggressive strategy targeting Southern armies: "I regarded the campaign we were engaged in as an offensive one."⁸¹

If Shiloh in its conception and execution represents no great Confederate achievement, it reflects even poorer strategic judgment on the part of the Union. Shiloh represents the price the Union paid for Halleck's breaking-up of the Federal army after Donalson. Failure to concentrate attack and defeat the disparate elements of Johnston's command in detail enabled their subsequent concentration against Grant. Johnston bravely attempted what Halleck lacked the moral courage to do and came close to winning a tactical victory in the west. Grant of course wanted battle with the forces eventually massed against him at Shiloh, but preferred to face them separately. In short, both sides sought battle somewhere in west; Johnston moved first and so enjoyed the value of the initiative. Halleck failed to act and so unnecessarily risked the reversal or stalemate of the course of the war in the western theatre.

The battle generated fundamentally different results throughout the North and South. Ironically given Confederate defeat on the battlefield, criticism of Grant both justified and unjustified nearly lost him his command: "at no time in the war was he more bitterly attacked." Despite his occupation of the field of battle and his forcing the retreat of the enemy, the question of surprise and the high casualties produced among the Northern home front the impression of defeat. For many Northerners, Shiloh defined no victory. Public opinion nearly accomplished what Confederate arms could not: Grant's

⁸¹ Grant, Memoirs, 189-90, 171; Smith, Grant, 184, describes Johnston's designs. Thomas's set-piece battle at Nashville nearly destroyed Hood though his army escaped Thomas's "pursuit," with 15,000 men still under arms at the time of Hood's resignation. Hattaway and Jones, How, 656.

dismissal. The significance of such an event rises to the strategic level in its implications. Lincoln as representative of the state and the primary maker of policy, defended Grant: “Mr. Lincoln stood like a wall of fire,” between the general and “the demands of insolence and cowardice.” Lincoln’s steadfastness politically matched Grant’s militarily, and together they deprived the Confederates of a victory.⁸²

For Southerners failure at Shiloh signaled the defeat of their attempt to re-conquer West Tennessee, a result of strategic significance. The retreat of the army also underlined a significant tactical reversal, even given the successes of the first day and the high casualties inflicted on the Union. Materially a dead heat, Shiloh constituted a defeat for the South in the estimation of both its army and its home front. Despite an essentially stalemated tactical engagement, the Southern response morally to the failure of its western concentration defined a strategic defeat. The chance to destroy Grant and Buell and reverse the course of the war in the west proved unrealizable.

To the home front in the North, Shiloh looked more like a defeat or at best a bloody irrelevancy. But for the Union troops Shiloh represented progress, perhaps two steps forward and one step back, but progress nonetheless. Grant summed up the effect on the army:

It was there that our western soldiers met the enemy in a pitched battle. From that day on they never went into action without feeling sure they would win. Shiloh broke the prestige of the Southern Confederacy.⁸³

⁸² Catton, *South*, 251; McPherson, *Trial*, 85, quoting Grant’s sponsor, Washburne. Simpson points out Lincoln probably never offered the “I can’t spare this man; he fights” quotation universally attributed to him. See Simpson, *Triumph*, 136.

⁸³ GP 5:420.

Again using Clausewitz's formula for evaluating battles, Shiloh constitutes a victory in the eyes of the Union army and government and a defeat in the eyes of the Union home front. Confederates of all stripes judged Shiloh a clear defeat. For them the loss of the field of battle, the loss of A. S. Johnston and the defeat of Southern strategy defined Shiloh. In terms of the further prosecution of the war the battle only benefited the Union. Grant might have erased doubt throughout the North by a vigorous pressing of the retreating Confederates, as an enemy's "really crippling losses . . . only start with his retreat." In battles with no pursuit, casualty differentials often prove unremarkable and therefore not an accurate determination of victory.⁸⁴ Instead Grant declined to press the Confederates, stating long after the fact:

I wanted to pursue, but had not the heart to order the men who had fought desperately for two days, lying in the mud and rain whenever not fighting, and I did not feel disposed to positively order Buell, or any part of his command to pursue.⁸⁵

Grant, like his men also had fought desperately for two days, also lying in the mud and rain. The anomalous command situation aside, Grant's failure to pursue seems out of character. Michael Ballard identifies a post-Shiloh Grant humbled and shocked by his experiences during the battle that affected both his actions and judgment. Though he eventually loses his "post-Shiloh funk," the casualties and scale of the battle accounts in Ballard's estimation for a lapse in Grant's aggressiveness. Shiloh marked a turning point in Grant's thinking about the war, in his own memory if not in actual fact. The violence

⁸⁴ Clausewitz, War 230-31.

⁸⁵ Grant, Memoirs, 184

and costs of that battle and the constant and continuing pressures of irregular war demonstrated the inadequacy of previous means the Union used to wage war.⁸⁶

A People's War

It was the restive populace and the guerrillas, not Shiloh, that turned Grant to the notion of hard war—Brooks Simpson

The most anxious period of the war, to me—Grant

War can be a matter of degree—Clausewitz⁸⁷

Clausewitz describes a process to determine the nature of a particular war and the degree of force needed to win it:

At the outset of a war its character and scope should be determined on the basis of the political probabilities. The closer these political probabilities drive the war toward the absolute, the more the belligerent states are involved and drawn into its vortex.⁸⁸

Clausewitz goes on to state that such probabilities are seldom ever fully known, thus his admonition to keep the ideal of absolute war in mind as a point of reference in determining the scale of effort required. Grant's determination of the "degree" of the war took time. Grant's biographers generally quote uncritically his assertion in his memoirs that Shiloh marked a turning point in his thinking about the war:

Up to the battle of Shiloh I, along with thousands of others, believed that the rebellion against the Government would collapse

⁸⁶ Ballard, Making, 75.

⁸⁷ Simpson, Peace, 24-25. Grant, Memoirs, 205. Clausewitz, War, 581.

⁸⁸ Clausewitz, War, 585.

suddenly and soon, if a decisive victory could be gained over any of its armies.⁸⁹

Clausewitz suggested some battles fail to stun the loser, but instead stimulate him to greater efforts. Shiloh constituted one such battle. Ten days after Shiloh the Confederate government instituted conscription, and Grant remarked two months later that “the whole state of Mississippi capable of bearing arms seem to be entering the army.” Guerrilla and irregular warfare waged against the Union provided additional clues to the true nature of Confederate will to resistance, the “kind of war on which they were embarking.” Though Southern political and social weaknesses existed and Grant identified some of them, the extent of that weakness, like Southern strengths, proved unknowable until revealed through practice by war. The use of irregular troops in concert with cavalry raids in the Union rear by leaders such as Nathan Forest and Van Dorn completed Grant’s conversion: “I gave up all idea of saving the Union except by complete conquest.” The appalling violence and bloodshed of the Shiloh predictably in Clausewitz’s view started a “reciprocal process pushing the war farther towards the absolute.” In its immediate aftermath Grant still failed to appreciate this, writing: “one more fight and then easy sailing to the close of the war.”⁹⁰

Theory, Clausewitz asserted, “has the duty to give priority to the absolute form of war,” not as a proposal for determining methods or operations, but instead “as a point of reference . . . measuring all his hopes and fears by it.” Grant hoped for “easy sailing,” and Lincoln feared “a remorseless revolutionary conflict.” The

⁸⁹ Grant, Memoirs, 191. Simpson, Peace, 24, alone among Grant’s major biographers documents Grant’s “conversion” to belief in a war of conquest later than Grant’s memoirs indicate. In all probability conversion required a process and took place over time. The scale of violence at Shiloh contributed to that process, thus Grant’s inaccurate recollection of it in his memoirs.

⁹⁰GP 5:204. Clausewitz, War, 88. Grant, Memoirs, 191. GP 5:47.

Southern response to Shiloh and the intensification of irregular warfare provided the appropriate measure and revealed the shortcomings of their original views. The American Civil War resembled the more absolute forms of war Clausewitz observed fighting revolutionary France in Europe. The Austrians and Prussians initially failed in their confrontation with France “because the transformation of war had not yet been sufficiently revealed by history.” Grant and Lincoln required a similar revelation of the “degree” of absoluteness of the Civil War’s character. Their experiences changed policy. Each began “approximating it (absolute war) when *he can* or *when he must*,” as advised by Clausewitz.⁹¹

General Badeau, writing immediately after war states that Grant recognized the need to conduct a “People’s War” in order to conquer the will of Southern civilians. Grant’s realization came over time, as documented in his letters. In August of 1861, Grant remarked on the “great fools” in Missouri, “who will never rest until they bring upon themselves all the horrors of war in its worst form.” Grant at this early date exhibits an understanding of some of the nature and contradictions of guerilla style war: “The people are inclined to carry on a guerilla Warfare that must eventuate in retaliation and when it does commence it will be hard to control.”⁹² The dynamic of guerrilla war best demonstrates Clausewitz observation that wars tend to escalate, through the application of greater and greater amounts of violence: “War is an act of force. Each side, therefore, compels its opponent to follow suit; a reciprocal action is started which

⁹¹ Clausewitz, War, 584, 581.

⁹² Badeau, Military, 3:29; GP 2:82-83.

must lead, in theory, to extremes.” In guerilla war, the remorseless revolutionary conflict Lincoln feared, violence (often instigated by the guerillas) incites retaliation against civilian populations. Often indiscriminate and inappropriate, retaliation drives guerilla recruitment and further violence. Irregular forces rely on this dynamic to unify and radicalize the local population, thus creating popular support and more guerillas.⁹³

Grant prevaricated in his own judgments as he struggled to determine the degree of commitment of the civilian populations he confronted, the “political probabilities” of civilian resistance and the policy appropriate to their behavior:

I have changed my mind so much that I don't know what to think . . . Send Union troops among them and respect all their rights, pay for everything you get and they become desperate and reckless because their state sovereignty is invaded. Troops of the opposite march through and take everything they want, leaving no pay but script, and they become desperate secession partisans because they have nothing more to lose.⁹⁴

Irregular or guerilla war presents an unsolvable tactical dilemma to an army waging an offensive war and occupying territory. Occupation requires dispersal of troops in garrisons and on guard duty. Dispersal allows enemy concentration against portions of an occupier's forces. An aggressive enemy always finds a target. “Civilian” part time soldiers seek out a bridge or an unguarded section of railway. Mounted raiders operate almost at will in occupied areas, gaining intelligence and supplies from local populations. If attacked, raiders and guerillas return to friendly areas or disperse into the civilian population.

⁹³ Clausewitz, War, 77.

⁹⁴ GP 2:105.

Clausewitz focused on the political unity of the occupied to determine the ability of an invader to make war in the face of “the people in arms”:

If the enemy country is rather loosely knit, if its people are soft and have forgotten what war is like, a triumphant invader will have no great trouble in leaving a wide swathe of country safely in his rear; but if he is faced with a brave and loyal populace the area of safety will resemble a narrow triangle.⁹⁵

Sherman’s remarks mirrored Clausewitz’s and reflect the nature of guerilla conflict: “The war closes in behind and leaves the same enemy behind.” Grant of course attempted to do everything he could to mitigate the unity of the enemy left in the Union rear and promote allegiance in the Border States. Upon his occupation of Paducah, Missouri, he issued the following:

Proclamation to the Citizen of Paducah! I have come among you, not as an enemy, but as your friend and fellow-citizen, not to injure or annoy you, but to respect the rights, and to defend and enforce the rights of all loyal citizens . . . I am here to defend you against this enemy and to assert and maintain the authority and sovereignty of your Government and mine. I have nothing to do with opinions. I shall deal only with armed rebellion and its aiders and abettors.⁹⁶

“I have nothing to do with opinions” underlines Grant’s commitment to the stated political goals of his government and a desire not to antagonize the “loosely knit” populations in the Border States through actions odious or insulting. The “rights” he is committed to defend and enforce primarily refers to slavery, as well as to more conventional property rights. In spite of this and other statements by the Federal government, Grant observed, “many seem to be entirely ignorant of the object of the

⁹⁵ Clausewitz, War, 621.

⁹⁶ GP 2:194-195.

present hostilities.” The occupied, with no overt evidence, believe “the ultimate object is to extinguish, by force, slavery.”⁹⁷

The drift towards extremes, the “reciprocal action” of Clausewitz’s observation, progressed by degree, regardless of the restraining actions of policy pursued by “moderates” such as Grant. Natural fears of an occupying army played its part: “They thought that evry(sic) horror known in the whole catalogue of disasters following a state of war was going to be their portion at once.” Providing security to Unionist allies and protection from forced enlistments proved difficult. One of Grant’s officers reported, “four fifths of the Inhabitants are ready to return to the Union, whenever the Government can assure them from punishment by the Rebel Army.” The lack of cavalry and the very nature of irregular warfare made such protection difficult. Grant suggested a solution, advocating the organization of mounted “homeguards.” If the locals proved unable to mount themselves “horses could be obtained from secessionists, who have been aiding and abetting the southern cause.”⁹⁸

The “narrow triangle” Clausewitz discussed seemed to contract even further over time as the violence escalated. Modern “propaganda” played a role. Grant observed, “My Regt. has been reported cut to pieces once that I know of and I don’t know but oftener, whilst a gun has not been fired at us.” Overt “immoderate” Union actions also contributed. General Pope’s pronouncements on guerilla activity made policy—bad policy. Pope inaugurated a system holding civilians financially responsible for guerilla

⁹⁷ Ibid, 80.

⁹⁸ Ibid, 72-73, 105-06,128; GP 4:348-49.

activities in their midst. In addition, Pope ordered Southern civilians apprehended committing acts of war shot without civil process.⁹⁹

Grant understood the necessity of dealing justly with civilians in areas of occupation, urging his officers to discover the “true politics” of those accused of disloyalty. In some areas “there is not a sufficiency of Union sentiment left in this portion of the state to save Sodom,” while in other cases the unwise actions of Union troops created the problem. Grant’s discipline proved severe regarding outrages by Union troops against civilians: “the officer in command will be held strictly accountable for the conduct of his men, and where they are caught in such acts they should be shot upon the spot.” Grant chose not to react in the manner of Pope. Clausewitz suggested in popular uprisings the center of gravity lies with public opinion, and “blow after blow must be aimed in the same direction,” targeting that center of gravity. Grant attempted to do this, seeing no need for draconian military measures that backfire politically, actions stimulating rather than discouraging resistance. Sometimes the best use of the engagement to achieve the goals of policy is to fight no engagement at all. Grant struck blow after blow at public opinion by not fighting.¹⁰⁰

For Grant the important point remained the fairness and integrity of Union policy. Those who are loyal must be preserved and protected. Those dispossessed by the depredations of the war must be supported at the expense of the disloyal that launched the conflict:

Many persons, who have been driven from their homes, and deprived of the means of subsistence, by the acts of disloyal citizens of

⁹⁹GP 2:80; Hattaway and Jones, How, 211-12.

¹⁰⁰ GP 2:80, 142-143, 211-212, 235; Clausewitz, War, 596.

Kentucky and Missouri, and their substance taken, for the support of a rebellion against this Government, Humanity dictates that these people should be comfortably supported, and justice demands that the class of persons who have caused their sufferings should bear the expense of the same.¹⁰¹

This idea permeated Grant's actions throughout the war. He knew his actions made policy and he lamented the lack of political direction from his superiors: "I am entirely without orders for my guidance in matters like the above and without recent Acts of Congress which bear upon them." Grant always proved a great simplifier. Property capable of supporting rebellion by definition constitutes "contraband a target for "destruction," or confiscation. Providing the protections of the U. S. Constitution (i.e. slavery) to those in rebellion against it, made no sense to the soldiers or to Grant. One soldier, invoking the Dread Scott decision, illustrated his point: "We are in effect advocating the doctrine that the Secesh have no rights a white man is bound to respect." Grant later in the war applied this principle globally to his "raiding" strategy, epitomized by Sheridan's campaign in the Shenandoah and Sherman's march through Georgia. Military stores and weaponry defined only one of the components supporting the rebellion. Agricultural goods and of course slaves also propped up the Southern war effort and therefore enjoyed no protection.¹⁰²

Grant's first descent on Vicksburg failed logistically due the effects of irregular warfare. Grant's troops remained strained to the limit; 62,000 men protected railways and towns from guerillas and cavalry raiders while Grant with 36,000 men confronted Vicksburg. Grant painstakingly built up a supply base at Holly Springs to support his

¹⁰¹ GP 2:349.

¹⁰² GP 2:102; Archer Jones, Civil War Command & Strategy: The Process of Victory and Defeat, (New York: Free Press, 1992), 150.

attack on the city. Earl Van Dorn's cavalry took the place, destroyed his supplies, wrecked his campaign and adding a final insult, captured Mrs. Grant. Grant determined to rely logistically on the guerilla proof Mississippi rather than railroads for his next move on Vicksburg.

In addition, his experience after losing his supply base stimulated another revelation regarding logistics: "We could have subsisted off the country for two months," Grant related, rather than the two weeks required to return to Grand Junction. Grant felt the loss of supplies at Holly Springs more than compensated for by those taken from the countryside after the battle and by the lessons learned.¹⁰³

¹⁰³ Hattaway and Jones, How, 311; Catton, South, 373; Grant, Memoirs, 226.

Chapter 11

Vicksburg to Chattanooga—Thinking in Campaigns and Pursuing a National Strategy that Doesn't Exist

Our belief then is that any kind of interruption, pause, or suspension of activity is inconsistent with the nature of offensive war—Clausewitz

I don't like the project for several reasons—Sherman

He knows he has to do something or off goes his head—Cadwallader Washburn

You can do a great deal in eight days—Grant¹

The single characteristic most descriptive of all of Grant's operations is his desire to get on with the business of defeating the enemy in battle, conquering Southern moral and restoring the Union. After Shiloh, Grant understood that this process would be much more difficult than he had imagined, but the original impulse remained, correct in its assumptions if deficient in its execution. This again underlines Clausewitz's (and Grant's) identification of the superiority of strategy, which if correct, remains supreme and effective in the face of inaction, mismanagement and tactical failure. Collapse of the rebellion required more than a few significant victories and Grant "gave up the idea of saving the Union except by complete conquest."²

The Vicksburg campaign and the story leading to its successful conclusion is testimony to Grant's strong mind and his tenacity. Grant exhibited a simple belief in the

¹ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 599; William T. Sherman, *Home Letters of General Sherman*, M. A. deWolf Howe ed., (New York: Scribners, 1909), 251; Brooks Simpson, *Ulysses S. Grant: Triumph over Adversity, 1822-1865*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000), 181, 193. Grant, explaining his decision to attack Vicksburg before Halleck can recall him.

² Ulysses S. Grant, *Personal Memoirs of U. S. Grant*, (New York: Da Capo Press, 1952), 191.

correctness of his views of Union strategy, his own role in its creation and its execution.. Halleck habitually through abdication delegated many responsibilities to his commanders in the field. This abdication extended properly to operational and tactical details. Less properly, Halleck's abdications left Grant unable to coordinate himself either with a national strategy or even deal efficiently with the other side of the Mississippi river. Grant communicated this to Halleck, who typically did nothing.³

In November of 1862, Grant related his frustrations with a little less restraint in his communications with Sherman:

Of course I can make nothing but independent moves with this command being governed in that by information received from day to day until I am fully informed of when and how all of these other forces are moving so as to make the whole cooperate.⁴

Grant's negativity toward Halleck would "tend toward the absolute" as the war progressed and hardened after the war when Grant read Halleck's communications revealing his duplicity and jealousies. After Belmont, Grant and Foote lamented Halleck's reluctance to rapidly attack forts Henry and Donalson. Grant lamented Halleck's inaction and caution. After the war Grant outlined his belief that a Union commander (Halleck or himself?), after Donalson "could have marched to Chattanooga, Corinth, Memphis and Vicksburg with the troops we then had." Grant suggested to Halleck his ability to quickly take Clarksville and Nashville. Instead, Grant waited and the passage of time worked to Confederate advantage.⁵

³ John Y. Simon, *et al.*, editors Papers of Ulysses S. Grant. Vols., 1-22, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press: 1967— I. 97) 6:199, Hereafter abbreviated as GP.

⁴ Ibid: 263.

⁵ Grant, Memoirs, 163. Bruce Catton, Grant Takes Command, (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1968), 15-16.

In this Grant recognized that in pursuing an offensive war, time must accrue to the advantage of the defender. Clausewitz explained some of the reasons for this phenomenon as he saw it. While halting, “could make offensive war easier;” it does not make its results more certain. The reasons given for halting “usually camouflage misgivings on the part of the general or vacillation on the part of the government.” In addition, anything time allows an attacker to accomplish generally will equally benefit a defender (i.e. the bringing up of supplies and reinforcements, refitting and reorganizing etc.). Time also generally benefits the weaker psychologically. It allows a defender time to recover his moral balance and exploit other options, look for additional allies or methods to weaken or divide his enemies. Of special relevance, given Halleck’s predilections, Clausewitz disdains fortification for an army on the offensive, as they are “no business for the army and therefore no excuse for suspending operations.”⁶

A similar dilemma existed after the bloody battle of Shiloh. Again Grant found his army misdirected when Halleck took command himself at Pittsburg’s Landing. The “attack” on Corinth took the form of a siege as the army entrenched every few miles. Though A. S. Johnston required only two days to move from Corinth to Shiloh, Halleck’s move in the opposite direction required seven weeks. Commanders were ordered (in Grant’s description), “not to bring on an engagement,” as it was better to “retreat than to fight.” Grant suggested to his commander several tactical combinations that “were silenced so quickly that I felt that perhaps I had suggested an unmilitary movement.”⁷ The eventual evacuation of Corinth (without a fight) offered a new opportunity, also

⁶ Clausewitz, War, 599, 598.

⁷ Grant, Memoirs, 196, 197. Herman Hattaway and Archer Jones, How the North Won, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1983), 171.

squandered. “The positive results might have been: a bloodless advance to Atlanta, to Vicksburg, or to any other desired point south of Corinth in the interior of Mississippi.” Like Grant and Lincoln, “the officers and men could not see how the mere occupation of places was to close the war while large and effective rebel armies existed.” Clausewitz labeled such occupations “a necessary evil” as they multiply the demands on an army yet fail to defeat its opponent.⁸

Halleck became commander-in-chief, in part as a result of successes claimed as his own at the expense of Grant and Foote (at Henry and Donalson), Southern repulse at Shiloh (clearly Grant’s accomplishment), and the “great victory,” he believed the Union won at Corinth. After Corinth as after Donalson, Halleck dispersed the Union armies, directed them against nothing, all without any positive gain.⁹

Direction existed neither operationally nor strategically in Grant’s department until Grant assumed command of that department himself. The broad outlines of the campaign down the Mississippi existed, perhaps as “obvious to all” as the move on Henry and Donalson, but again the concept mattered little as long as the Union commanders lacked the strong mind and the conviction to carry it out. Grant wanted to go for Vicksburg before repairing railroads, policing and administering territory or doing any of the other things Halleck felt necessary. Lincoln’s aim of restoring east Tennessee

⁸ Grant, Memoirs, 198-99. Clausewitz, War, 92.

⁹ James M. McPherson, Battle Cry of Freedom, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 406, details Halleck’s taking credit for Grant and Foot’s achievement and asking for sole command in the West as a reward. Halleck also felt Corinth a greater victory than it was, see William S. McFeely, Grant: A Biography, (New York: W. W. Norton, 1981), 117.

and also the weather conspired to prevent a quick advance on Vicksburg after the occupation of Corinth.¹⁰

Grant's view of the proper method remained unequivocal:

From the moment of taking command of the "Army in the Field, " in person, I became satisfied that Vicksburg could only be successfully turned from the South side of the City.¹¹

Having divined the proper strategy for his department and the method for its execution, Grant then turned to the complexity of its application. Grant appreciated northern social and political divisions and tailored his strategy to accommodate them, for "within the government of the north there was division if not sedition." After failure of Grant's attempts to get at Vicksburg due to destruction of his supply base at Holly Springs, Grant refused to go back to Memphis and renew attempts to approach the city east of the river, as Sherman and others advised. Retreat for most civilians signaled defeat, and the country could ill-afford another humiliation.¹²

So Grant pursued seemingly endless improvisations and schemes to get below Vicksburg, digging a canal (Lincoln's favorite), seeking passage through Yazoo Pass and Lake Providence in order to get south of the city. All of these operations yielded little except criticisms in the Union press, though "both President Lincoln and General Hallack stood by me to the end of the campaign." Grant's troops also exhibited faith in their

¹⁰ See McPherson, *Cry*, 512 for a discussion of the reasons preventing a quick move on Vicksburg, perhaps unappreciated by Grant as well as historians such as Catton, Foote and Nevins. Clausewitz repeatedly suggests delays in offensive operations generally benefit the weaker party, especially psychologically: "both belligerents need time; the question is only which of the two can expect to derive special advantages from it in the light of his own situation. If the position on each side is carefully considered, the answer will be obvious: it is the weaker side—but thanks to the laws of psychology rather than those of dynamics." See Clausewitz, *War*, 597.

¹¹ GP 8:485.

¹² J. F. C. Fuller, *The Generalship of Ulysses S. Grant*, (New York: Da Capo Press, 1929), 9.

commander, though some of his designs might fail, “he has 37 more plans in his pocket.” Grant’s failed schemes yielded positive results in two areas: they kept the Union troops occupied and ultimately baffled the Confederates regarding Grant’s true intentions. Grant converted this “waste of tactical energy into a strategic smoke cloud.” Strategy uses the results the engagement, whether victory or defeat to serve the aims of war, “even if no actual fighting occurs.”¹³

Grant found his operational solution running Vicksburg’s batteries with a limited number of supply ships and barges, while marching his troops below on the west bank of the Mississippi. Sherman believed the whole move down river past Vicksburg “unmilitary.” Sherman favored a return to the central route and attempted to derail Grant’s campaign plan, appealing to Rawlins, Grant’s chief of staff:

I would most respectfully suggest, for reasons which I will not name, that General Grant call on his corps commanders for their opinion, concise and positive, on the best general plan of campaign.¹⁴

No such meeting occurred. Grant sought no advice or council of war to validate or question his judgment. Grant’s plan remained Grant’s risk and Grant’s responsibility.

Grant expressed his reasoning:

Some officers will in all likelihood oppose any plan that is adopted; and when it is put into execution, such officers may, by their arguments in opposition, have so far convinced themselves that the movement will fail that they cannot enter upon it with enthusiasm¹⁵

¹³ Grant, Memoirs, 239; Samuel Carter III, The Final Fortress: The Campaign for Vicksburg, 1862-1863, (New York: St. Martins Press 1980), 149; Fuller, Generalship, 184. Clausewitz believed the mere threat of an actual engagement functions in a manner similar to the engagement itself. Clausewitz, War, 97.

¹⁴ O R I, XXIV, 3, pp. 179-80 .

¹⁵ Horace Porter, Campaigning With Grant, (New York: Century, 1906), 313.

Sherman's doubts continued and accompanied him into the field. Sherman wrote to his brother as operations began expressing "less confidence" in Grant's moves "than in any similar undertaking of the war." Being a true professional, Sherman expressed his doubts and in spite of them conducted his own moves throughout the campaign as if it had been his own.¹⁶

Sherman's reservations continued beyond the plan of the campaign and even the beginning of operations west of the river. Upon reaching Grand Gulf, Sherman wrote Grant:

Stop all troops till your army is partially supplied with wagons, and then act as quickly as possible, for this road will be jammed as sure as life if you attempt to supply 50,000 men by one road.¹⁷

In bypassing Vicksburg Grant, in effect, cut his own supply line. Grant had no plans to supply 50,000 men, or any substantial part of his force by one road. twelve days after crossing the Mississippi, Grant formally ended contact with the river, leaving Pemberton free to break his communications, which no longer existed. Grant knew "as well as anybody" that the move was unmilitary, but that as far as he could see it was the only movement "that had any chance at all."¹⁸

If Sherman failed to understand his strategy Grant could take comfort in the probability it vexed Pemberton also. As after the first day at Shiloh he alone divined the true reality of situation. He alone ordered the movement and carried it out in the face of

¹⁶ Rachel Sherman Thorndike, ed., The Sherman Letters, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1894), 201.

¹⁷ Bruce Catton, Grant Moves South, (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1960), 436.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 413.

enemy opposition and in spite of opposition within his own command. Grant explained to General Porter his methods:

I will not direct anyone to do what I would not do myself. I never held what might be called councils war and I do not believe in them. They create divided responsibility and at times prevent that unity of action so necessary in the field . . . I believe it is better for a commander to consult his generals informally, get their views and opinions, and then make up his mind what action to take and act accordingly.¹⁹

Grant traced the political origins driving his most admired and *unmilitary* achievement:

The campaign of Vicksburg was suggested and developed by circumstances. The elections of 1862 had gone against the prosecution of the war. Voluntary enlistments had nearly ceased and the draft had been resorted to; this was resisted, and a defeat or backward movement would have made its execution impossible. A forward movement to a decisive victory was necessary.²⁰

Thus politics drove operations in Grant's most important, unorthodox and brilliant campaign, "the most important northern strategic victory of the war," both operationally and strategically. Even a temporary set-back would have "so adverse an influence on the political situation, as not only to wreck his campaign, but overthrow the Government."²¹

The understanding of politics driving Grant's operational plan at Vicksburg extended to its execution. McClelland's corps led the advance down the west side of the river, Grant seemingly giving the greatest burden to the weakest of his commanders.²²

¹⁹ Porter, *Campaigning*, 316.

²⁰ Grant, *Memoirs*, 301.

²¹ McPhearson, *Cry*, 637. James Arnold, *Grant Wins the War: Decision at Vicksburg*, (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1997), argues the Vicksburg campaign decided the course of the war; Fuller, *Generalship*, 28, 128.

²² OR III, 24: 180; Adam Badeau, *Military History of U. S. Grant*, 3 vol., (New York: D, Appleton and Company, 1881), I:183, III:616-618.

McClelland, unlike Grant's staff, supported the campaign for the record. Senior to his fellow corps commanders, he was also Lincoln's friend. Grant commanded McClelland and properly utilized him for what he was: an instrument of his government's policy. What ever his failings as a tactician and administrator, 25,000 Union soldiers raised by McClelland marched with Grant's army. Grant could no more question Lincoln's policy of using McClelland than his policy of using contrabands. If any policy, as Grant stated earlier, "proved too odious," he could always resign. During the march from Grand Gulf, Grant rode with McClelland, Illinois Governor Yates and his mentor in Washington, Congressman Washburne, rather than with any regular army officer.²³

Grant also declined to formulate a suggestion to Sherman to feint at Snyder's Bluff as a positive order. Grant expressed concern that the feint, especially if effective, might be interpreted in the North as a repulse, with negative political repercussions for Sherman's reputation. Grant left it up to Sherman to define the method and extent of the demonstration. Sherman made the attack and ordered his troops to make "every man look as numerous as possible," fooling the Northern press as well as the rebels as to Grant's true intentions.²⁴

In doing so Grant harmonizes military and political concerns, never losing sight of the fact that his military victory must achieve great and measurable political effects and weighing each of his actions accordingly. Grant accepted all of these political

²³Michael B. Ballard, U. S. Grant: The Making of a General, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005),120, suggests part of Grant's presence might have had something to do with a desire to more closely watch McClelland. Significantly McClelland wrote Grant a letter approving of the plan, predated so it would appear the idea for the move was his. See Brooks Simpson, Ulysses S. Grant: Triumph over Adversity, 1822-1865, (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000), 183, and Geoffrey Perret, Ulysses S. Grant: Soldier and President, (New York: Random House, 1997.), 240.

²⁴ Hattaway and Jones, How, 369.

constraints, as he accepted the size of his forces and the abilities of his commanders: each a “given” quantity harmonized with military actions through the formulation of strategy.²⁵

In making these decisions Grant coordinated his operations with domestic politics (the election of 1862 and the effect of Sherman’s feint on public opinion); harmonized relations within the army (Grant took his army in hand and carried out his plan against the advice of both his staff and Sherman), and civil-military relations (his recognition of Lincoln’s political needs through the use of his “friend,” McClelland).

In the execution of this move, Grant’s contemporary writings exhibit little evidence of systematic and careful planning. The tactics and even larger operational details of the campaign follow circumstance while remaining true to the strategic concept throughout. In his final report Grant attributed his decision to attack Jackson and invest Vicksburg rather than aid Banks at Port Hudson, to circumstances in the field and his repulse at Grand Gulf.²⁶

Grant, aware of the unreliability of intelligence, questioned the strength of Johnston’s Confederate troops assembling at Jackson. Grant attacked them in order to force the issue. As Grant stated after the war:

You know the theory of the campaign was to throw myself between Johnston and Pemberton, prevent their union, beat each army separately if I could, and take Vicksburg. It was important to have this

²⁵ Most writers tend to view all these “constraints” dictated by politics as pejoratives, as a necessary evil. While often “true” it seems wrong to assign too many value judgments to the given reality of the strategic equation. The Northern political structure also contributed multiple positive elements. The employment of Grant and Sherman was also “political,” and ultimately pushed Grant to the “top spot” in the army.

²⁶ GP 8:485-508

movement so far advanced before even the knowledge of it reached Washington that it could not be recalled.²⁷

Grant's army crossed below Vicksburg and moved inland. Grant sent a dispatch to Halleck detailing his move toward Jackson, away from Banks, away from Vicksburg and away from the river and his supplies. He remarked that a reply from Halleck, presumably a recall order, could not reach him for eight days. Grant "did a great deal," in those eight days, committing his army beyond recall. "Our army was acting as a movable column, without a base." Grant's troops suffered no counter-attack, such as had occurred at Belmont and Donalson, no surprise assault, as at Shiloh, and no misfire, as at Iuka. Grant mastered no crisis on the battlefield in this campaign, instead his troops created them for the enemy. Grant won five battles, scattered Johnston, wrecked a state capitol and invested Vicksburg. Grant acted as strategist, field commander and, as in the Mexican War, quartermaster.²⁸

Owing inspiration to Scott, Grant's originality in cutting loose from his base and abandoning his communications proved the most effective operational innovation in the Civil War. Reminiscent of the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars, in which disorganization and poverty forced French abandonment of the depot system, Grant proved the feasibility of armies operating without formal supply lines. Clausewitz contrasted these methods with the old system, finding the new methods of "warfare based on requisition and local sources of supply," so superior to the old depot system that the new armies "no longer seem to be the same instrument." Sherman and Grant refined

²⁷ Ibid, 494. ²⁷ John Russell Young, Around the World With General Grant, (New York: American News Company, 1879), 1:619.

²⁸ Ibid.

these methods from this point forward in the war, creating an instrument completely different from the previous Union armies that often floundered on the offensive due to limitations of formal supply. Given Sherman's reluctance before Vicksburg, clearly Grant deserves the title of teacher. While Sherman later evidenced no qualms about cutting his own supply line and marching across Georgia and the Carolinas, the innovation properly belongs to Grant.²⁹

While other soldiers obsessed over tactics, interior lines and communications, Grant thought in campaigns. When Union troops arrived at Snyder's Bluff, from which the now invested Confederates once slaughtered their attackers, Sherman commented:

Until this moment I never thought your expedition a success. I never could see the end clearly until now, but this is a campaign. This is a success if we never take the town³⁰

Lincoln concurred:

Whether Gen. Grant shall or shall not consummate the capture of Vicksburg, his campaign from the beginning of this month up to the twenty second day of it, is one of the most brilliant in the world.³¹

Grant always saw the end clearly. The campaign, effective strategically when viewed in isolation in its own theatre, generated strategic consequences affecting the conduct of the entire war. All this "if we never take the town." The effect of one regiment's arrival on another regiments flank is largely political. Some units break and turn and run at first contact, others turn and fight to the death. The mere arrival of a Union army of investment from south of the city generated dismay and disquiet

²⁹ Clausewitz, War, 337.

³⁰ Carter, Fortress, 208.

³¹ Joseph T. Glatthar, Partners in Command: The Relationships Between Leaders in the Civil War, (New York: Free Press, 1994), 194.

throughout the South. Grant's move below Vicksburg and the battles accompanying its investment constitute perhaps the only true example of strategic surprise accomplished in the Civil War. Clausewitz labeled surprise "basically a tactical device," generally limited and transient in its effects. While it is relatively easy to steal a march on the enemy or occupy a road while maneuvering for an advantage, surprise in the strategic realm, surprise dictating policy remains difficult and is rare event in military history.³²

Vicksburg's investment constituted just such a rare occurrence. Surprised Confederates outside Vicksburg pressured Lee to detach troops for its relief. Lee believed an attack on Northern soil might force the Lincoln administration to detach large forces from Grant and raise the siege. Rather than send troops west or go to confront Grant himself, Lee launched his disastrous Gettysburg Campaign, "as a way of drawing Grant from the lower Mississippi Valley."³³

The surprised Confederates inside Vicksburg were now in shock. Grant wanted to strike before they recovered their equilibrium. An improvised assault failed, as did a more formal one three days later. After the war Grant rationalized these two costly frontal assaults in terms of the psychology of his soldiers:

The troops believed they could carry the works in their front, and would not have worked so patiently in the trenches if they had not been allowed to try.³⁴

³² Clausewitz, War, 198.

³³ Edwin B. Coddington, The Gettysburg Campaign: a Study in Command, (New York: Scribner's, 1968), 5-7; Joseph T. Glatthar Lee's Army: From Victory to Collapse. New York: Free Press, 2008, 268-69. How much of Lee's planning evolved directly from Grant's moves is difficult to say. Lee may have offered this justification for invasion of the North to pacify Secretary of War James Seddon and Jefferson Davis, who favored direct action aimed at Grant's Army. Archer Jones, Civil War Command & Strategy: The Process of Victory and Defeat, (New York: Free Press, 1992), 167, finds Lee focused on his own theatre despite his statements at the time to the contrary.

³⁴ Grant, Memoirs, 277.

There may be truth in this rationalization, though Grant probably needed convincing as well. Grant also preferred not to settle for a siege given the effects of disease on his troops and the investment in time likely needed to starve out the city.³⁵ Like the mobile operations leading to investment of the city, improvisation characterized the siege itself. Lacking a large corps of professional engineers, Grant knew his army and relied on the skills of his westerners: “every man in the investing line became an army engineer day and night.” As well as building extensive entrenchments, Grant’s amateurs built sap rollers and extemporized trench mortars from tree trunks.³⁶

While Lee sought to wreck Grant’s strategy through an invasion of Pennsylvania, and Johnston sought to prod Pemberton to save his army if he could not save Vicksburg, Grant pressed his siege. Grant labeled Pemberton his “best friend,” due to his inaction. Pemberton neither attacked Grant’s rear during Grant’s engagement Jackson or saved his army by abandoning Vicksburg and joining Johnston. As at Donalson, aggressive and independent tactical leadership inside the siege might save an out-maneuvered army, but it could not beat Grant’s strategy. Maneuver and siege, as at Donalson, again provided the effective and decisive method of offensive war. Lee’s invasion of the North failed to distract Grant or diminish his numbers, though Lee managed to wreck his own army as a starving Vicksburg surrendered.³⁷

³⁵ Simpson, Triumph, 203.

³⁶ Carter, Fortress, 238-9.

³⁷ Theodore Lyman, Meade’s Headquarters 1863-1865, (Freeport: Books for Libraries Press, 1970), 102.

After Vicksburg—Another Nickname, War Aims and Sykes' Yellow Dog

The fate of the Confederacy was sealed when Vicksburg Fell—Grant

The rebel leaders were mad, and seemed determined that their people should drink of the very lowest dregs of the cup of war—Sherman

Loss of hope is worse than loss of men and land –B. H. Liddel-Hart³⁸

Surrender presented a huge technical problem, which Grant adeptly solved to Northern political advantage. The logistical requirements of transporting an army of 30,000 prisoners to northern prison camps, as well as their feeding and housing represented a great burden on Northern resources at a time when Grant wanted to continue pressing the enemy. Grant agreed to the paroling of the prisoners to avoid that burden, assuring that the paroled and demoralized prisoners constituted a drain on increasingly fragile Southern logistics. Apart from such material considerations politically the parolees “would scatter to their homes and carry the contagion of defeat with them.”³⁹

Sherman identified another benefit to Grant's generous surrender terms at Vicksburg: “To me the delicacy with which you have treated a brave but deluded enemy is more eloquent than the most gorgeous oratory of an Everett.” Reconciliation comprised the

³⁸ Grant, Memoirs, 297; William T. Sherman, Memoirs of William T. Sherman (New York: Library of America: 1990), 359, on Southern continued prosecution of the war after Vicksburg and Gettysburg. Jean Edward Smith, Grant, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), 259, quotes Liddel-Hart, on why Vicksburg constitutes the turning point of the war.

³⁹ Grant, Memoirs, 297-98. McPhearson, Cry, 636.

ultimate war aim. Grant wished to destroy armies, but destruction of armies without reconciliation left open the possible renewal of the conflict.⁴⁰

As Clausewitz offered, in war the result is never absolute:

Even the ultimate outcome of a war is not always to be regarded as final. The defeated state often considers the outcome merely as a transitory evil, for which a remedy may still be found in political conditions at some later date.⁴¹

Grant believed humane treatment essential for permanent reunion and ran the very real risk that some parolees might return to combat before being properly exchanged. Halleck generously evaluated Grant's performance at Vicksburg: "In Boldness of plan, rapidity of execution, and brilliancy of results, these operations will compare most favorable with those of Napoleon about Ulm," but also criticized Grant's paroling of the city's garrison. Lincoln replied to the Halleck's and other unnamed "wiseacres" critical of Grant policy of parole. Lincoln related a bizarre story of an obnoxious yellow dog, blown to pieces with a fused cartridge by some boys seeking revenge on the animal. The owner, a man named Sykes, looked up, saw the air filled with pieces of yellow dog and reportedly said, "Well, I guess he'll never be of much account again—as a dog." Lincoln then added for the benefit of any of Grant's detractors missing the point: "Well, I guess Pemberton's forces will never be of much account again—as an army."⁴²

Sherman also offered another evaluation of the battle, linking it to the evolution of Union war aims:

⁴⁰ O R I, XXIV, 3, p. 472.

⁴¹ Clausewitz, War, 80.

⁴² O R I, XXIV, 1, p. 63. GP 8:532. Grant, Memoirs, 299. Catton, South, 478-79. Porter, Campaigning, 27-28

The value of the capture of Vicksburg, however, was not measured by the list of prisoners, guns and small-arms . . . the event coincided as to time with another great victory which crowned our arms far away, at Gettysburg . . . the two occurring at the same moment of time, should have ended the war.⁴³

If the duel-victories of Vicksburg and Gettysburg signaled a great psychological and material blow to the South they failed to stimulate war-winning political change. Vast reserves of political capital remained to the South, given the political will of Davis, the continued existence of Army of Northern Virginia and the abilities of Robert E. Lee. Further targets in the South required identification and destruction. Davis stated his resolve: “The war . . . must go on till the last man of this generation falls in his tracks.” Davis expressed his willingness to see “every Southern plantation sacked, and every Southern city in flames.” The Southern war aim remained the revolution of independence, “and that, or extermination we will have.”⁴⁴

Vicksburg provided many lessons and reinforced Grant’s thinking driving future prosecution of the war. Irregular warfare targeting his logistics demonstrated an essential vulnerability. Southern logistics must be equally vulnerable and Grant developed three fundamental and innovative methods to target them. In the future Grant sent whole armies to completely destroy rather than merely interdict Southern railroads and communications. The destroying or carrying off military supplies by “conventional” raiders proved at best transitory. Grant’s destruction proved comprehensive. In addition, Grant no longer sought permanent occupation of territory thus avoiding diminishing his own numbers and exposing his own fragile communications. As Clausewitz observed,

⁴³ Sherman, Memoirs, 359.

⁴⁴ McPherson, Cry, 768.

“capturing enemy territory will reduce the strength of our forces.” Grant’s armies functioned as raiders, not builders of railroads or occupiers of areas abandoned by the Confederacy. Lastly, Grant’s armies lived off the areas they marched through to the greatest degree possible. In doing so, “we fight the war partly as his expense.” This served two goals simultaneously; consuming enemy stores obviated the need for an extensive and vulnerable supply system and destroyed enemy war potential in the process. As Sherman said of the Mississippi, “hold the river absolutely and leave the interior alone.”⁴⁵

Grant’s difficulties with McClellan during the campaign revealed a complex lesson regarding the nature of political soldiers. Grant tolerated the political general for a long time and even acknowledged his contribution to the war effort. Grant’s toleration continued until McClellan evidenced moral irresponsibility and demonstrated himself a liability to the service. His claiming of responsibility for successes not gained, seeking to blame others for his defeats and pushing for Grant’s job destroyed his utility to Grant and to the Union. After victory was assured at Vicksburg Grant waited for McClellan “to trip over his own ego one more time” and then relieved him.⁴⁶

Grant got possession of Vicksburg and got rid of McClellan. From Julia, Grant got a new name: “Victor,” for victory. Grant’s achievement guaranteed further rewards, for

⁴⁵ Hattaway and Jones, How, 434. Clausewitz, War, 611

⁴⁶ Brooks D. Simpson, “Lincoln and Grant: A Reappraisal of a Relationship” in Frank J. Williams, William D. Pearson and Vincent J. Marsala eds. Abraham Lincoln: Sources and style of Leadership (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1994), 117.

as Sherman prophesized to Halleck, “The man who won the Mississippi would be *the* man.”⁴⁷

A New birth of Freedom

The Civil War was the exorcism—J. F. C. Fuller

My inclination is to whip the rebellion into submission, preserving all constitutional rights—Grant, November, 1861.

The emancipation of the Negro, is the heaviest blow yet given the Confederacy—Grant, August, 1863⁴⁸

Logically, limited Northern political ends early in the war mandated a strategy of limited war. Scott’s Anaconda Plan proposed use of the blockade and occupation of the Mississippi River to wage an economic war designed to coerce the South to return to the Union. Union strategy, however confused and disjointed, continued the Anaconda strategy coupled with politically indispensable direct attacks on Richmond. As the war continued limited Union means failed to overcome Southern resolve. Political demands escalated, encompassing the military destruction of the Confederacy and social revolution through the destruction of slavery.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Porter, *Campaigning*, 285. William T. Sherman, *Home Letters of General Sherman*, M. A. deWolf Howe ed., (New York: Scribners, 1909), 287. McFeely, *Grant*, 81 dates the nicknames origin much earlier and attributes it to Grant’s admiration for Victor Emmanuel.

⁴⁸ Fuller, *Personality*, GP.2:26-27, GP 9:196.

⁴⁹Brooks Simpson, “The Doom of Slavery: Ulysses S. Grant’s War Aims and Emancipation” *Civil War History* 36 (1990): 36-56.

Misperception of the true political purpose of the war naturally resulted in the inferior Union strategies pursued in the early years of the conflict. Grant's personal and political views evolved in much the same manner as those of Lincoln. Initially Grant supposed the war would be "a ninety days' affair."⁵⁰ Grant felt the shock of a few defeats, (especially his victories at Fort Donelson and Shiloh) sufficient to accomplish reunion. Such victories proved inadequate to end the war. Awareness of this inadequacy drove the acceptance of the unlimited political goal of social revolution through the destruction of slavery. Social revolution required the application of a strategy of "total" war to achieve it.

In spite of his clear under-estimation of Southern resolve and intentions, it is useful to look at other aspects of Grant's early evaluation of the war. Before the advent of the actual fighting, Grant anticipated a social revolution in the South through the fall of slavery:

In all this (secession) I cannot but see the doom of slavery. The North does not want nor would they want to interfere with the institution. They refuse for all time to give it protection unless the South shall return soon to their allegiance.⁵¹

As Grant predicted, slavery did not survive the war. Salmon P. Chase's observations at the time of emancipation confirmed Grant's prediction at the time of secession:

This was the most wonderful history of an insanity of a class that the world had ever seen. If the slaveholders had staid in the Union they might have kept the life in their institution for many years to come. What no

⁵⁰Fuller, *Generalship*, 68.

⁵¹ GP 2:6-7.

party and no public feeling in the North could ever have hoped to touch they had madly placed in the very path of destruction.⁵²

In these remarks Chase illustrates Clausewitz's observation that the objects of war tend to evolve. The pressures and emotions of war and the violence itself condition and drive political change. Those objects evolve towards the absolute, as "there is no logical limit to the application of force." Each side struggles, beginning Clausewitz's reciprocal action of escalating violence leading in theory to extremes. Though Northern war aims, and Southern for that matter, reached toward specific and somewhat limited goals (reunion without revolution on the part of the North, independence and the social status quo for the South), it is in the nature of war itself to push violence to its limits. War drives its own agenda; generally out of the control of and often beyond the intentions of its practitioners.⁵³ As political conditions change or are revealed, the strategy to achieve those ends must change also. Lincoln's identification of a larger goal, making the war about social revolution and further freedom in addition to reunification, is symptomatic both of the tendency of wars to become both more absolute and of the evolution of politics during the war itself.

Grant described his commitment to overriding political authority, when Lorenzo Thomas came west to implement the new Union policy of arming blacks:

I never was an abolitionist, nor even what could be called anti-slavery. You may rely upon it I will give him [Lorenzo Thomas] all the aid in my power. I would do this whether arming the Negro seemed to me a wise policy or not, because it is an order I am bound to obey and I do not feel

⁵² Quoted in Jones, Abraham Lincoln and a New Birth of Freedom, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999.), 114.

⁵³ Clausewitz, War, 92 for the tendency of war aims to change, 76-77 for tendency of war to move towards extremes of violence.

that in my position I have a right questions any policy of the government.⁵⁴

The “non-abolitionist” Grant understood in practical terms the significance and benefit of new Union policy: “By arming the Negro we have added a powerful ally.” Grant respected blacks and his personal experience working beside them at Hardscrabble Farm convinced him of their abilities: “They will make good soldiers and taking them from the enemy weakens him in the proportion they strengthen us.” Grant’s evaluation of slavery, his utilization of blacks as soldiers and his attempts to stop both the illegal sale of cotton and smuggling in general, establish his recognition of weakness in multiple areas of Southern society. Lincoln agreed, and quoted Grant’s evaluation of Emancipation “the heaviest blow yet given the Confederacy,” to his critics. Grant’s strategy targeted the coherence and machinery of that society. Like the Prussian reformers’ reordering of their state through ending class privilege, emancipation served similar multiple strategic purposes.⁵⁵

On a material level, freed slaves provided Northern armies with large numbers laborers and soldiers. Even those opposed to emancipation appreciated the utility of contraband labor and the effects of its removal from the enemy. Others appreciated, especially over time as casualties increased, the use of black troops if only as “cannon fodder.” Emancipation represented a quantifiable “technical” gain for the North and a corresponding diminishment of Southern power. On a national political level to some

⁵⁴ Smith, Grant, 259-260. Grant’s personal views are complex. His freeing of William Jones to his own great financial detriment and his kind treatment of blacks slave and hired, proves his personal rejection of the concept of slavery. Translating personal rejection into overt action in support of social revolution required the stimulus of war.

⁵⁵ GP 9:195-97. Simpson, Triumph, 67. McPherson, Cry, 681.

degree the use of black troops also lessened the demand for draftees, a destabilizing program anathema to many Northerners. Elevation of the slave to the status of a man and a citizen soldier challenged traditional views of blacks both North and South. When Robert E. Lee late in the war advocated the arming of blacks, Howell Cobb, a Georgia moderate remarked: "If slaves will make good soldiers our whole theory of slavery is wrong."

Two years earlier inexperienced black troops fighting at Milliken's Bend during the Vicksburg campaign had provided Cobb with the evidence needed to make a judgment. In their first engagement and equipped with inferior weapons black troops repulsed Confederate veterans through a "vicious counter-attack." The bravery exhibited "completely revolutionized the sentiment of the army" in regards to the employment of blacks. Southerners like Cobb missed the lesson. Clausewitz understood participation in defense of the state irrevocably links citizens to that state, making citizenship something more than an abstraction. Former slaves demonstrated to themselves and whites their fitness for freedom through their competent service and sacrifice during the war, just as Prussian peasant soldiers led by bourgeois officers proved the equal of Napoleon's *Grande Armee* and worthy of full citizenship.⁵⁶

Grant saw irrationality in Southern continued prosecution of the war, as it tended toward the absolute. Their sacrifice showed no sense of proportion: "The people, while willing to send their sons to the field, were not willing to part with their Negroes." When prisoner exchanges floundered on the issue of treatment of black soldiers, the South

⁵⁶McPherson, Cry, 835 Carter, Fortress, 249-50. Simpson, Peace, 40-42.

remained unmoved, as they “would ‘die in the last ditch,’ before giving up the right to send slaves back as property recaptured.”⁵⁷

Finally, after emancipation the Confederates no longer appeared before the world as defenders of national self-rule and independence but as suppressors of liberty. Foreign intervention or even recognition slipped further from possibility. The North gained “a decisive moral victory” over the South in the court of world opinion through emancipation.⁵⁸

Breaking the Siege at Chattanooga—Set Piece Battle

The position was one which ought to have been held by a line of skirmishers—Bragg on Missionary Ridge

Well, it was impregnable—Grant on Missionary Ridge

Half rations of hard bread and beef dried on the hoof—Union soldiers on their provisions⁵⁹

During the siege of Vicksburg General Rosecrans missed an opportunity to defeat Braxton Bragg’s army and capture middle and eastern Tennessee. Grant’s operations greatly depleted Rosecrans’ opponent. Joe Johnston attempt to lift the siege required reinforcements and many were drawn from Bragg’s army. Rosecrans failed to act despite Grant’s urgings and Hallecks orders. Rosecans reportedly cited the military maxim “not

⁵⁷ Grant, Memoirs, 195. McPherson, Trial, 205.

⁵⁸ Fuller, Personality, 185.

⁵⁹ McPherson, Cry, 680. Grant, Memoirs, 311-312

to fight two decisive battles at the same time” to justify his inaction. Rosecrans finally advanced ten days before Vicksburg’s surrender, at which point “the troops sent from Bragg were free to return.”⁶⁰

Rosecrans advanced and skillfully out-maneuvered Bragg without a battle, gained a great deal of territory and then begged the War Department not to “overlook so great an event because it is not written in blood.” The benefits of Rosecrans’ bloodless great event gained through maneuver proved transitory. Rosecrans’ rushed forward “as if he had defeated the enemy army in battle.” Bragg’s army unfortunately still existed and launched a vicious counterattack at Chickamauga. Though Bragg endured greater losses (the “victory” that crippled him in the estimation of some), he chased his enemy to Chattanooga and commenced a siege. Clausewitz described the irony of Rosecrans’ defective strategy and reasoning. Governments and generals “have always tried to find ways of avoiding a decisive battle and reaching their goal by other means.” Maneuver may gain territory at little initial cost in lives but a decision merely delayed constitutes no advantage. In these situations an adversary is best advised to regard lost territory as “merely lent” to the enemy. Rosecrans’ campaign failed, the great event ultimately overlooked and “written in blood,” despite Rosecrans’ best attempt to achieve his goal by other means.⁶¹

Rosecrans twice fell victim to the military platitudes he held in such esteem. He declined to attack during the Vicksburg siege so as “not to fight two decisive battles at the same time” losing the chance to take advantage of Confederate weakness. Soon after

⁶⁰ Grant, Memoirs, 309-10.

⁶¹ OR, I, XXIII , 2, p. 518. Hattaway and Jones, How, 448. Clausewitz, War, 259, 488.

the fall of the fortress Grant proposed sending an expedition to Mobile, partly to support Rosecrans' Army of the Cumberland, now on the offensive. T. Harry Williams credits Lincoln with seeing weakness in Grant's plan to move against Mobile and Chattanooga simultaneously as it "violated the strategic principle of doing one big thing at a time," a clear paraphrase of Rosecrans' maxim. As well as targeting an important port, the vetoed plan threatened Bragg's rear, and his army afforded the only troops available for defense of the city. Its cancellation allowed the Confederate concentration at Chickamauga that so punished Rosecrans.

Grant weighed in on Rosecrans' and Williams' (and Lincoln's supposed) use of the maxim and such formulations in general: "If true, this maxim was not applicable in this case." Significantly Grant questions both the validity of the maxim and attempts to apply it regardless of context. Grant sarcastically concedes losing two decisive battles on the same day "would be bad," but added, "it would not be bad to win them." Grant leaves unsaid that the Union did do "two pretty big things" at one time, winning the decisive battles of Vicksburg and Gettysburg on the same day. By implication Rosecrans missed his opportunity to win a third.⁶²

Instead of winning a battle the maxim-quoting Rosecrans lost his job to the maxim-suspicious Grant. Defeat at Chickamauga and the pressures of the siege destroyed Rosecrans morally. Ironically, in an interview Rosecrans briefed Grant on the situation in Chattanooga and made several "excellent suggestions" to retrieve the situation. Grant commented later, "My only wonder was that he had not carried them out." When Grant arrived at Chattanooga, he evidenced no difficulty in carrying out plans designed by a

⁶² T. Harry Williams, Lincoln and His Generals, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1952. 295; Grant, Memoirs, 309-10.

staff officer, W. F. Smith to break the siege. Within the week the Union regained control of the Tennessee River and full rations reached the debilitated Army of the Cumberland.⁶³

General Porter reported on Grant's process in solving the strategic problem he found at Chattanooga:

His questions showed from the outset that his mind was dwelling not only upon the prompt opening of a line of supplies, but upon taking the offensive against the enemy. In this he was only manifesting one of his chief military characteristics—an inborn dislike to be thrown upon the defensive.⁶⁴

Essentially Napoleonic in conception, Grant at Chattanooga envisioned pinning his enemy frontally and then assaulted his flanks. Hooker and Sherman would attack on both flanks while Thomas pinned in the center. In execution, Sherman and Hooker both pinned, as their attacks misfired. Thomas then delivered a frontal attack that wrecked Bragg's army. Grant proved able to improvise during a set-piece battle as well as in a more fluid situation such as Vicksburg. Grant passed yet another test at Chattanooga, lifting a siege while on the defensive and then quickly moving to the offensive, again reversing a Confederate advantage. Beginning with a regiment, Grant now commanded an army group. Having proven himself at every level, only one position remained, that of General-in-Chief.

⁶³Even though the engineer Smith commanded no troops, Grant believed it appropriate to give the originator of the plan command of its execution. Grant, *Memoirs*, 313, 317.

⁶⁴Porter, *Campaigning*, 5.

Chapter 12

Generals-in-Chief and Commanders-in-Chief

A success over the enemy is what I crave above everything else—Grant on the question of his candidacy.

He don't like anything except fighting and smoking—Admiral Porter on Grant's political ambitions.

Is he going to be *the* man? —Lincoln's secretary on the great question¹

Grant's success at Chattanooga erased doubt for many Americans: "The victory satisfied the country." Grant demonstrated his military abilities through victory.

Victories isolated Grant's critics, making it difficult to attribute his achievements to luck or the actions of others. This extended to the President and his advisors, who looked upon the General's skills with few reservations. Significantly, Lincoln's concerns focused not merely on Grant's military abilities, but his new found potential as a political candidate. While Grant's utility as a military commander rose, so did his potential as a rival. Ironically, Lincoln might promote Grant straight into the Whitehouse. Hand in hand with the crafting of his military abilities, previous campaigns also crafted Grant politically. Nowhere is this demonstrated more clearly than in his handling of unwanted efforts to bring him into the political arena in 1864.²

¹ Bruce Catton, Grant Takes Command, (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1968), 110; William O. Stoddard, William O. Stoddard: Lincoln's Third Secretary, (New York: Exposition, n. d.), 359.

² For political context and Lincoln's attitude toward Grant's candidacy, see Catton, Command, 110-112.

Grant benefited from his evaluation of the politics of high command during the Mexican War. Zachary Taylor won four difficult victories before his replacement by Scott. Taylor's name appeared in newspapers as potential candidate, as did rising criticism of Polk and his war. Grant speculated, as have others, on the ethics of Polk's political maneuvering, substituting Scott for one rival (Taylor), and after Scott built his own reputation, advancing Butler's name in place of Scott.³ Generals Fremont and McClellan acted politically against Lincoln (both eventually ran for President) and his party. Lincoln deflected the threat of failed generals, but he required assurances that a successful general harbored no presidential ambitions.

Grant's negative evaluation of Polk's policy aside, his dealings with Lincoln display recognition of the potential destructiveness of his own candidacy, not just to Lincoln, but to the war effort as a whole. Grant's own maneuvering during this period illustrate both his understanding of the nature of domestic politics and his adroitness and sophistication in handling the situation. Grant made sure Lincoln knew of his commitment to the president's war policy and his own preference to remain a military commander, while skillfully defusing those (including his own father) who lobbied for his entry into the political arena.⁴

Selection of a supreme commander represents a profound policy choice on the part of a resident. Grant's appointment at this point in his career defines and clarifies Lincoln's own policy. Grant's enjoyment of political acceptance on the popular level defused criticism of Republican prosecution of the war, making the day-to-day "tactical"

³ Lloyd Lewis, Captain Sam Grant, (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1950), 273. Ulysses S. Grant, Personal Memoirs of U. S. Grant, (New York: Da Capo Press, 1952), 104-105.

⁴ Catton, Command, 108-111.

running of government much easier. Grant also proved ideal in a larger sense, satisfying the larger “strategic” demands of Lincoln’s policy.

During the course of the war Grant’s thinking evolved in a manner similar to Lincoln’s. The revolutionary and “unlimited” character of the war revealed itself by 1864. In November of 1861 Grant described his outlook, reflective and sober in its outlines and intent:

My inclination is to whip the rebellion into submission, preserving all constitutional rights. If it cannot be whipped in any other way than through a war against slavery, let it come to that legitimately.⁵

Lincoln succinctly set forth his own views in August of the following year. Under attack, given the announcement of the document legitimizing the revolutionary character of the war, Emancipation Proclamation, Lincoln explained the logic of his policy:

If I could save the Union without freeing any slave I would do it, and if could save it by freeing all the slaves I would do it; and if could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone, I would also do that.⁶

Grant’s thinking dovetailed with Lincoln’s in another respect, the methods required militarily to close out the war. Grant repeatedly demonstrated his willingness and desire to fight. He matched natural aggressiveness (absent in many of Lincoln’s generals) with a proven ability to win battles and campaigns. Lincoln and Grant each rejected the idea that the mere capture of places defined victory as long as intact armies supported by a politically committed population remained.

⁵ John Y. Simon, *et al.*, editors Papers of Ulysses S. Grant. Vols., 1-22, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press: 1967— I. 97). 2:226-27. Hereafter abbreviated as GP.

⁶ Quoted in James M. McPherson, Battle Cry of Freedom, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 510.

T. Harry Williams paraphrases and illustrates Clausewitz's trinitarian definition of war in his description of the creation of a modern command system through Grant's appointment as general-in-chief:

In a fundamental sense, the new arrangement represented the total military thought of the country. Congress authorized it, and Lincoln set it in operation. The central military figure in the system was Grant and he was central by the united desires of Lincoln, Congress, and the people.⁷

The army, people and state, each in dynamic opposition to the other through their wartime evolution, created a committed citizen army commanded by a Lieutenant General Grant, directed by an administration (i.e., Lincoln) that by 1864 advocated a clear and nuanced policy to win the war. Grant, representing the army, proved competent in winning victories serving that policy.

The people, the army and the state re-embraced both Lincoln's policy and Grant's martial abilities, demonstrating a willingness to continue participation in the war:

Nearly everybody applauded (Senator) Fessenden's assertion that if Grant had been at Antietam he would have demolished Lee, and if at Gettysburg the Confederates would never have recrossed the Potomac.⁸

Grant possessed the qualities necessary to surpass all of his predecessors in bringing harmony to the trinitarian equation. In the realm of government, the rational element of policy, Grant fostered cooperation and communication. Unlike McClellan, who was contemptuous of Lincoln and wanted his job, and unlike the unsuccessful Hooker, who openly advocated military dictatorship, Grant ensured that Lincoln knew of his support of Lincoln's war policy and his rejection of those who sought his candidacy

⁷ T. Harry Williams, Lincoln and His Generals, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1952, 291.

⁸ Allan Nevins, 4 vol. The War for the Union, The Organized War to Victory, 1864-1865, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons), 4:7.

for President. Grant never questioned the propriety of civilian control of the military (again part of Clausewitz's central thesis) and was content to follow orders and policy as directed by his superiors, "warning a balky subordinate that orders must be obeyed regardless of one's private views."⁹

While occasionally able to win battles, all of the other generals failed politically. Lincoln (and the country) required more than a technician leading an army: they required a commander who satisfied the desires of the people and fulfilled the requirements of war policy. The ascension of U. S. Grant to the top spot is a testament to the willpower and capability of both Lincoln and Grant. Both endured in their appropriate spheres until achievement came through a true partnership. In short, Grant recognized the complexities of supreme command and the art of the possible in contributing to victory in a long and difficult war. He coordinated and balanced changing political, societal and military imperatives and reflected those changes in a flexible military strategy achieving political goals.

Grant's vision extended beyond tactics or other purely military operations. As general-in-chief he expressed concern regarding the political composition of the army: "When I took command of the army I had a dream that I tried to realize—to reunite and recreate the whole army." If Grant's appointment reflected the collective will of the nation, Grant worked to ensure that his army also reflected that collective will, "the passions of the people." Grant expressed confidence in the ability and loyalty of Buell, McClellan and other Democratic officers and directed the Secretary of War to offer

⁹ J. F. C. Fuller, *The Generalship of Ulysses S. Grant*, (New York: Da Capo Press, 1929), 176.

assignments to some of them. Grant, “wanted to make the war as national as possible, to bring in all parties.”¹⁰

Grant’s attempt to recreate the army according to his multi-party dream proved stillborn. Buell purportedly refused to serve in the west under Sherman or Canby, as he had ranked them in the old army. McClellan rebuffed back door overtures made to him. “The generals,” Grant said, “were not in a humor to be conciliated.” Grant wrote after the war he believed Buell’s reasons for declining command “the worst excuse a soldier can make,” as it served personal gain rather than the war effort. Like war, an army and by implication each individual soldier is an extension of policy, a “true political instrument” in Clausewitz’s famous formulation. An officer or an army failing to serve policy defines an absurdity, or at best a very suspect instrument.

Early in the war General Prentiss irritated Grant over a similar issue. Prentiss left his command rather than obey Grant’s orders to move against Confederate guerillas, thus (in Grant’s estimation) sabotaging the war effort. Grant must have contrasted the actions of Prentiss and Buell with those of Sherman, who offered without hesitation to serve under either Grant or C. F. Smith during the Donalson campaign “without making any question of rank with you or General Smith.” Grant was “so intensely patriotic and so truly disinterested, that he was always ready to ignore, in his official capacity, his own personal feelings,” and he expected the same in others. Grant proved as good as Sherman’s word. When rumors surfaced of Sherman’s own promotion to lieutenant general during Grant’s disappointing and seemingly stalemated campaign outside

¹⁰ John Russell Young, 3. vol. *Around the World With General Grant*, (New York: American News Company, 1879) 2: 445-447; Catton, *Command*, 157, believes Grant sought this “to set the army free of politics.” More correctly Grant sought to take advantage of politics by bringing all parties into the army and therefore giving them a stake in the wars outcome.

Petersburg, Grant wrote Sherman: “No one would be more pleased at your advancement than I.” Grant further indicated his willingness to serve under Sherman and do all he could to win the war adding, “It would not change our relations in the least.”¹¹

The new General-in Chief significantly decided to take the field and accompany the Army of the Potomac, preferring “not to make war ridiculous by attempting to maneuver armies and battles in distant States from an armchair in a Washington parlor.” Practical observation led Clausewitz to a similar conclusion: “It used to be the custom to settle strategy in the capital, not in the field,” but since assumptions change and the details of orders cannot be determined in advance, “it follows that the strategist must take the field.”¹² Finally, having the courage of responsibility lacking in previous Union commanders-in-chief, Grant wrote Lincoln in early 1864: “Should my success be less than I desire and expect, the least I can say is, the fault is not with you.”¹³

Lincoln and the Civil/Military Relationship

¹¹ Young, World, 2: 447; Grant Memoirs, 361; GP 2:169-70; GP 4:215; A. L. Conger, Rise of U. S. Grant, (New York: Century, 1931), 29; Joseph T. Glatthar, Partners in Command: The Relationships Between Leaders in the Civil War, (New York: Free Press, 1994), 104, details a similar problem, this time at the highest levels of command in the Confederate army, over the rank of Joseph E. Johnston. Grant stated his own willingness to accept an appointment so repellent to Buell: “If a command inferior to my rank is given me it shall make no difference in my zeal.” GP 4:292; Catton, Command, 408-09.

¹² Harry J. Maihafer, The General and the Journalists, (Washington D. C.: Brassey's, 1998), 189, the phrase is from Horace Greeley and an obvious criticism of McClellan and Hallack. Clausewitz, War, 177. Clausewitz typically cites an exception to his own “rule.” If the government remains close enough to the fighting to serve as a general headquarters, the strategist may still be able “to maintain control throughout.” Modern communications allow a strategist to “take the field” in ways unavailable to soldiers in Clausewitz’s time. The advice remains the same, the course of a conflict will condition and clarify perceptions, new conditions arise and the strategist must be prepared to accommodate the changes on daily basis.

¹³GP 10:380.

A certain grasp of military affairs is vital for those in charge of general policy--Clausewitz

**No other policy exists then, than to subordinate the military point of view to the political—
Clausewitz¹⁴**

Lincoln, through his ascension to the Presidency of the United States became commander and chief of its armed forces. The U. S. constitution in its recognition of the veracity of civilian supremacy in military affairs, mirrors Clausewitz. No American President has ever taken to the field in this capacity, but all effective wartime presidents demonstrated an understanding of essential military matters. Lincoln as commander-in-chief educated himself through trips to the Library of Congress and ultimately through experience. Self-education coupled with Lincoln's own intuition and natural abilities in due course proved effective.¹⁵

The novelist Gore Vidal imagines Lincoln embracing Clausewitz as part the well-documented odyssey of self-education he undertook early in the War. In Vidal's fictional juxtaposition, Lincoln finds Clausewitz thesis linking policy and war compelling, and Lincoln integrates it in his prosecution of the war. Vidal's Lincoln is competent militarily, obtaining his knowledge of Clausewitz from conversations with the Prussian, Carl Schurz¹⁶

Vidal's fictional Lincoln, while imagined in its specifics, is essentially correct in its conclusions. While the evidence for any direct knowledge of Clausewitz specifically

¹⁴ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 608, 607.

¹⁵ James B McPherson, "Lincoln as Commander and Chief," in John Y. Simon & Harold Holzer, *Rediscovering Abraham Lincoln*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002): 1-15 includes a positive evaluation of Lincoln's abilities.

¹⁶ Gore Vidal, *Lincoln: A Novel*, (New York: Random House, 1984), 284. Schurz studied Clausewitz during his service with the Prussian army. Vidal also invents a translation by John Hay, enabling Lincoln's application of Clausewitz's ideas. Lincoln also gained knowledge from other thinkers from his well-known readings from the Library of Congress undertaken early in the war.

or his famous theses is tenuous at best, Lincoln recognized Clausewitz's thesis as "a fundamental reality" reflecting the only logical relationship between war and policy on the one hand and the civil/military relationship on the other.¹⁷

James B. McPherson credits Lincoln with "intuitional" knowledge of the thesis, and also identifies in Lincoln an acknowledgment and appreciation of the difference between political goals and military strategy. In a private conversation with Grant, Lincoln revealed this knowledge:

While armies were sitting down waiting for opportunities to turn up which might, perhaps, be more favorable from a strictly military point of view, the government was spending millions of dollars every day; that there was a limit to the sinew of war, and a time might be reached when the spirits and resources of the people would become exhausted.¹⁸

As significant as a battlefield reverse, inaction disrupted the war effort and therefore defined a defeat. Lincoln went on to say that he preferred not to know Grant's plans, and that he would not interfere in his operations. On the eve of Grant's final offensive culminating in Lee's surrender, Grant remarked on Lincoln's visit:

The President is one of the few visitors I have had who have not attempted to extract from me a knowledge of my movement, although he is the only one who has a right to know them.¹⁹

Lincoln, like the army and the country as whole, struggled with policy and the use of means in its application. Defining policy is one thing, finding a general to carry it out and convincing a people to support that policy is another. The education of Lincoln, the

¹⁷ Christopher Bassford, Clausewitz in English, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 51-55, provides the best discussion of Clausewitz's availability in the United States at this time.

¹⁸ McPherson, "Commander," 4, identifies Lincoln's intuitional understanding of Clausewitz's dictum and also credits Lincoln with an understanding of the difference between political goals and military strategy. Horace Porter, Campaigning With Grant, (New York: Century, 1906), 26.

¹⁹ Ibid.

army and the people preceded, as the course of events defined “the kind of war,” in Clausewitz’s formulation, Lincoln was fighting. It defined as well the relationship between the three major actors—the army, the people and the state—that waged it.

Abraham Lincoln On the Border—Policy and Military Strategy

There exists in America no tradition of intellectual concern with that border area where military problems and political ones meet—Bernard Brodie²⁰

In many ways the history of the Civil War, especially in the Eastern theatre, is a history of Lincoln’s search for a competent commander.²¹ Successive commanders of the Army of the Potomac exhibited incompetence in military matters. These commanders matched or surpassed their military incompetence through further blunders in the political sphere. It is fair to say that probably all of the eastern generals elevated to high command believed themselves, to a greater or lesser degree, superior to Lincoln and questioned his military ability and often his policy. With time, Lincoln’s military abilities and understanding of the true nature of the war progressed. So it is more correct to say that in the Eastern theatre the search for a correct political policy accompanied and proceeded parallel to the search for military competence. But if Lincoln did not perceive immediately the true nature of the war and its requirements, neither did his generals.

²⁰ Brodie, Bernard. Strategy in the Missile Age, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959), 7.

²¹ T. Harry Williams, Lincoln and His Generals, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1952), and Kenneth P. Williams, Lincoln Finds a General, 5 vol. (New York: MacMillan, 1949—59), are two well-known examples.

There is a “disconnect” evident in all of the Union generals’ thinking (before Grant) between the technical demands of the war and policy.

Lincoln as supreme commander suffered no disconnect. His province encompassed policy on the highest level, and he should be judged on policy rather than on his part in the operations his armies pursued during the war. As Clausewitz suggests, “at the highest realms of strategy . . . there is little or no difference between strategy, policy and statesmanship. On the “civilian” side, Lincoln’s “intuitional” understanding of the dynamics of war and politics guaranteed nothing. Unapparent to Lincoln and to everyone else, the nature of the war defined itself. Lincoln’s perceptions and understanding evolved, and with them his policy.²²

That Lincoln eventually divined a proper policy and understood the true nature of the war also guaranteed nothing. The policy of government comprises only one of the three branches of the Clausewitzian trinity. To win the war, the desires and understanding of the people required cultivation, and the Army also required an evolution to match Lincoln’s. The difficulty in any war always turns on the relation of individual military actions to achievement of political and policy goals. Identifying a true center of gravity and targeting it effectively remained elusive through much of the war. Until Grant, no clear link exists connecting Union military operations and fulfillment of the political goals of the North. Unsophisticated generals, dismissive of Lincoln’s views or ignorant of their political role, devised planned and carried out operations (or failed to carry out operations) so disconnected from the needs of policy that they repeatedly sabotaged the political designs of the North.

²² Clausewitz, War, 178.

How does killing (or not killing) some young Southern soldiers on the field of battle make Lincoln and reunion acceptable to the majority of citizens in the South? Does occupying some piece of territory make the North stronger or does it only disperse the Union effort? Should emancipation take place as a war measure to weaken the South or would emancipation only stimulate greater resistance? If emancipation, when, where and how? What should the country be like after the war? Should soldiers be “soft” on civilians so as not to provoke their further resistance, or “hard” in order to demonstrate resistance is futile? Does fighting a particular battle, in particular way, at a particular time, contribute or detract from the political goal of reunion? Understanding all of these considerations and formulating a coherent policy and designing military action to achieve them defines a great complexity. Clausewitz admiringly quotes Bonaparte’s memorable phrase describing the complexity of strategic command: “many of the decisions faced by the commander-in-chief resemble mathematical problems worthy of the gifts of a *Newton* or an *Euler*.”²³

Lincoln, Scott, Anaconda and the Search for a Policy

The people, knowing nothing of war, demanded an immediate advance—J. F. C. Fuller

When people talk, as they often do, about the harmful political influence on the management of war, they are not really saying what they mean. Their quarrel should be with the policy itself, not its influence—Clausewitz²⁴

²³ Ibid, 586.

²⁴ J. F. C. Fuller, *Grant and Lee: A Study in Personality and Generalship*, (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1957), 135-36; Clausewitz, *War*, 112.

J. F. C. Fuller suggests that at beginning of the war (both North and South) “grand strategy was conspicuous through its absence.”²⁵ Russell Weigly, unwilling to go quite so far, finds, “the failure of North and South to choose strategic priorities approached having no strategy.” Winfield Scott provides an exception to Fuller and Weigly’s critique of a “disconnect” between strategy and policy at the highest levels of army command during the early days of the Civil War. Scott understood Lincoln’s original political aim, one of limited war to restore the Union, and devised an appropriate military strategy to carry it out. “Anaconda,” represents less an absence of strategy or a failure “to select priorities,” than a quarrel with policy based on a misperception.²⁶

Scott’s well-known Anaconda Plan represented something apart from the other Union strategies devised (or not devised) to prosecute the war. Ultimately Scott’s estimations proved more realistic than those of his detractors, who turned its very name into a pejorative. Scott’s pragmatic evaluation of the scale of the task, the vastness of the time and resources required to defeat the South in hindsight seem perceptive and essentially correct. Scott predicted a three-year war, in which a large army would bisect the Confederacy through combined Army and Navy operation based on the Mississippi.

²⁵ Fuller *Personality*, 250; Geoffrey Perret, *Ulysses S. Grant: Soldier and President*, (New York: Random House, 1997), 299. Perret believes Grant was only the second truly strategic thinker the United States military produced, the first being Winfield Scott.

²⁶ Much of Book VIII of *On War* discusses the problems of defining political context, its relationship to warmaking and discovering policy. Since pre-war policy created the military instrument used in the current conflict, “a familiar tool that had been in use for many years,” that instrument shared in the errors of policy, “and therefore could provide no corrective.” New conditions and new policy, driven by the war itself, created a new instrument able to cope with new conditions. In the American Civil War the old professional instrument found itself largely irrelevant and superseded by masses of volunteers. See Clausewitz, *War*, 577-637.

These operations, coupled with a blockade, would exert the political/economic/military pressure necessary to end the rebellion.²⁷

Though not followed in its original form, in essence the North eventually wins the war through Anaconda, with the addition of direct targeting of Southern armies and internal logistics and communications. Increasing the economic “squeeze,” Union armies marched through Georgia and Carolina, accompanied by direct attacks neutralizing or destroying the Confederate field armies.²⁸ Geoffrey Parret is unstinting in his admiration for Scott’s Anaconda Plan which in its

Realism, its thoroughness and its heroic scale . . . left no scope for even the most brilliant Confederate commander to triumph and no prospect for a stalemate for southern politicians to negotiate into an acceptable peace.²⁹

Does Scott’s strategy truly stand apart from other Union commanders due to the achievement of Anaconda? A Clausewitzian critique must point to three flaws in Anaconda, attributable less to Scott’s military abilities than to inaccurate readings of political context. Mistakes in understanding the true political circumstance (a “given,” out of the control of Scott) must be shared by Lincoln, as Scott’s commander-in-chief.

The first great political flaw results from Scott and Lincoln’s belief that a war for reunion described something essentially limited in its character. Lincoln believed, as did Grant until the time of Shiloh, in the existence of a large, if silent, majority of Unionist

²⁷ Allen Peskin, Winfield Scott and the Profession of Arms, (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2003), provides a detailed, sympathetic evaluation of Scott’s plan, its detractors and McClellan’s superseding of Scott.

²⁸ James M. McPherson, Abraham Lincoln and the Second American Revolution, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 73-76, provides a “Clausewitzian” discussion of Anaconda and the political problems associated with waging limited war, both during the Civil War and in subsequent U. S. history.

²⁹ Parret, Soldier, 136

Southerners who clandestinely opposed secession. This belief accredited to the South a powerful, elite, slave owning ruling class, which intimidated and hijacked the poorer classes into secession and war. Scott calculated the economic pressures of Anaconda sufficient to tip the balance of power in the South toward the lower classes and reunion. If these pressures proved inadequate, many shared Grant's belief that a few successful battles should break the rebellion. The current war, initially defined by Lincoln and Scott, encompassed no social revolution, no abolition and envisaged no great loss of life or property. During the war itself Southern society revealed none of the fragility postulated by Lincoln and Scott. Victory through displacement of ruling classes in the South required much greater pressure than Anaconda could deliver.

The second miscalculation hinged on geography, the available means and a misjudgment of the passions of the people and their requirements for waging war. The sheer size of the Confederacy determined that even a strategy of limited intent required a vast investment of time and resources. Anaconda required time. Time to invent a strong navy, implement an effective blockade and wait for the results; time to raise and train a professional army and march it down the Mississippi; time for anti-secession political forces to regain control in the South, and then time to negotiate and find and implement a legal basis for reunion. Anaconda exhibits at its heart an irresolvable contradiction: while essentially limited in its ends, its means remained extensive. Union limitation of political ends received popular support: the less limited factors of time and the development and application of the means of a large army and navy did not.

Popular desire to punish the rebels through direct action pounded a third nail into Anaconda's coffin. An attack on Richmond, preferably before the Confederate congress

could meet, provided a quick, easy, and aggressive response that appealed to a large segment of the population. They wanted to make the rebels pay, and pay quickly for secession and the attack at Fort Sumter. The image of Napoleonic war, with decisive, climactic battles, affected civilians as well as soldiers. “On to Richmond” strategies represented the art of the politically possible, even if they represented impossibility from a practical military standpoint. Popular politics expressed popular conceptions of war. Given the proximity of the Confederate capital and a natural inclination to end the conflict quickly and punish the South, Northerners proved reluctant to commit to Anaconda.

Anaconda floundered on miscalculation of political context and the contradictions inherent in waging and essentially limited war over a vast area. Scott developed a war plan paradoxically to extreme (in time and resources) and too limited (in not including direct military assaults on the South) than Northern opinion would allow. Northern opinion demanded a shorter war. Scott’s three-year estimate for Anaconda to achieve the limited goal of negotiated reunion represented a political impossibility at this stage in the war. Northern opinion also demanded a direct attack on Richmond, much more aggressive and direct than the “very limited, indeed scarcely a war at all . . . a police action to quell a very large riot,” determined by Lincoln and developed strategically by Scott. Political capital existed for, and indeed demanded, quick, direct methods.³⁰

If we apply Clausewitz’s trinity to Anaconda, we can clearly appreciate how theory effectively defines reality. We find Lincoln’s appreciation of the political

³⁰ Ibid, 75; James M. McPherson, *Tried by War: Abraham Lincoln as Commander in Chief*, (New York: Penguin Press, 2008), 11, 35-36 discusses Lincoln’s fear that Scott’s “professionalism” in devising a limited war plan Anaconda reflected his political convictions as a Virginian.

situation, the rational element of policy, flawed in its essentials and wrong in its conclusions due to the true fervor war released in the South; next we examine the first wild card, the passions of the Northern people, unwilling to accept either a limited war of uncertain length or an unlimited war of any length including social revolution. The people demanded nothing less than a violent, direct attack on secession. In the second wild card, Scott's means, we find a correct design, based unfortunately on flawed political assumptions. Scott's means, when measured against political constraints, lacked substance and realism.

In the Scott/Lincoln partnership we find Scott devising an operational plan effectively serving political aims as Lincoln perceived and defined them. Scott's physical condition and McClellan's efforts to usurp him, leaves a key element in an evaluation of Scott undecided: could Anaconda win the war if executed by its creator? Although Scott's resignation leaves this question unanswerable, its deficiencies and subsequent history of the war makes some judgments possible.

If a healthy Scott built a big army and skillfully marched it down the Mississippi, the main theatre of war moves west. Without other armies applying pressure throughout the length of the Confederacy, it seems logical the South could find troops elsewhere to stalemate this move for several years, as happened in general during the war itself. One can also imagine the efficient and skillful Scott eventually clearing the Mississippi and Anaconda succeeding over-time in its design, blockade and control of the River. It is difficult to visualize, given Southern resolve revealed during the war, this alone producing an end to the war. Admirable as a technical exercise, Scott and Lincoln misread the political situation, both North and South, and this destroyed their plan.

Operations based on deficient politics generally fail, and when they don't they achieve results politically deficient. Seldom, if ever, do strategies based on an imperfect appreciation of political contexts win wars.³¹

Anaconda in conception survived, albeit with additional and increasingly unlimited means to carry it out. The progress of the war itself revealed the true character of the war, changed Northern political beliefs and allowed a variation Anaconda to proceed. Lincoln's own perception of the nature of the war also evolved, providing the policy engine to prosecute the war. Some of Lincoln's generals, notably Grant and Sherman, participated in a similar evolution. Many did not. If we couple Anaconda with a changing public opinion, additional means, Lincoln's drive and Grant's skill in execution, Scott's plan approaches the admiration suggested by Geoffrey Parret and others. Certainly Scott demonstrated great technical skill in devising his plan and exhibited less naiveté than many in estimating the resources required to win the war.

From the example above we see some of the difficulties confronting Lincoln and his successive generals. The progress of the war itself demonstrated Southern resolve and the war's true political context and character. The formulation of an appropriate policy and its implementation waited for this demonstration. Lincoln and Scott's policy was wrong. Instead of finding grand strategy totally absent in the early years of the Civil War, as Fuller and Weigly suggest, from Scott's example we find it present, but wrong. Until the advent of Grant and the evolution of Lincoln, Northern grand strategy stayed wrong.

³¹ Clausewitz identified unintended political consequences as part of the unpredictability inherent in waging war. Sometimes those consequences are beneficial, but generally they derail policy. See Clausewitz War, 139-140, 582-83.

McClellan and Lincoln on War Aims, War's Limitation, Brilliant Minds and Fighting

The original political objects can greatly alter during the course of the war and may finally change entirely since they are influenced by events and their probable consequences—Clausewitz

I suppose the Union was the real sentiment, the dominant sentiment—Bismarck

In the beginning yes, but as soon as slavery fired upon the flag it was felt, we all felt, even those who did not object to slaves, that slavery must be destroyed—Grant.

The only way to whip an army is to go out and fight it—Grant ³²

Otto von Bismarck is often credited with defining politics as the art of the possible. In 1861 Anaconda defined a political impossibility. Lincoln's search for a "possible" policy accompanied his search for a possible general to carry it out, as the course of the war itself revealed its character. Anaconda presents a clear picture of the complexity Clausewitz identified in the interaction of chance, passions and policy through the actions of three actors: the army, the people and state.

The evolution of Northern war aims, from a "soft" to a "hard" war illustrates Clausewitz's dualistic conception of war. While all wars tend toward the absolute, they are conditioned by politics, which determine the character of the limitation. While the soldiers themselves drove hard war on the battlefield, the progress of the war and the

³² Clausewitz, War, 95; GP 28:409; Clausewitz, War, 92.

failures of George McClellan and his successors drove progressively greater efforts in the operational sphere, urged on by Lincoln in the domain of policy.

A Clausewitzian constructing a critique of McClellan does not suffer from a lack of examples of his failures as a strategic thinker, but at least one biographer credits McClellan with wisdom in a Clausewitzian sense. Ethan S. Rafuse believes:

McClellan consciously shaped his actions during the war with an eye on the connection between military means and political ends and how the battlefield, the seat of government and the home front interacted to shape the aims for which a war is fought and the means for attaining them.³³

Rafuse also finds McClellan aware of how “the perception of the political aims for which a nation is fighting and the means for achieving them can be radically altered by how military operations are conducted.” If we concede this understanding of a few of Clausewitz’s key ideas (few of McClellan’s other biographers would) they do not find expression in McClellan’s performance on or off the battlefield during the war.³⁴

McClellan had a problem with both the command structure of an army, in which junior officers obey their superiors and with the constitutionally mandated civilian supremacy of the Presidency. He actively sought ascension to Scott’s job of commander and chief of all the armies, labeling Scott a “dotard or a traitor . . . a perfect imbecile,” and was equally condescending and critical of Lincoln, whom he described as “not a man of strong character . . . certainly in no sense a gentleman,” and “nothing more than a well-

³³ Ethan S. Rafuse, McClellan’s War: The Failure of Moderation in the Struggle for the Union, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1989) 1-2.

³⁴ Ibid, 1. For a critical view of McClellan on these matters, see Stephen W. Sears, George B. McClellan: The Young Napoleon, (New York: Tickner and Fields, 1988).

meaning baboon.” He also famously opined, “never a truer epithet applied to a certain individual than that of the ‘Gorilla.’”³⁵

McClellan, unable to accept either the military direction of the traitorous Scott or the political direction of his simian commander-in-chief proved unable to design and carry out coherent military operations to win a war, or in fact a major battle. McClellan shared Lincoln’s and Scott’s initial political evaluation of the conditions in the South, believing it less unified than it was, believing the slave-owning class responsible for the war and loyalists in the majority.³⁶

McClellan’s alternative to Anaconda seems unrealistic in its matching of ends and means and in its relation to the political situation even as McClellan himself perceived it. McClellan proposed the building of an army of 273,000 men, with which one should:

Drive the enemy out of Virginia and occupy Richmond . . .
Charleston, Savannah, Montgomery, Pensacola, Mobile, and New Orleans
. . .Crush the rebellion at one blow, terminate the war in one campaign.³⁷

These represent rather unlimited military aims directed at places far in the interior of the Confederacy, some of which were not occupied until quite late in the course of the war. If applied, as McClellan perceived it, Southern resolve and military power would certainly have destroyed McClellan’s intention to “terminate the war in one campaign.” McClellan’s grandiose first plan also suffers from two of the same three political flaws present in Anaconda: underestimating Southern resolve and proposing an essentially unobtainable military goal. It did exhibit the political advantage of proposing positive

³⁵ Stephen W. Sears, ed. The Civil War Papers of George B. McClellan, (New York: Ticknor and Fields, 1989), 81. 59; Joseph T. Glatthar, Partners in Command: The Relationships Between Leaders in the Civil War, (New York: Free Press, 1994), 61.

³⁶ Sears, Young, 322.

³⁷ Sears, Papers, 71-75

action. “Terminating the war in one campaign” implies, but not explicitly, the climactic Napoleonic battles the people expected and desired. In practice, McClellan assiduously avoided this type of battle throughout his career.

Also interesting is McClellan’s list of place objectives and by implication territory to conquer. Destruction of Southern armies or will to resist is absent, as is any indication of just how occupation of territory and places achieves reunion and wins the war. While Lincoln soon understood and appreciated Clausewitz’s observation that, “to occupy land before {enemy} armies are defeated should be considered a necessary evil,” all of McClellan’s campaigns seem predicated on the notion of avoiding battle through maneuver and occupying places.³⁸

The Peninsula Campaign provides an illuminating example. Richmond certainly embodied an objective endowed with great political symbolism. McClellan sought to seek an “indirect approach” to its capture, utilizing Union advantage in naval capability to outflank the Confederate army and transfer his army up the James. So far so good, but the flanked army still existed. At some point McClellan must confront that army in combat. Great political benefit would accrue to the North if Richmond fell, but it is not clear how this necessarily ends the war. An intact and motivated army in and of itself constitutes an effective means of resistance.³⁹

³⁸ Clausewitz, *War*, 92; Sears, *Young*, 85, documents McClellan’s reluctance to “depart from my intention of gaining success by maneuvering rather than by fighting,” even when the chance of a brilliant stroke existed.

³⁹ Liddel Hart, B. H., *Strategy*, (New York: Praeger, 1967), 145, finds McClellan’s campaign as “a shorter, direct approach to Richmond,” rather than a true indirect approach. Its “indirectness” targeted the Confederate army, not its capitol. As an alternative, Washington’s example in the Revolutionary War of preserving the army in favor of fighting for any city should have been obvious.

McClellan also opposed revolutionary political objectives, such as the abolition of slavery, which might “embitter the contest and leave the South no choice but to fight to the death.” So limitation for McClellan applies to policy toward Southern property and social institutions, and to the scale of combat perused. Most significantly McClellan’s policy of limited political aims and indirect military methods failed to evolve as the course of the war demonstrates the necessity for change.⁴⁰

A critique of McClellan’s political/military strategy finds at its heart the following contradictions: Secession on the part of the Confederacy constitutes revolution; Southern revolutionary impulse should not be met by a correspondingly revolutionary Northern response, as it might destroy Southern institutions and push the war toward the absolute; by implication, so long as Southerners seek the revolution of secession, they enjoy immunity from a proportionate and equally revolutionary Northern response.

Apart from contradictions in his military strategy, McClellan’s problem with the civil/military relationship and the command system of the army condemned his strategy to failure. While Lincoln’s policy continually evolved, McClellan’s did not, and his self-delusion on matters political and military at times borders on the bizarre. Lincoln sought to break the stalemate of the war through political means (his province) through issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation. McClellan, identified Lincoln’s policy as “servile insurrection,” and could not make up his mind “to fight for such an accursed doctrine.” McClellan’s failure to resign given his opposition to Lincoln’s policy exhibits a lack of character.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Sears, Young, 99.

⁴¹ Sears, Papers, 345, 481.

The contrast with Grant, writing after the fall of Donalson, could not be more profound:

So long as I hold a commission in Army I have no views of my own to carry out. No man can be efficient as a commander who sets his own notions above law and those whom his sworn to obey. When Congress enacts anything too odious for me to execute I will resign.⁴²

Clausewitz and his fellow officers confronted a similar dilemma after the Franco-Prussian Treaty of 1812, which allowed French military occupation of Prussia and required her to provide an army corps in the event of war with Russia. These terms preserved the Prussian monarchy, but proved “too odious” for Clausewitz (and nearly 300 other officers) who resigned rather than serve Napoleon.⁴³

After the war Grant defined how disagreements over policy and chain of command derailed the effectiveness of the type of soldier epitomized by McClellan:

I never knew of a case of an officer who went into the war with political ideas who succeeded. I do not mean Democratic ideas alone, but Republican as well. The generals who insisted upon writing emancipation proclamations, and creating new theories of State governments, and invading Canada, all came to grief as surly as those who believed that the main object of the war was to protect rebel property, and keep the negroes at work on the plantations while their masters were off in the rebellion.⁴⁴

While failure to fight remains in the view of most historians McClellan’s defining characteristic, his failure to serve the constitution and the demands of policy are more significant. A general unwilling or unable to serve policy serves no purpose, no matter how great his professional weakness or ability.

⁴² GP 8:423

⁴³ Martin Kitchen. *A Military History of Germany*, (Secaucus: The Citadel Press, 1975), 52.

⁴⁴ Young *World*, 2:447.

McClellan's formulated other rather grandiose war plans, suggesting to Malcolm Ives, (correspondent for the New York Herald) in January, 1862, a combination anticipating some of Grant's thinking later in the war. Buell would operate in East Tennessee while Burnside attacked North Carolina. A second column would be directed against Nashville, with Halleck cooperating and finishing off the rebels in Missouri. Buell's moves would sever communications between Virginia and the West; Burnside's would do the same between Virginia and the Carolinas. This would put Virginia in a desperate situation. McClellan offered no details about the role of his own Army of the Potomac in this scheme, but implied what was left of the Southern armies after Burnside's and Buell's depredations would probably be found and rounded up somewhere in Louisiana.⁴⁵

McClellan also regaled Stanton in February of that same year with a twenty-two-page defense of his so-called "Urbanna" plan. A Union army moving up the Rappahannock would force the Confederates into a hopeless attack, in order to defend Richmond. Advances would follow this into the interior of the South. From the East, Union armies would target South Carolina and Georgia. Buell would move from the West either to Montgomery or towards merger with the Eastern armies somewhere in Georgia. Halleck would move down the Mississippi toward New Orleans.⁴⁶

McClellan exhibited none of the determination necessary to fight these battles nor did he operate as an effective general-in-chief. He could conceive ambitious, extravagant

⁴⁵ Rafuse, McClellan's, 174. Rafuse details this meeting, arranged by Stanton, who wished to defuse criticism of Northern lack of progress in prosecuting the war. See Sears, Young, 143, for a slightly different account of this plan.

⁴⁶ Sears, Young, 149-150.

plans but he didn't possess the "strong mind" and determination necessary to carry them out. He also lacked the moral courage to meet the political requirements of action, leading to Lincoln's order of a general movement by all Union armies against the enemy, on February 22, 1862, and ultimately to his own removal.⁴⁷

In contrast to Grant, who in Sherman's estimation, "don't care a damn for what the enemy does out of his sight," McClellan continually inflated Confederate numbers and intentions, and losing "the courage fight as he did in every battle," failed to carry any of his dubious schemes to fruition, and in fact left the field of battle on more than one occasion.⁴⁸ Clausewitz described these kinds of generals, who, mesmerized by the enemy's numbers and often incapable of action, should focus on a commander and his intentions:

Men are always inclined to pitch their estimate of the enemy's strength as too high than too low, such is human nature. The strength of his (the commander's) will is much less easy to determine (than his numbers) and can only be gauged approximately by the strength of motive animating it.⁴⁹

McClellan's obsession with numbers exhibits perhaps more than the mistaken notions identified by Clausewitz above. His repeated over-estimation of Southern numbers borders on paranoia. Unjustified by reality, McClellan's caution also represents

⁴⁷ Warren W. Hassler, Commanders of the Army of the Potomac, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1962), 33-35. Lincoln's ill-advised order requiring all of the national armies to move forward against the enemy reflects his frustration with generals unwilling to fight and his intuitive belief in the necessity for simultaneous offensive action. Essentially correct in its strategic assumptions, his action proved ineffective in motivating his generals.

⁴⁸ Glatthaar, Partners, 138. Stephen W. Sears, Controversies and Commanders: Dispatches From the Army of the Potomac, (New York: Houghtone Mifflin, 1999), 17.

⁴⁹ Clausewitz, War, 88, 77. J. F. C. Fuller, given his World War I experience, felt all estimates of enemy forces should be halved, an accurate evaluation when dealing with McClellan's figures. See Fuller, Generalship, 111.

more than just bad or incomplete intelligence (Clausewitz's distrust of intelligence is also well documented). Acceptance of exaggerated estimations of Confederate strength enabled justification of his own inaction and provided fuel for his demands for additional troops. McClellan also exhibited paranoia in other areas, believing his own government conspired to see him and his army defeated, regardless of the consequences for the course of the war or the country itself.⁵⁰

McClellan's view of his success at Antietam, only marginal at best, reveals a sense of the surreal, and no clear appreciation of the meaning of the word "victory." He said he had, "defeated Lee so utterly, & saved the North . . . completely." Because of the effects of this victory, he then "insisted that Stanton shall be removed & that Halleck shall give way to me as Comdr in Chief," adding that Halleck "is an incompetent fool." McClellan believed "God in his mercy has for the second time made me the instrument for saving the nation."⁵¹

For McClellan, even his defeats proved advantageous to the cause of the Union: "If I had succeeded in taking Richmond now the fanatics of the North might have been too powerful & reunion impossible." Grant, who never shrank from responsibility, famously told Lincoln, "what ever happens the fault is not with you." McClellan shifted the blame for all his failures writing to Lincoln after his retreat after the Seven Days

⁵⁰ See Clausewitz, War, 84-85, 117-118, 140, and Anastaplo, George, "Clausewitz and Intelligence: Some Preliminary Observations." Teaching Political Science 16 (Winter, 1989): 77-84, for Clausewitz's views on intelligence; GP I:xii; Sears, Young, xi; Sears, Controversies, 12.

⁵¹Sears, Papers, 473; Sears, Young, 322.

Battle “you have done your best to sacrifice this army.” He then attributed all to God, the “ultimate escape from responsibility,”⁵²

McClellan above all Civil War generals best illustrates Clausewitz’s preference for commanders who possess “the strong, rather than the brilliant mind.” Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain summed up McClellan specifically, and a type of commander generally, who is able in the abstract, but always fails in actuality: “With great organizing power, he failed in practical application. The realities of the war seemed to daze him.”⁵³ McClellan’s imagination and obsession with numbers, his admiration of Jomini with his esoteric rules of strategy and his lack of appreciation for the political climate in which he functioned doomed his designs. All of his plans and “brilliance” count for nothing when weighed against their failure in application. Members of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War, Benjamin Wade and Zacharia Chandler engaged in the following conversation, illustrative this style of war making by generals in the mode of McClellan:

Wade: What do you think of the science of generalship?

Chandler: I don’t know much about war, but it seems to me that this is infernal, unmitigated cowardice.⁵⁴

Given all these contradictions and failings in McClellan’s character, his obsession with numbers, with Jominian doctrine, his paranoia and especially his reluctance to

⁵²Quoted in Catton, Command, 178; Sears, Young, 341; Glatthaar, Partners, 79. See also Sears, Controversies, 15-16 for a discussion of McClellan’s evasion of responsibility. Glatthaar, Partners, 79.

⁵³ Sears, Young, 1-12 relates McClellan’s education and performance at West Point, the word “brilliant” and its equivalent appears repeatedly in evaluations of his abilities. Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain, The Passing of the Armies, (Gettysburg: Stan Clark Military Books, 1994), 27.

⁵⁴ Rafuse, McClellans, 176

modify his evaluations of the nature of the war, it becomes easier to see why McClellan preferred not to fight at all.⁵⁵

Halleck

He was too learned a soldier to consent to a campaign in violation of all the principles of the art of war—U. S. Grant.

My men will never dig another ditch for Halleck except to bury him—Black Jack Logan

General battles are not to be fought –Halleck

So much then for the ends to be pursued in war; let us now turn to the means. There is only one: combat—Clausewitz⁵⁶.

Given his dismal performance in many ways reminiscent of his predecessor, the summoning of Halleck to Washington to become General-in-Chief appears suspect. Lincoln based his decision largely on recent success in the West were Halleck commanded. He filled a need as Lincoln, having assumed the role if not the title of General-in-Cheif, sought to improve his command structure. His nickname in the prewar army, “Old Brains,” implied a measure of mastery of his craft. Grant’s and Foote’s success at Henry and Donelson and even Grant’s mixed performance at Shiloh demonstrated to Lincoln the possibility of progress, progress attributable in part to Halleck. In addition, ejection of the Confederates from large areas of Kentucky and Missouri as well as the recent Union domination of West Tennessee spoke for Halleck’s

⁵⁵ Herman Hattaway and Archer Jones, *How the North Won*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1983), 267, provide a more generous evaluation of McClellan compared to the Grant of Donalson and Shiloh or the Lee of the Seven Days’ Battle.

⁵⁶Young, *World*, 2: 615. Logan quoted in Smith, *Grant*, 209, 207; Clausewitz, *War*, 74.

advancement. In addition, both the retired Winfield Scott and long-time West Point instructor Denis Hart Mahan recommended him.⁵⁷

In Halleck's performance as a theatre commander one uncovers all of the elements of his failures as a General-in-Chief. While a competent administrator, he proved unable to effectively define and carry out policy through military operations. These failings, apparent to those below him, emerged only over time to Lincoln and Stanton. In Halleck we see the epitome of the commander to whom doctrine assumes the mantle of unbreakable rules. While Clausewitz famously opined "A Positive Doctrine is Unobtainable," and "Theory Should be Study, not Doctrine," Halleck believed in the literal application of rules.⁵⁸

Numerous examples of Halleck's obsessions exist. We find the origins of Halleck's caution and inaction in his struggle to coordinate his theories of war with reality. Halleck offered the following:

to operate on exterior lines against an enemy occupying a central position will fail, as it always has failed, in ninety-nine out of a hundred cases. It is condemned by every military authority I have ever read.⁵⁹

Clausewitz, always a rigorous critic of formulations based on theory divorced from actual conditions, critiqued the concept of interior lines: "its purely geometric

⁵⁷ McPherson, *Cry*, 406, finds that Halleck took credit for Grant's and Foots' achievement at Forts Henry and Donelson. As senior commander he deserves credit for the ordering of operations, even if their successful execution are attributed to the drive and skill of his subordinates. Fuller, *Generalship*, 82, finds Halleck "by nature not only stupid, but jealous and ambitious." Hattaway and Jones, *How*, 209, details Scott's and Mahan's endorsement of Halleck to Lincoln and defend Halleck's abilities as a strategist and administrator.

⁵⁸ Clausewitz, *War*, 140, 141.

⁵⁹ McPherson, "Commander," 1-15, 7. McPherson believes Lincoln, reading the same authorities as Halleck, figured out that the interplay between concentration in space and concentration in time mitigated the advantages enjoyed by an opponent operating on interior lines.

character, still makes it another lopsided principle that could never govern a real situation.” In the real situation of the Civil War, the South viewed in its entirety, enjoyed the “advantage” of interior lines. Moving troops between fronts or theaters generally should prove easier than for the Confederates due to the shorter distances traveled. Therefore, by Halleck’s logic 99 percent of all operations mounted against the South should fail. Given this fact of geography, the North should chose not to fight and it often seemed to Lincoln his Generals chose not to.⁶⁰

In practice, in the “real situation” Clausewitz alluded to, better Northern railroads and especially sea power limited the Southern advantage of the central position. While the Confederates could and did move troops shorter distances from theatre to theatre, superior Union use of railroads, sea power and river lines limited the Southern advantage. Regardless of the accidents of geography, the Union had no choice in the matter. As Clausewitz observed: “Freedom of choice is available only in tactics, not always in strategy.” In spite of any disadvantages given the Southern enjoyment of the central position, the Federal army must attack in order to return the South to the Union. Strategy must serve policy, despite the “given” reality of geography.⁶¹

In the smaller theater or battlefield situation, the reality of interior lines aids one side or another, and a commander at any level must consider this as part of the complexity of battle. This remained true in the Civil War as in other wars. In contrast to a Halleck or a McClellan (and others), a Lee or a Grant never used such formulations as an excuse for not attacking an enemy or undertaking a campaign necessary to further war

⁶⁰ Clausewitz, War, 136.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, 367.

aims. Clausewitz derision of obsessions with interior lines extends to other dimensions. Clausewitz points out that attacks on exterior lines converging on a common center enjoy their own advantages. While naturally taking longer to develop, convergence generally proves more decisive. Attackers meeting in the center cut off or flank their objective, so they have a greater potential to destroy rather than marginally defeat the enemy. At best geographic conditions (the reality of interior/exterior lines) define a polarity, not a rule governing real situations.⁶²

Lincoln understood this better than most of his generals, identifying his “general idea of this war” as using the advantage of converging attacks. “This can be done by menacing him with superior forces at *different* points, at the same time.” The various Southern armies might attempt to concentrate against one of these points, leaving the others inadequately defended. Throughout the war Union generals and Halleck in particular proved unable to see with the clarity the polarity of interior/exterior lines understood by the professional Clausewitz and the amateur Lincoln.⁶³

Another of Halleck’s obsessions regarded the identification and capture of so-called “strategic points.” Jominians in general and Halleck specifically regarded these points as essential keys to winning wars. “I cannot make Buell understand the importance of strategic points until it is too late,” Halleck complained during his tenure as commander of the armies in the West. While the exact composition of such points remains somewhat vague in definition, Clausewitz observed “there is no theoretical concept in the art of war dearer to the hearts of critics.” Their possession signals or

⁶² Ibid, 367-68. Clausewitz distinguishes between the relative values of interior lines, divergent and convergent attacks both tactically and strategically.

⁶³ McPherson, Trial, 70.

enables the defeat of an enemy, while their denial to an opponent prevents their victory. For Halleck, Corinth represented just such a point. A. L. Conger offered this analysis, after the belated Union occupation of the city following Shiloh: “Halleck became imbued with the idea that the important strategic point of the West had been gained and that all that remained was to hold it.” While Halleck waited for his victory to manifest itself, Grant and others fumed at the delays. Clausewitz discussed the futility of Halleck’s logic: “The possession of provinces, cities, fortresses, roads, bridges, munitions dumps, etc, “ can only constitute the “*immediate* object of the engagement, but can never be the final one.” Such objects have no value unless they lead to some greater (i.e., political) goal. Even if one concedes the existence of such strategic points (Clausewitz would not per se, unless their occupation achieved some great political advantage), targeting enemy armies provides the surest method to occupy any “strategic points,” whether the city of Corinth or somewhere else.⁶⁴

Clausewitz’s thinking dovetails with Lincoln’s and Grant’s regarding the targeting of geographical or place objectives instead of the armies defending them: “If we wish to gain total victory, then the destruction of his armed forces is the most appropriate action and the occupation of his territory only a consequence.”

As to the specific points themselves, Clausewitz offers the following:

If we do not regard a war, and the separate campaigns of which it is composed, as a chain of linked engagements each leading to the next, but instead succumb to the idea that the capture of certain geographical points or the seizure of undefended provinces *are of value in themselves*, we are liable to regard them as windfall profits.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Clausewitz, War, 456-59 refers specifically to the concept of “keys to the country.” John W. Emerson, “Grant’s Life in the West and His Mississippi Valley Campaigns,” Midland Monthly, X, 4 (Oct. 1898): 317; Conger, Rise, 277; Clausewitz, War, 181.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 92, 181.

In misunderstanding such “profits,” many ignore the fact that possession of territory or cities often carries other disadvantages. An occupier must garrison and supply geographic points and undefended provinces, which may consume more resources than they generate. Occupation also magnifies the distances and difficulties of supply of the occupiers’ now diminished armies. Advancing troops also now find themselves exposed to irregular war as occupiers, by definition, generate opposition from local populations. As always the “final balance,” the success of the war or the campaign as a whole, determines the value of places. Grant’s experiences with irregular warfare and the raids of Forest and Van Dorn demonstrated the difficulty in truly controlling any occupied locality. This knowledge drove the development of his unique raiding strategy, which targeted enemy resources and transportation and abstain from the occupation of territory. His common sense drove his targeting of armies.⁶⁶

The greatest divergence in thinking existing between Grant and his General-in-Chief regards the use of the engagement. Grant’s natural aggressiveness and desire to attack and conquer the South stands in stark contrast to Halleck’s seeming reluctance to fight pitched battles. Halleck’s own words clarify his views: “General battles are not to be fought,” he wrote, except under extreme circumstances. His views reflected those of fellow Jominians, McClellan and Buell. Buell’s explicit formulation, “the object is not to fight great battles, but by demonstrations and maneuvering to prevent the enemy from concentrating his forces,” accounts for some his own lethargy in confronting his enemies

⁶⁶ Ibid, 182.

and the ineffectiveness of the Jominians in waging a Civil War. Halleck truly lives up to the appellation, “a large emptiness surrounded by an education.”⁶⁷

Grant defined his own views in response to critics of his high casualties during the Overland Campaign:

I do not know any way to put down this rebellion and restore the authority of the Government except by fighting, and fighting means that men must be killed. If the people of this country expect that the war can be conducted to a successful issue in any other way than by fighting, they must get somebody other than myself to command the army⁶⁸

The wars of the Revolution and Napoleon provided Clausewitz with an example of war pushed towards the extreme. The export of revolution confronted questions of national survival, exhibiting little relation to the “cabinet wars” of limited objectives characteristic of European wars of the previous two hundred years. The passions released in the American Civil War also confronted comparable issues of national survival. Waging remorseless war for national existence required fighting great battles and a General-in Chief other than Halleck.⁶⁹

Like McClellan, Halleck did not possess the strong mind necessary to carry out the operations he planned. Soon after his ascension to General-in-Chief, he used his position to eliminate the exterior lines of operation represented by the Peninsular Campaign, withdrawing McClellan’s army to protect Washington. The failure of Union efforts devolves less to the relative advantages of operating on exterior or interior lines than on the will of the commanders. Lee’s aggressiveness, energy and determination

⁶⁷ Quoted in Smith, Grant, 207, 171. Fuller, Personality, 140.

⁶⁸ Simplson, Triumph, 307.

⁶⁹ Russel Weigly, The American Way of War, (New York: Macmillan, 1973), 89.

during the battles on the peninsula achieved a politically significant victory, even given a great tactical disadvantage and in spite of significantly higher casualties. Halleck, more significantly refused to command Burnside after defeat at Fredericksburg, becoming the “first-rate clerk” of Lincoln’s evaluation.⁷⁰

Clausewitz vividly expressed his sentiments: “only a great battle can produce a major decision.” While in a war or campaign, a great battle is not necessarily the only decisive factor; its artificial limitation in the face of revolutionary or more absolute forms of war carries with it a dangerous absurdity:

We are not interested in generals who win victories without bloodshed. The fact that slaughter is a horrifying spectacle must make us take war more seriously, but not provide an excuse for gradually blunting our swords in the name of humanity. Sooner or later someone will come along with a sharp sword and hack off our arms.⁷¹

McClellan and Halleck both fought with blunted swords, partly in the name of humanity and partly in the name of artificial constructs regarding the nature of the war, its limitation and the “proper” way to fight. McClellan “was unnerved by the sight of ‘mangled corpses’ and wounded men,” and later wrote: “Victory has no charms for me when purchased as such a cost . . . every poor fellow that is killed or wounded almost haunts me.” Lee and Jackson came along with sharp swords and hacked McClellan into

⁷⁰ Hattaway and Jones, How, 210-11. Lincoln understood by this time the tangible effects of battles apart from the mere infliction of casualties and that their generation of political effects proves unpredictable. At this time Lincoln lamented the fact that public opinion both at home and abroad denigrated Union achievements in the West due to the “half-defeat” in the east at the Seven Days Battle. See John F. Marszalek, Commander of all Lincoln’s Armies: A Life of General Henry W. Halleck, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 2. for Halleck’s abdication of the duties of command. Much of Marszalek’s book details Halleck’s inaction and refusal to take responsibility. More positive evaluations of Halleck exist. Stephen E. Ambrose, Halleck: Lincoln’s Chief of Staff, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1996), 64-65, 144, finds Halleck able to modify Jomini better than many of his fellows. Judging Halleck as an administrator and military manager rather than a field commander “rehabilitates” him to some degree. See Hattaway and Jones, How, 50-77 for a generally positive view of Halleck, and Conger, Rise, 125-26, for a favorable analysis of both his administrative and command abilities.

⁷¹ Clausewitz, War, 260.

ineffectiveness during the Seven Days. Lee's sharp sword at Second Manassas hacked away at Halleck's nerves, transforming a general-in-chief into the "first rate clerk," of Lincoln's estimation, the "mechanism through which unsuccessful generals were sacked."⁷²

Like Lee, Grant operated without slavish devotion to systems of rules, and demonstrated a mode of thinking foreign to Halleck. Grant, unlike Halleck:

Had never been blinded his vision with these rules, which as formulated were so inapplicable to the Civil War. Hence he could not even discuss with Halleck the strategical ideas which presented themselves to his chief's mind, for the two men did not use the same vocabulary.⁷³

The soldiers in the field fairly early recognized Halleck's failings as a higher commander. Albert Sidney Johnson's Confederates took two days to march from Corinth and attack Grant at Shiloh. Halleck's march in the opposite direction took several weeks. This "faintly ridiculous," move to the strategic point of Corinth, "a siege from start to close (Grant)," "a magnificent drill (Sherman)," defined a lost opportunity similar in character to the aftermath of the fall of Fort Donalson. Even McClellan, who shared many Halleck's obsessions, weighed in on the General: "I do not think he ever had a correct military idea from beginning to end," and claimed that "of all the men whom I have encountered in high position, Halleck was the most hopelessly stupid." In summation Halleck evidenced a failing in moral courage equal to that of McClellan.

⁷²McPherson, Trial, 96-97. Marszalek, Commander, 22.

⁷³ Conger, Rise, 273. This became clear as Grants fortunes rose and Washington sought his council on the further prosecution of the war. Halleck rejected and probably did not fully understand either Grant's plans for a campaign through Mobile, His North Carolina plan for the winter of 1864 or perhaps even Sherman's march through Georgia.

Halleck's own failures during Pope's defeat broke down the Union command system and it remained broken until Grant's ascension to the post of General-in-Chief.⁷⁴

Halleck proved superior to McClellan in one key respect. His views on the war changed over time. By 1864, "war experience had finally made Halleck into an aggressive warrior," joining Grant and Lincoln in urging Thomas to attack Hood quickly, though he arguably continued to misunderstand Grant's strategy, even as it won the war. Halleck believed that "Grant's campaign is almost as great a failure as that of McClellan, so far as strategy is concerned," and felt Grant's move south of the James "a fatal mistake." For Halleck, the only thing worse than a siege (of Richmond) was a siege on exterior lines (Petersburg). Of more importance to the war effort, Halleck interpreted and informed Lincoln, functioning as Chief-of-Staff after Grant's ascension to General-in-Chief. Lincoln's description of Halleck as a "first-rate clerk" seems rather harsh in the estimation of some scholars. But Halleck lost his job to Grant, a former (and literal) second-rate clerk in a leather store in Illinois when the war began. By 1864 the second-rate leather shop clerk had clearly surpassed the first-rate clerk as a war maker.⁷⁵

⁷⁴Paddy Griffith, *Battle Tactics of the Civil War*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 44; Grant *Memoirs*, 195; *Memoirs of William T. Sherman*. 2 vols. (New York: Charles Webster & Co., 1891), 1: 274; Williams, *Generals*, 154-58; Fuller, *Generalship*, 95; Weigley, *American*, 85, documents Halleck's obsession with defensive works and entrenchments as five of fifteen chapters in his book directly concern fortifications.

⁷⁵ Marszalek, *Commander*, 218-19. Hattaway and Jones, *How*, 593.

Chapter 13

Planning for 1864: Strategic Vacuums, Politics, Blunt Instruments, Political Generals, and Thinking Strategically

What future operations will be, of course I don't know—Grant, September, 1861

You have never suggested to me any plan of operations in this department—Grant, October, 1862

The army was sent to where it could do the least good—After Vicksburg, 1863¹

From the beginning of his career as a Civil War commander, Grant operated as if overall strategic direction existed. That strategic direction did not necessarily exist or was imperfect and insufficient is beside the point: from the beginning Grant conceived himself as part of a larger whole designed to end the war and he designed his own operations accordingly. Given Hallack's peculiar view of command and strategy, Grant operated in a strategic vacuum even when operating as part of a preconceived plan on the part of his superior. Through intuition as much as design, Grant substituted his own conception of a national strategy and acted as its instrument as he saw it. He created "a strategy in spite of his government."²

When Grant seized Paducah, Kentucky, he seized upon Polk's political blunder in first violating Kentucky neutrality. In doing so he acted in accordance with Lincoln's desires to proceed cautiously politically in the border states: like the launching of the war

¹John Y. Simon, *et al.*, editors Papers of Ulysses S. Grant. Vols., 1-22, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press: 1967— I. 97), 2:237. Hereafter abbreviated as GP; GP 6:199; Ulysses S. Grant, Personal Memoirs of U. S. Grant, (New York: Da Capo Press, 1952), 303.

²J. F. C. Fuller, The Generalship of Ulysses S. Grant, (New York: Da Capo Press, 1929), 375.

itself at Fort Sumter, aggression came from the Rebels, not the Yankees. Grant operated on his own rather than Fremont's responsibility and issued proclamations that made policy. At Belmont Grant's own actions and concept of the war again determined events, not orders from above. Grant's efforts to push for an attack on Columbus, which blocked any Union move down river came to nothing, so he attacked at Belmont which exceeded his orders. Given the lethargy of Halleck, the Union might never have gained Forts Henry and Donalson with their obvious strategic advantages without Grant's essential personal drive.

After Donalson, Grant believed Halleck squandered a great strategic opportunity:

I believe now that there would have been no more battle in the West after the capture of Fort Donelson if all the troops in the region had been under a single commander who would have followed up that victory.³

Grant's strategic concept of the war changed with Shiloh and a more independent command. Despite Halleck's reluctance or inability to formulate an over-all plan for the war, Grant pursued the Vicksburg campaign as if it were part of an overall design to win the war. Grant engineered his movement from Grand Gulf in such a way that he could not be recalled when cooperation with Banks (Halleck's plan), became untenable.

Acknowledgment of a rising severity of method, the political unity of the South and the revolutionary character of emancipation did not fail to affect Grant's thinking and operations. The independence of command and responsibility naturally led to Grant into thinking more strategically as the war progressed, long before his ascension to command of all of the armies of the United States required it. Grant's experience with lack of direction and coherent policy made itself felt in Grant's own formulations of strategy,

³ Grant, Memoirs, 112.

culminating in his planning for 1864. Tracing the development of a national strategy on the part of Grant thus begins with a review of his conception of it as he commanded on a lower level.

Beginnings of a Grantian National Strategy

The South was beaten from the beginning. There was no victory possible for any government resting on the platform of the Southern Confederacy—Grant⁴

Clausewitz always attributed the victories of the French to the bad policy practiced by its enemies (i.e. the policy being the product of Prussian and other European states' absolutism). Bad policy makes bad strategy, and victory is virtually impossible with bad strategy. Grant viewed secession itself as bad policy, further compounded by the bad policy of launching the war through direct aggression at Fort Sumter. Secession constituted a "suicidal act" and the Southern cause "one of the worst for which a people ever fought, and one for which there was the least excuse." Grant deduced this early in the war, the North, "having truth and justice on our side," while Southerners "are cheered on by falsehood and deception."⁵

Simplistic in its outlines, Grant at this early date understood and expressed some essential contradictions in the position of the Confederacy. While Southern propaganda demands only peace and independence, they attack Fort Sumter, invade neutral Border States and even invade the North. While they clamor for freedom from Northern tyranny, they tyrannize over their own slaves and Unionists in their midst. While they demand

⁴ GP 28:417.

⁵ GP 1:359; Grant, Memoirs, 556; GP 2:237.

protection for their own property and slaves, they wage irregular war on the Union, killing its soldiers, burning its bridges and destroying its railroads.

In Grant's simplistic explanation we can see the broad outlines of the war driving his thinking about strategy. Southern resolve ultimately could not stand, based on contradiction and bad policy. From the beginning Grant "cannot but see the doom of slavery," and labeled secession synonymous with aggression.⁶ Secession "was illogical as well as impractical." It was revolution, not a free expression of a people, whose "right of revolution is an inherent one," but driven by a slave-owning class, a minority "that governed both parties" in the South. The poorer classes also "needed emancipation," having been misled and "looked down upon . . . as poor white trash who were allowed the ballot so long as they cast it according to direction."⁷ Those choosing revolution, "stake their lives, their property, and every claim for protection given by citizenship" on victory." If unable to gain it "the conditions imposed by the conqueror—must be the result."⁸

From the beginning Grant identified several revolutions accompanying the war, some by design, some by implication. First, a "conventional" revolution (or its attempt) existed in Southern endeavors to create a separate nation and destroy the Union. The destruction of slavery, however it came about, constituted another revolution, liberating one class and assailing another. Driven both from below by the soldiers themselves and from above by Lincoln's legalistic efforts, ending slavery offered several transformations of Southern

⁶ Ibid, 3-4.

⁷ Grant, Memoirs, 110, 113.

⁸ Ibid, 110

society encompassing political, social and economic change. Damaging the Southern ruling class of large landowners through the physical destruction of the war itself and by targeting its slaves transformed all class relationships in the South and so involved several (if ultimately incomplete) revolutions.

Clausewitz's definition of bad Prussian policy curiously parallels some of these same issues. Prussia and all of Europe also struggled with problems that may loosely be defined in terms of class. While the relative positions of the aristocracy, middle class and peasants in Europe exhibit no real equivalency in the Southern system of aristocracy, poor whites and slaves, neither system could accommodate change. French-led revolutionary transformation drove both French military superiority and targeted dynastic and class privilege in its enemies. Grantian strategy also targeted the privileged materially and Confederate governmental power directly in a similar and equally revolutionary manner.

Before Shiloh, Grant failed to match a true perception of Southern society and political context to a coherent military strategy. Grant behaved initially in the West much as Lee did in the East throughout the entire war. Target the enemy army in front of you or put oneself in a position to pick a fight. Find a battlefield and destroy or wreck the enemy army as thoroughly as possible. The effects of defeat in battle shake the morale and resolve of the enemy, thus ending the war. The "winner" of decisive battles should by definition win the war. While Grant and Lee both exhibited aggressiveness and enjoyed some tactical success within this strategy, this kind of war is not revolutionary, absolute or destined to achieve the type political transformation necessary to win a revolutionary war.

If anything, the shock of significant military defeats at Donalson and Shiloh stimulated Confederate resistance. Clausewitz observed this phenomenon, noting that defeat in a major battle “may be instrumental in arousing forces that would otherwise remain dormant.” Of greater significance, Southern society seemingly exhibited none of its inherent weaknesses. Unionist sentiment failed to assert itself and irregular warfare in occupied areas demonstrated the depths of secessionist sentiment in some areas of recent Union domination. Like most wars, in Clausewitz’s formulation, the direction of this war “tended toward the absolute,” each subsequent increase in effort by one side matched by the other. Grant’s strategy also tended toward the absolute, even before he directed multiple armies in the field. Grant’s strategy changed after Shiloh, as he targeted weakness and contradiction in Southern society, especially the economic and social weakness of slavery. The trauma of multiple defeats in battle failed to destroy either side’s ability to continue to prosecute the war (at least until Lee’s surrender), either in the physical terms of fielding armies or in retaining support on the political front. Clausewitz learned a similar lesson in his experience in Russia and the final campaigns against Napoleon. Neither anticipated the ability of modern states to preserve in such extreme circumstance. Defeat and occupation generated great depths of political will, enabling the mobilization of the great power and the resources of entire states.⁹

More directly in the military sphere, Grant followed his natural instincts to destroy completely his opponent’s military power, targeting the enemy through battle, logistics and maneuver. When decisive victory did not transpire after Henry and

⁹ Clausewitz, War, 256,

Donalson, he began to think in campaigns. After Shiloh he began to think in multiple campaigns in multiple theatres. He outlined the military changes this entailed as follows:

My opinion was firmly fixed long before the honor of commanding all our Armies had been conferred on me that no peace could be had that would be stable, or conducive to the happiness of North or South, until the Military power of the rebellion was entirely broken.¹⁰

Achieving this military goal also necessitated changes in the political and economic policy of his command:

I gave up all idea of saving the Union except by complete conquest . . .Up to that time it had had been the policy of our army, at least that portion commanded by me, to protect the property of the citizens whose territory was invaded . . .After this however, I regarded it as humane to both sides . . .to consume everything that could be used to support or supply armies.¹¹

From the time after Shiloh, or soon after, Grant, unlike most of his fellow Union commanders, identified the proper military goal, “complete conquest,” and “breaking the military power of the rebellion,” as the only military strategy applicable to a revolutionary war that tended towards the absolute. Also Grant properly began the direction of “severity” toward the political weaknesses of the enemy, targeting its civilian and economic supports. In this Grant understands that winning battles is not enough to end a war. The sentiment of the people who continue to wage war is the true target of both military operations and the economic destruction wrought by a severe political policy. In this Grant echoed Clausewitz’s observation: “Yet both these things

¹⁰ GP 5:195.

¹¹ Grant, Memoirs, 191-92.

may be done (destruction of the enemy's forces and the country occupied) and the war . . . cannot be considered to have ended so long as the enemy's will has not been broken."¹²

All military operations seek (or should seek) destruction of the enemy's will. If war is an extension of politics, political will determines the beginning, end and nature of conflict:

Since war is not an act of senseless passion, but is controlled by its political object, the value of this object must determine the sacrifices to be made for it in *magnitude* and also *duration*. Once the expenditure of effort exceeds the value of the political object, the object must be renounced and peace must follow.¹³

As reprehensible as being part of the Union might be for Southerners, the sacrifices of war might be worse. Grant determined to make it worse. Grantian strategy proposed to increase the sacrifice beyond the reprehensibility of reunion; convincing Southerners their sacrifice now exceeded the political object of independence.

Mobile should be captured

It seems to me now that Mobile should be captured—Grant, after Vicksburg

I also had great hopes of having a campaign made against Mobile—Grant, after Chattanooga

Halleck disapproved of my proposition to go against Mobile—Grant¹⁴

¹² Clausewitz, War, 90.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ GP 9:70; Grant, Memoirs, 351, 303.

Grant first advocated a move against Mobile as early as 1862. Soon after the fall of Vicksburg in a series of quick messages to Halleck, Grant again began advocating this part of his national strategy:

Mobile can be taken from the gulf department, with only one or two gunboats to protect debarkation; I am very anxious to take Mobile while I think it can be done with comparative ease.¹⁵

Remembering the dispersal of his forces occurring after victory at Donalson, Grant advocated while politics diverted. Troops supporting Banks in Texas and Schofield in Arkansas diminished Grant's command. Charles A Dana later complained that if Grant had been given permission to launch his winter campaign after Vicksburg, he could have "cleaned up Alabama" in three months. The attack against Mobile would have to wait.¹⁶

After victory at Chattanooga, Grant, at Lincoln's behest, sent Sherman to relieve Burnside. "If I had ammunition and horses I could now march to Mobile, Charleston and Richmond."¹⁷ Grant further elaborated his thinking to Halleck:

¹⁵ GP 9:70, 137-38, 146; Grant, Memoirs, 486.

¹⁶ Maihafer, Harry J., The General and the Journalists, (Washington D. C.: Brasseys), 187-88.

¹⁷ Brooks Simpson, Ulysses S. Grant: Triumph over Adversity, 1822-1865, (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000), 243.

Should the enemy make an obstinate resistance at Mobile I would fortify outside and leave a garrison sufficient to hold the garrison of the town and with the balance of the Army make a campaign into the interior of Alabama, and, possibly, Georgia. This move would secure the entire states of Alabama & Mississippi, and a part of Georgia or force Lee to abandon Virginia & North Carolina. Without this course they have not got Army enough to resist the Army I can take.¹⁸

Grant launched Sherman in a raid towards Meridian, Mississippi while others debated his idea for a dual move from Chattanooga to Atlanta and from Mobile to Montgomery or possibly, as Grant also suggested, moving from Atlanta toward Mobile (if in Union possession) or toward Savannah.¹⁹

As commander-in-chief Grant instructed Banks to take Shreveport, return troops loaned from Sherman, again attempting to revive the move against Mobile. In planning the grand offensive for the summer of 1864, Grant again included a move against the city, this time with thrusts directed from Mobile to Selma or Atlanta. The end of 1864 saw Grant stripping troops from Thomas to send to Banks replacement, R. S. Canby. Grant ordered Canby to send a column into Alabama, drawn from the troops besieging Mobile. Canby delayed and Grant's idea of operations from Mobile remained largely stillborn, as events elsewhere rendered the actions and inactions of others strategically moot.²⁰

Having suffered the effects of attacks on his logistics (both the general effects of guerilla war and larger scale raids such as the capture of Holly Springs), Grant

¹⁸ GP: 9, 500-01, Grant to Halleck. Catton regards Grant's letter of Dec. 7, 1863, as "a new step" in Grant's development as a soldier, remarking that "he had at last reached the point" where he understood how to defeat the Confederacy by using superior Northern resources without respite. Grant's understanding of the political context of the war (full use of Northern resources to completely conquer the South) dates from the time of Shiloh and as his previous letters regarding Mobile indicate his thinking along these lines date from August of 1863.

¹⁹ Grant, *Memoirs*, 351.

²⁰ GP: 10, 200-01. Simpson, *Triumph*, 269, 409.

determined to turn the tactics of the Confederate raiders into strategy. By making his raids with entire armies, Grant's attacks carried with them a severity and permanence not possible with the smaller forces available to a Nathan Bedford Forrest or a Van Dorn. Declining to permanently occupy territory, Grant relieved his own forces from the necessity to garrison or protect lines of communication. From Grant's thinking about Mobile, we conclude that from the time of the fall of Vicksburg, Grant promoted a strategy of logistical action culminating in Sherman's decisive marches to the sea and through the Carolinas. While the planning, execution and the nature of the march remained Sherman's (especially in his cutting loose from Atlanta without first destroying Hood), innovation of the strategy devolves to Grant.²¹

Grant's North Carolina Plan

Grant proposed to grasp the Confederacy's throat, its logistical throat—Archer Jones

Grant's plan was bold, imaginative, and achievable—Brooks Simpson

We must recur to fundamental principles in regard to interior and exterior lines—Halleck²²

Grant failed to effectively implement his Mobile strategy even as general-in-chief, highlighting again the political limitations to even the highest command. Lincoln and

²¹B. H. Liddel Hart unfavorably contrasts Grant's direct, unimaginative campaign in Northern Virginia with Sherman's "dramatically decisive," and "indirect approach to the enemy's economic and moral rear," forgetting Grant formulated and approved all of Sherman's moves. B. H. Liddel Hart, *Strategy*. (New York: Praeger, 1967), 151-153.

²²Herman Hattaway and Archer Jones, *How the North Won*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1983), 513; Brooks Simpson, *Let Us Have Peace*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991, 54-55. Warren W. Hassler, *Commanders of the Army of the Potomac*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1962).

Halleck preferred operations in Texas largely as a demonstration to counter French designs in Mexico, policy again determining the feasibility of operations primarily military in character. At the behest of Halleck and Lincoln, Grant developed another scheme to defeat the South. Grant proposed a winter campaign in North Carolina, initially targeting Raleigh and later Wilmington. In this Grant planned to break the stalemate in Virginia by threatening Lee's communications with the rest of the Confederacy.

In proposing a winter campaign Grant asked "whether an abandonment of all previously attempted lines to Richmond is not advisable, and in lieu of these one be taken farther south," in a massive raid in North Carolina. The move through North Carolina, supported by advances on Atlanta and Mobile, represents the culmination of Grant's war experience and thinking. As well as abandoning previous lines to Richmond, Grant proposed abandoning previous thinking about the proper manner to get at Lee, his army, and Richmond. Grant's proposal targeted the two obvious Southern centers of gravity indirectly (i.e., Richmond and Lee's Army), in a manner completely contrary to previous Union efforts and also contrary to the actual Overland Campaign and sieges that actually ensued. Though indirect, the move sought Confederate strength, not the "easy way out" of those Clausewitz criticized who define strategy as the matching strength to weakness.²³

Grant speculated regarding the results of this move:

This would virtually force an evacuation of Virginia and indirectly of East Tennessee. It would throw our Armies into new fields where they could partially live upon the country. It would cause thousands of North

²³ GP: 10, 39-40.

Carolina troops to desert and return to their homes. It would give us possession of many Negroes who are now indirectly aiding the rebellion.

Halleck remained true to his “fundamental principles,” lecturing Grant. Lee, “with a short interior line, can concentrate his entire force,” while a divided Union army operating either from North Carolina or the Peninsula (a replay of McClellan in Halleck’s mind), operated on exterior lines.”²⁴

Halleck and Lincoln rejected Grant’s plan considering the reduction of army of the Potomac to parity with Lee too risky and questioning if the required troops could be found elsewhere. Lincoln also failed to understand the fundamentals of Grant’s proposals for an offensive in North Carolina. Lee’s army remained the objective point, albeit through indirect methods. Lincoln through experience distrusted any “strategy” failing to confront Lee’s army directly; the failures of McClellan, Halleck and others derailed Grant’s proposals.²⁵

Grant’s conception ultimately proved:

So contrary to the traditional notions of warfare that had emerged from the Napoleonic era, so rooted in actual experiences in the Mississippi River Valley, that the leadership in Washington had no basis from which to evaluate their strengths and weaknesses.²⁶

Sherman’s marches through Georgia and the Carolinas eventually provided the basis for evaluation missing to Lincoln and Halleck in January of 1864. It required the lessons of the Mississippi, the imagination and collaborative efforts of Grant and Sherman as well as months of deep thought and conversation to formulate the plan, so it

²⁴ Hassler, *Army*, 119.

²⁵ Brooks D. Simpson “Ulysses S. Grant and the Problems of Command in 1864,” in *The art of Command in the Civil War* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press 1998), 139.

²⁶ Joseph T. Glatthar, *Partners in Command: The Relationships Between Leaders in the Civil War*, (New York: Free Press, 1994), 202-203.

is not surprising that few outside of Grant's inner circle understood it. Halleck's reply, reflecting Lincoln's views as well, contained the predictable worries about Washington, Lee going north on a raid again and reiterated Lincoln's mantra regarding Lee's army as the only proper objective point.²⁷

Examined closely, Grant's proposals reveal shrewdness and wisdom. First, North Carolina offered several advantages over Virginia as a location of operations. Being "new country" Union troops could travel light and subsist *à la* Vicksburg, largely off the countryside as far as forage and rations were concerned. In addition, North Carolina's political commitment to the rebellion defined a weakness. The last state to secede, significant unionist activity existed and "Tories and draft-dodgers gained virtual control of whole counties." In addition more desertions emanated from North Carolina than any other state. The "narrow triangle" of political control following an army in hostile territory Clausewitz described might not be so narrow in North Carolina.²⁸

Grant's move also targeted Wilmington, "the port now of more value to the enemy than all the balance of their sea coast." Taken with his proposed attack on Mobile, Grant sought to close the last significant ports open to the Confederacy. Destroying the rail net and blockading Wilmington targeted Lee's logistics as well of those of the eastern Confederacy as a whole. A successful raid promised great results, politically, economically, psychologically and militarily.

²⁷ Ibid. Simpson, Triumph, 250-51, labels this "the Grant/Smith/Comstock" plan, finding its origins in Franklin and Smith's proposals after Fredericksburg and details Lincoln and Halleck's misunderstanding of it. GP:10, 110-112.

²⁸ McPherson, Cry, 694-95.

Halleck's and Lincoln's reservations reflected traditional fears for the safety of Washington as well as fear of the political fall-out stemming from another invasion of the North by Lee. Some of the troops for such a raid could only come from the Army of the Potomac and at this point in the war keeping Lee on the defensive seemed much less risky politically than weakening the principle eastern army.²⁹

In retrospect the fears of Grant's superiors seem over-wrought. The last two times Lee went north it didn't work out that well. The indifferent administration of Lee's army guaranteed failure in any protracted campaign. Grant's 60,000 in Carolina would have destroyed Lee's logistics anyway, regardless of the results of any new northern invasion. Concentration against the raiders, Halleck's fear of interior lines, presented more of a risk. Lee himself saw such an operation not as an opportunity to converge on an enemy at a disadvantage, but as a threat. Lee moved north and launched his Gettysburg campaign partly due to his own fear of a just such a Federal thrust in southeastern Virginia or North Carolina.³⁰

Operations along the lines Grant suggested might have developed in a manner similar to Hood's move north after the fall of Atlanta. Lee's own logistics would have failed if he moved north for any long period of time, especially with the raiders in North Carolina devastating his base and Virginia's own links with the rest of the South. Washington's defenses and half of Army of the Potomac sufficed to protect the capitol and stalemate Lee. The success or failure of the Grant's North Carolina plan depended

²⁹Allan Nevins's, *The War for the Union: The Organized War to Victory*, 4 vol. (New York: Scribner's, 1971), 4:8-9. Nevins also speculates Grant's scheme reflects his distrust of the Army of the Potomac, and so preferred some redistribution of its command and troops.

³⁰Hattaway and Jones, *How*, 400; Edward Hagerman, *The American Civil War and the Origins of Modern Warfare*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 244, finds Grant's plan impractical due to a lack of available troops.

ultimately on its execution. If led by a Grant or a Sherman the odds of success go up immeasurably; if led by others unfamiliar or uncommitted to Grant's strategic vision, the plan suddenly becomes extremely risky.³¹

Grant's plan survived in Army of the James component of Grant's 1864 campaign. This time directed at Petersburg and Virginia's railroads of instead of Raleigh and the railroads of North Carolina. That it miscarried due to the fumbling of Butler and others fails to detract from a strategy innovative, imaginative and ultimately stillborn.

The Political Concerns of a the New Lieutenant General

The failure of the General will be the overthrow of the President—New York Times, 1864.

Every bullet that we can send is the best ballot that can be deposited against Lincoln's selection—Augusta Constitutionalist

Upon the progress of our arms all else chiefly depends—Lincoln³²

³¹ T. Harry Williams, Lincoln and His Generals, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1952. 295-96, finds Lincoln's strategic insight superior to Grant's as his Mobile plan, "violated the strategic principle of doing one big thing at a time." Williams adopts Lincoln's critique of Grant's North Carolina plan, also mistakenly believing it aimed exclusively at capturing Richmond rather than Lee's army.

³² Brooks Simpson, "Great Expectations: Ulysses S. Grant, the Northern Press, and the Opening of the Wilderness Campaign, in Gary W. Gallagher, ed. The Wilderness Campaign, (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 10, quoting a *New York Herald* editorial, March 10, 30, April 1, 1864; Mark Grimsley, And Keep Moving On, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), 13 quoting an *Augusta constitutionalist* editorial (no date given) on Longstreet's plan for Kentucky to destabilize Lincoln's chance for re-election. Lincoln quoted in James M. McPherson, Battle Cry of Freedom, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 718.

In 1864 as in all wars and campaigns, the political context remained paramount. Astute observers on both sides, inside the military and out, understood the links between Grant's performance, Lincoln's reelection and the realization of Southern war aims. Only Lincoln's replacement by a "peace democrat," willing to trade disunion for an end to the war offered any realistic hope for the South. The pressures on Grant to succeed cannot be exaggerated, and the way that he responded is testament to his tenacity, his "strong mind," and the qualities of leadership that set him apart from all other Civil War generals. Only Washington enjoyed the permanent rank of Lieutenant General before U. S. Grant. Washington's success in revolution justified the rank, by implication if Grant failed so would the Union: "that third star was becoming an existential marker."³³ The political situation and this pressure conditioned all of Grant's strategic plans and their implementation.

If the politics of the coming election enjoyed a place paramount in defining political context, the views of his superiors come a close second. Lincoln and Halleck's interpretation of political context differed substantially from Grant's. The new Commander-in-Chief significantly modified and displaced his own plans in order to align himself more closely with his superior's policy. The coming election determined that the North continued to pursue the war offensively, and of more importance Grant needed to demonstrate his ability to bring the war to its conclusion. In spite of great victories in the West, the center of gravity of Southern resistance remained in the eyes of most Americans with Lee's army and the Confederate capitol in Virginia. Lincoln believed

³³ Geoffrey Parrett, Lincoln's War: The Untold Story of America's greatest President as Commander and Chief, (New York: Random House, 2004), 356.

keeping Lee on the defensive and directly targeting his army essential politically and Grant complied.³⁴

Grant targeted Lee's army. Ironically, and with more than a hint of tragedy, Grant desired none of the directness that transpired and none of his plans for beating the Confederacy aimed at the direct and bloody battles that transpired. As we have noted, Clausewitz determined the destruction of states and armies need not be physical. In the end Lee surrendered rather let his army be physically destroyed through actual combat. Grant designed combinations to accomplish his aim with the knowledge that direct confrontation of Lee comprised only one of many tools available to remove his army from the game.

Significantly, Grant modified his original intention to "take the field" with the Western armies. His visits to Washington made it "plain that here was the point for the commanding general to be." The center of gravity of the war, for better or worse, lay in Virginia. Given the immense political pressures emitting from Washington, "no one else could, possibly, resist the pressure that would be brought to bear upon him to desist from his own plans and pursue others." Grant recognized in the political forces at play intense friction and determined to overcome it, just as he would overcome an enemy in the field in front of him.³⁵

The Political Generals

I can't afford to quarrel with a man whom *I have to command*—Grant

³⁴ OR I, 33, p. 1144 and Brooks Simpson, Let Us Have Peace, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 54-55

³⁵ Grant, Memoirs, 358.

He was endlessly useful and endlessly troublesome—Alan Nevins on Butler

He will do nothing but run. He never did anything else—Halleck on Sigel

Schem-mel-fin-nig must be appointed—Lincoln³⁶

In his ascension to top command Grant acquired several other blunt instruments along with The Army of the Potomac. Foremost among these rank the so-called political generals. The political generals owed their commissions to some political connection or service rather than to any demonstrable facility at command. Grant competed with, served under or employed such men from the beginning of his service in the war. Grant expressed distaste for those who groveled for command early in the war, and this influenced his evaluations of his fellow officers. He felt such men tainted, in that they “owed,” something to those who accomplished or lobbied for their appointments.

Politics extended to the methods chosen to prosecute the war and often determined both operations and the men selected carry them out. In this Grant and Lincoln of necessity struck a balance between performance on the field of battle and performance in the political field. Tension between the two over this issue existed, Grant deferring in large part to Lincoln in the planning and early phase of 1864. Utilization of political generals defined part of the “art of the possible” in Grant’s equation matching politics to operations. The course of the war, with its own grammar, redefined the logic of the balance between political utility and battlefield liability.

While all of the political generals (i. e. Banks, Sigel and Butler) employed by Grant in major positions failed him, they did not fail Lincoln. If Lincoln lost the election Grant’s own position and prosecution of the war itself might end. In evaluating Grant’s

³⁶Catton, Command, 256; Hattaway and Jones, How; 502. Nevins, War, 4:14; Simpson, Triumph, 314..

use of political soldiers and Lincoln's advocacy of them it is useful to view Butler as Lincoln did. Geoffrey Perrett offers the following:

It was Butler who had taken the lead in freeing the slave, Butler who had been the first to hang a traitor, Butler who had seized Baltimore when Maryland was on the brink of secession. Whatever his failure in the field, his services to the Union exceeded those of most generals, including some of the professional soldiers.³⁷

The political value of his employment must measure a general. As in a battle or a campaign, political results matter, not the occupation of places or the raw numbers of the enemy killed. Lincoln earlier in the war demanded of Stanton the appointment of a certain German/Dutch officer, Alexander Schimmelfennig, in order to stimulate the recruitment of German-Americans. Stanton replied, "Mr. President, perhaps this Schemmel-what's-his-name is not as highly recommended as some other German officer." Lincoln's logic proved irrefutable, if unquantifiable: "his name will make up for any difference their might be." Schemmel-what's-his-name served as an extension of Lincoln's war policy. Judging Schimmelfennig demands political evaluation based on his utility to Lincoln. Would his name alone recruit more soldiers for the Union than his inexperience might kill? If the answer is yes, then he is a more effective soldier than a skilled officer with fewer recruiting "skills."³⁸

Victory and defeat carry their own political baggage, and Grant bided his time as the performance of the political generals defined their utility. Horace Porter described

³⁷ Perrett, President, 390.

³⁸ Hattaway and Jones, How, 502. Schimmelfennig, named a Brigadier, was wounded at Gettysburg, lost his moral courage and afterward proved unable to face the troops his name helped recruit.

this process: “Grant has to get rid of political generals, by degrees, after demonstrating by their failure they are not fitted for command.”³⁹

Brooks Simpson suggests the process ultimately flawed:

Decisions made for political reasons in the spring of 1864 thus ultimately proved counterproductive, for the results damaged the prospects for political victory by hampering military operations.⁴⁰

Little choice existed for Grant, other than to reverse to some extent the civil/military relationship—perhaps he should have. Grant might demand more authority, win the war early thus saving Lincoln’s job and the Union on his own terms. If Grant pursued such a course and confronted Lincoln and Halleck, responsibility for failure automatically devolves to Grant. Grant’s failure lies in his poor evaluation of his subordinates, in not finding a way to oversee even some Meade’s failings, let alone those of Butler Banks and Sigel.

Grant based much of his grand strategy and operational strategy for the 1864 campaign on the needs of domestic politics. He attacked aggressively with five different armies, hoping a military victory would secure Lincoln’s re-election.⁴¹ For similar reasons he retained political generals, Banks and Butler: “Grant realized that the political security of Lincoln was at this time of greater importance than the military efficiency of Butler”⁴² Even on the operational level as Grant’s strategy served policy rather than the

³⁹Porter Papers, 155.

⁴⁰ Brooks D. Simpson “Ulysses S. Grant and the Problems of Command in 1864,” in The Art of Command in the Civil War (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press 1998), 137-156.

⁴¹ Catton, Command, 321-323, discusses Grant’s concern for preservation of democratic process during wartime. Grant knew the importance of the soldiers’ vote for the election of Lincoln. The troops wished to “vote as they shot.”

⁴² Fuller, Campaigns, 219-218.

pure military view. Horace Porter attributes Grant's assaults at Cold Harbor (some of which Grant always regretted) to Northern impatience at indefinite maneuvering.⁴³

Grant also tailored his hard war strategy to the social system in the South. Grant directed "severity" towards those who participated in the Confederate war effort and towards the class of plantation owners who benefited most from the peculiar institution. He protected unionist and neutral private property while destroying public property, railroads and factories that contributed to the Confederate war effort.⁴⁴ Nominally directed against the Confederate army's logistical system, Archer Jones describes Grant's "raiding strategy" (epitomized by Sherman's march to the sea) as "political attrition."⁴⁵

⁴³Grant, Memoirs, 444-45 for Grant's regrets. See Porter, Campaigning, 172-173, for political considerations during Cold Harbor.

⁴⁴ Mark Grimsely, The Hard Hand of War: Union Military Policy Toward Southern Civilians, 1861-1865, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), details Grant's emergence as a practitioner of "hard war."

⁴⁵Jones, Strategy, 212-213.

Chapter 14

CENTERS OF GRAVITY AND THE BEAUTY OF TIME—HOW TO BEAT ROBERT E. LEE, WIN A WAR AND LOOSE A REPUTATION

So far as practicable all the armies are to move together, and towards one common center—
Clausewitz

It is my design, if the enemy keep quiet and allow me to take the initiative, to work all parts of the army together, and somewhat towards a common center—Grant¹

Grant went into the Wilderness with a strategy of destruction greatly diminished by the political ends he served. International politics wrecked an advance on the Mobile/Selma/Montgomery/Atlanta axis in favor of the Red River operation; National politics imposed the use of political generals whose incompetence ultimately wrecked Grant's plans in the Shenandoah Valley and up the James River; Halleck's Jominian obsessions and fears for Washington's security wrecked Grant's plans to render Virginia untenable through winter operations against Raleigh; Grant "over-ruled" himself, abandoning plans to turn Lee's left and strike for Lynchburg as too dangerous, given the political climate of an election year and his doubts about the "political culture" that defined and blunted his chief and politically most important instrument, the Army of the Potomac.

Within a few weeks, only Sherman's Chattanooga/Atlanta axis and his own move on Lee's army remained intact. Grant's presence with the Army of the Potomac seems

¹ Carl von Clausewitz, On War (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 582-83; OR. I, XXXIX, 3, pp 245-246.

decisive in its success, given Meade's hitherto unremarkable performance on the offensive. Only two of Grant's seven inspirations remained in play as he conceived them. That his plan succeeded at all illustrates the superiority of Grants strategic combinations in 1864 and his iron will to overcome friction. Clausewitz drew attention to achievements such as Grant's, in devising and carrying out operations of this intricacy, multifaceted in its military means and Byzantine in its political calculation: "To master all this complex mass by sheer methodical examination is obviously impossible."²

Mastery of such complexity Clausewitz attributes to "the intuition of genius." Grant demonstrates such intuition in the campaigns of 1864, both in formulation and execution. Grant reached a level of mastery of war that enabled his negotiation through a labyrinthine political context, matching multiple operations to that circumstance and through execution of those operations in the face of almost unbearable friction.³

Grant outlined his strategy in its final evolution at the beginning of the campaign:

Here then is the basis of all plans formed at the outset. First to use the greatest number of troops practicable against the Armed force of the enemy. To prevent that enemy from using the same force at different seasons, against first one Army and than another, and to prevent the possibility of repose for refitting and producing the necessary supplies for carrying on resistance, Second: to hammer continuously at the Armed force of the enemy, and his resources, *until by mere attrition, if in no other way* (emphasis added), there should be nothing left to him but an equal submission with the loyal section of our common country to the universal law of the land.⁴

The phrase "to hammer continuously" proved an unfortunate choice of words, many of Grant's critics identifying in this single component the focal point of Grant's

² Clausewitz, War, 585-586.

³ Ibid, 586.

⁴ John Y. Simon, *et al.*, editors Papers of Ulysses S. Grant. Vols., 1-22, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press: 1967— I. 97) 13:273. Hereafter abbreviated as GP.

plan.⁵ Those who labeled Grant an unimaginative “butcher,” cite the high casualties suffered by the Union in Overland Campaign and subsequent sieges of Richmond and Petersburg as evidence. Both Grant’s contemporaries and subsequent historians who subscribe to this view ignore the totality of his strategy. From what we have seen in tracing the development of the strategy of 1864, *if in no other way*, describes the least desirable and the last resort in Grant’s plan. The Army of the Potomac, “directed by Grant and led by Meade,” engages Lee’s army, defeats it in battle if possible or necessary, but above all pins it and prevents it from intervening anywhere else, while Butler, Banks and Sigel (and Sherman after dealing with Johnston) target its logistics destroying it and the Confederacy. While the strategy of the campaign clearly includes the “destruction” of Lee’s army, Grant intended that the instrument of the Army of Potomac encompass only one of many such instruments of Lee’s destruction. The plan as designed in no way depended on the directness developing as soon as Grant entered the Wilderness. The Army of the Potomac’s role, as conceived, took Lee’s army out of the contest not necessarily through its physical destruction, but through its negation while other instruments destroyed its logistics. Grant never contemplated the “pitched assaults alternating with flanking movements,” that defined the campaign⁶

Lee of course understood all of this as well as Grant did and used similar language to describe the situation in a conversation with General Early:

We must destroy this army of Grant’s before he gets to the James

⁵ Brooks D. Simpson, “Continuous Hammering and Mere Attrition: Lost Cause Critics and the Military Reputation of Ulysses S. Grant,” in Gary W. Gallagher and Alan T. Nolan, ed. The Myth of the Lost Cause and Civil War History, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 147-169.

⁶ Brooks Simpson, “Great Expectations: Ulysses S. Grant, the Northern Press, and the Opening of the Wilderness Campaign,” in Gary W. Gallagher, ed. The Wilderness Campaign, (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 144.

River. If he gets there, it will become a siege, and then it will be *a mere question of time . . . until by the process of attrition*, the brave defenders of our cause would gradually melt away.⁷

Confronted with a task that had broken McDowell, McClellan, Pope, Burnside, Hooker and frustrated Meade, Grant attempted something completely different. Paradoxically, the “something completely different,” (Butler, Banks and Siegel) also failed. But Grant’s strategy won, even as major operational elements of his plans failed. Clausewitz’s admonition that “every war must be conceived of as a single whole, and that with his first move the general must already have a clear idea of the goal on which all lines are to converge,” and should aim “towards one common center” might have been written by Sherman, who contrasted Grant’s plan with those of his predecessors: “That we are now all to act in a Common plan, Converging on a Common Center looks like Enlightened War.”⁸

Grant’s concessions to various political considerations made themselves felt almost as soon as his army crossed the Rapidan, in early May of 1864. Grant preferred almost any line of march to the one he took. Previous Union armies floundered on all of the overland routes available. Grant, like his predecessors, faced few choices in a geography favoring the South. Logistical considerations determined a large wagon train, clearly visible to the Confederates, who observed all of the routes open to the Union. Grant also identified logistical limitations as a key consideration in determining his move by Lee’s left:

⁷ Simpson, “Hammering,” 153.

⁸Clausewitz, *War*, 582-83. Brooks Simpson, Ulysses S. Grant: Triumph over Adversity, 1822-1865, (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000), 271.

A movement by his left—our right—would have to be done with the supplies and ammunition we started with. All ideas of adopting this latter plan was abandoned when the limited quantity of supplies possible to take with us was considered.⁹

The option of strategic deception on Grant's front proved impossible. Grant matched operations to geography, logistical and political constraints with full knowledge of the friction they produced and the advantages accruing to the South. Grant's strategy in 1864 provides further illustration of Clausewitz's observation that freedom of choice, often available in tactics, is not necessarily available in strategy.¹⁰

In one of the most famous orders in U. S. military history, Grant instructed Meade, "Lee's army will be your objective point. Wherever Lee goes there you will go also."¹¹ Oft quoted, this order and its implications remain frequently misunderstood or over-emphasized. While it correctly defines Meade's role, it is often taken to define Grant's overall campaign strategy or to represent proper Civil War strategy. T. Harry Williams (and others) found in this order fulfillment of Lincoln's "correct" strategic insight. It also represents to many historians the end of the "on to Richmond" or "place" obsessed Jominian strategists, who were "wrong" to ascribe to strategic points the power to win wars.¹² Targeting armies and defeating them enabled occupation of those same places, whose possession the critics regarded as indecisive. Historians therefore identify targeting armies as the superior strategy. While "true," it also is inaccurate. Destruction of an army in and of itself, like occupation of a city, may or may not obtain decisive

⁹ Ulysses S. Grant, Personal Memoirs of U. S. Grant, (New York: Da Capo Press, 1952), 369-370.

¹⁰ Clausewitz, War, 367.

¹¹ Grant, Memoirs, note. 369.

¹² T. Harry Williams, Lincoln and His Generals, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1952. 285, 294-95.

political significance. Grant understood the distinction, if others did not, finding neither places nor armies as the target of his combinations:

The object of my campaign was not Richmond, not the defeat of Lee in an actual fight, but to remove him and his army out of the contest, and, if possible, to have him use his influence in inducing the surrender of Johnston and the other isolated armies.¹³

Clausewitz perceptively pointed out an engagement need not actually take place in order to be effective. Grant's object, "not the defeat of Lee in an actual fight" but his removal, reveals Grant's innate understanding of the subtleties of Clausewitz's argument. "Destruction" need not be physical or achieved directly through battle. Butler and Sigel's armies operating against Lee's logistics might accomplish his removal without the bloody battles that transpired. Even the destruction of an enemy army is decisive only if it leads to a given political aim, "inducing the surrender of Johnston and the other isolated armies." Grant destroyed two other armies previously during the war and Thomas would nearly destroy a third, yet the war continued. Armies can be rebuilt or dispersed into guerilla bands; resistance can resume in the interior; new political conditions can arise and allow resumption of hostilities in the future. In Clausewitz's memorable phrase, "there is always still time to die." Grant's strategy of targeting Lee accomplished great results moral and political, for as Lee wedded himself to Richmond, both came to enjoy a symbolism so as to represent the Confederacy itself.¹⁴

While Grant told Meade "Lee's army will be *your objective point*," he also wrote instructions to Butler: "he was to act from here (City Point and Bermuda Hundred),

¹³ John Russell Young, 3. vol. Around the World With General Grant, (New York: American News Company, 1879) 2:455. GP 15:165.

¹⁴ Clausewitz, War, 97, 483.

looking to Richmond as *his objective point*.”¹⁵ In looking at Grant’s orders it is a mistake to identify an army as some definitive key to victory or the core of Grant’s strategy. Richmond represented a center of gravity as defined by Clausewitz, a capitol “*not only the center of administration, but also that of social, professional and political activity.*” Grant’s logic in targeting both objectives is political and material; Richmond’s great symbolic political value forces Lee to fight. Lee’s army also possessed great symbolic value, and great military potential. Grant sought the moral affect of either the siege or occupation of Richmond or the “removal” of Lee’s army through siege or surrender. Either should prove decisive throughout the South. If not, Sherman’s moves through the interior of the Confederacy remained in play.¹⁶

In this case the targeting of Lee’s army is significant because of its unique political qualities. The Army of Northern Virginia represents the best hope for the South. It is the principle army in the politically most prominent theatre of the war. Its very victories make its political value much greater than the sum of its men and equipment. Lee and his army’s “mystical” qualities acted on the moral of every Southern citizen in a way no other army could. In seeking its negation Grant utilized the political power of a place objective, Richmond, because he knew Lee would fight for it.

It is not necessary or even desirable that the destruction of an army be purely physical. All of Grant’s plans for 1864, especially the ones wrecked through politics, demonstrate this. Mobile/Selma/Montgomery, Wilmington/Raleigh and the attempted moves of Sherman, Siegal and Butler aimed at something other than the Overland

¹⁵ Grant, Memoirs, 375.

¹⁶ Clausewitz, War, 596-97.

Campaign, the siege of Petersburg or even Appomattox. Clausewitz describes his definition of destruction:

When we speak of destroying the enemy's forces we must emphasize that nothing obliges us to limit this idea to physical forces: The moral element must also be considered.¹⁷

The implication is clear. If “destruction” fails to include the moral element of will to resist, it is not really destruction at all. Conversely, destruction of the will to resist does not require physical destruction. Grant demonstrates again his understanding that destruction of an army, like the occupation of a city, represents nothing unless its capture achieves the required political object. “Where Lee goes, there you will go also” targeted not Lee or the Army of Northern Virginia, but went beyond Virginia to the moral element, the Southern will to resist.

Grant critiqued Confederate strategy during the 1864-65 campaign on this point:

Lee's great blunder was in holding Richmond. He must have been controlled by Davis. Davis felt that the moral effect of the fall of Richmond would have been equal to the fall of the South.¹⁸

Defending Richmond controlled Lee to the detriment of Southern strategy as a whole in 1864, in a similar manner that Washington's defense controlled previous commanders of the Army of the Potomac and limited Grant's own strategic options. Richmond pinned Lee's armies because of its political importance, maybe so great as to represent the Confederacy itself. Its fall might lead to a collapse of the Rebellion, as many Southerners feared. At the very least Lee felt obligated to fight for it, to the extent (it turned out) of wrecking his army defending it. So while Grant ordered Meade to

¹⁷ Clausewitz, War, 97.

¹⁸ Young, World, 2:627.

confront Lee's army directly, and defined Butler's objective as Richmond, targeting Lee indirectly, he intended to control Southern strategy, limit Lee's options and end the war.

This concurrent action, described by Sherman as "the beauty of time," provided the key in its simultaneous execution. All of the armies moved on a common center (Clausewitz's convergent lines of operations), counteracting any Southern advantage due to the use of interior lines. In reality Meade did not follow Lee, as ordered. Rather, through the unfolding of the Overland Campaign, "where Grant goes, Lee will go also."¹⁹ In a similar manner, Sherman's moves controlled the other main army of the South, using Atlanta to pin Johnston's army, and try to wreck it also, as a prelude to further blows against the Southern interior.²⁰

A Clausewitzian finds it hard to criticize Lee on his decision to accept a siege at Richmond, to be "controlled by Davis." If policy defines the defense of the Capital as its goal, Lee's obligation is clear. If the policy of the Confederacy is to continue the war at all costs and at all hazards, then Lee's obligation changes. Lee chose not to make policy and advocate the alternative of abandoning Richmond before a siege and protracting the struggle in the interior of the Confederacy.

The exact proportional political value of The Army of North Virginia and Richmond, like everything else in war, remains unquantifiable. Of some significance in evaluating the Northern home front, the capture of Richmond warranted a nine hundred-

¹⁹ Bruce Catton, Grant Takes Command, (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1968), 168-69. Lincoln called for concurrent action of the armies throughout the war, knowing through intuition or inspiration the feasibility of such a strategy.

²⁰ Ibid, 249. Atlanta's political importance determined that the South replace Johnston with the offensively minded Hood, before a proper siege ensued. Hood's task seemed clear: risk your army through offensive action, wound Sherman and prevent a siege. The relative political values of the two armies finds reflection in the fact that Davis declined to ask Lee to attack Grant (after the Wilderness) at all hazards and possibly destroy his own army to prevent a siege and its inevitable consequence.

gun salute; Lee's surrender a few days later merited five hundred. Sherman offered his evaluation of the Southern home front: "If Lee lets go of Richmond the people of Virginia will give up." Grant related in his memoirs when Lee evacuated Richmond, "the Confederacy at once began to crumble and fade away"²¹

Clausewitz discusses at some length the relative political importance of cities and armies, using examples from the Napoleonic wars. Moscow required that Bagration fight a terrible battle at Borodino in its defense, risking the major Russian army. Loss of the battle and of Moscow proved indecisive, partly because of Russia's unique possession of a second Capital at St. Petersburg. In contrast, Paris in 1814 represented the true political center of power in France and its capture destroyed Bonaparte's power regardless of the continued existence of a diminished French field army. Richmond occupied its own unique place in the political context of the Civil War. Richmond resembled Moscow in that its defense required battles similar to those fought by Bagration in 1812, but was also like Paris in 1814, in that it constituted a true center of power.²²

The Wilderness— Picking a Fight, A Fear of Gymnastics and Teaching a Blunted Instrument Not to Lose

A nightmare of inhumanity and inept military strategy—William McFeely

²¹McPherson, Cry, 850-851; William T. Sherman, Home Letters of General Sherman, M. A. deWolf Howe ed., (New York: Scribners, 1909), 336; Grant, Memoirs, 525.

²² Clausewitz, War, 181-82, 166; J. F. C. Fuller, Grant and Lee: A Study in Personality and Generalship, (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1957), 39, finds the movement of the Confederate from Montgomery, Alabama to Richmond the first Southern strategic mistake of the war. The Federals predictably targeted the Confederate political center, its capital, and locating the political center in Richmond exposed it to direct attack.

Strategically it was the greatest Federal victory yet won in the East—J. F. C. Fuller

I had known him personally and knew that he was mortal—Grant on Lee²³

Grant's army crashed into the Wilderness, attempting to pass by Lee's right, and get between Lee and Richmond. Grant and Meade, relying on General Humphries' plan, desired to transverse the Wilderness in a single bound. The Army of the Potomac, hobbled by its huge wagon train, the sheer weight of its numbers and the vigilance of the Confederates, failed in this movement. In the Wilderness, Union preponderance of troops produced only immobility.²⁴

Grant attempted to flank the Confederates and Lee lost no time in confronting the Union movement. Grant ordered Mead: "if any opportunity presents itself for pitching into a part of Lee's army, do so without giving time for disposition." Grant anticipated a running fight and committed his army to combat under adverse conditions unequivocally.²⁵

Some identify a failure in Grant's "surprise" at Lee's attack, that he lost his former audaciousness, or that he was now "slow." Only through actual combat could Grant learn how to handle the Army of the Potomac, as he had with the Western armies. Understanding the limitations of each commander, the commitment of the troops, the staying power of each unit in the attack and defense posed a formidable challenge. Grant most of all wanted to get on with it, to "keep moving on," and this explains Grant's

²³ William S. McFeely, Grant: A Biography, (New York: W. W. Norton, 1981), 165, demolishes his own criticism of Grant's strategy by pointing out "it worked," providing yet another example of confusing tactics and strategy. Fuller, Personality, 215. Grant, Memoirs, 96.

²⁴ McPherson, Cry 725. By Spotsylvania Grant took steps to improve the mobility of the Army of the Potomac, sending back to Washington "over a hundred guns," as they impeded maneuver. Grant, Memoirs, 427.

²⁵ OR XXXVI, pt 2 403-404.

actions in the Wilderness. Experience with command in combat provided the only method to gain such knowledge, as Clausewitz noted, war itself is only “real” teacher. While Grant adopted Meade’s overoptimistic timetable, his orders to Meade show he expected to fight. The fight generated the knowledge of the army Grant required.²⁶

Grant and Lee both suffered from conditions in the Wilderness. Both armies found it difficult to align their corps in the rough terrain. Both found it difficult to identify the size of their opponent and the nature of their movements. Both made aggressive moves, mistakes, and suffered unnecessary casualties as a result. By the second day both commanders still waited for the arrival of significant parts of their armies. Longstreet’s arrival and Lee’s personal intervention perhaps saved his army, while Burnside’s delay limited the power of Grant’s attacks. Lee took advantage of Union disorder, flanked Hancock, destroyed two of his divisions and nearly collapsed his entire position. Lee’s violent attacks shook the Army of the Potomac to its core, as they had in the past. In large part Grant allowed the battle to unfold and remained controlled, as each corps, divisional and brigade commander revealed his competences and weaknesses. Grant lost his composure, or contrived to appear to do so, in a celebrated incident. A subordinate, panicked by both Lee’s attacks and his own imagination,

²⁶See J. F. C. Fuller, *The Generalship of Ulysses S. Grant*, (New York: Da Capo Press, 1929), 233, for the “surprised” Grant. See Jean Edward Smith, *Grant*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), 315, for the underestimating Grant, who has forgotten the lessons of Shiloh. See William S. McFeely, *Grant: A Biography*, (New York: W. W. Norton, 1981), 166 for the “slow” Grant. Edward Hagerman, *The American Civil War and the Origins of Modern Warfare*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 244-46 identifies a more cautious Grant, slow and conservative Grant due to Lee’s reputation. See Perret, *Country*, 241, for Grant losing his daring due to problems with the Army of the Potomac. In his memoirs Grant outlines the many difficulties of moving through the Wilderness or by Lee’s left. It is probable he never believed it possible to get through in the single bound proposed by Meade and Humphries. Grant, *Memoirs*, 366-39.

excitedly lectured Grant on the seriousness of the current “crisis” and Lee’s ability to sever the communications of the Army of the Potomac. Grant responded:

Oh, I am heartily tired of hearing about what Lee is going to do, Some of you always seem to think he is going to turn a double somersault, and land in our rear and on both of our flanks at the same time. Go back to your command, and try to think what we are going to do ourselves, instead of what Lee is going to do.²⁷

Throughout the battle of the Wilderness Grant proved far less worried about Lee’s double somersaults, flanking attacks or any other actions than on how he would take control of his instrument and demonstrate facility with it. The Battle of the Wilderness provided Grant with the first opportunity to really learn the quality, constitution and character of his new army. Unlike the armies in the Western theatre, which Grant understood and built-up through years of contact and command, the Army of the Potomac proved an unknown quantity. This dynamic constituted a two way street. In the Wilderness Grant taught the Army of the Potomac about himself, his abilities and expectations and also demonstrated to that army its own abilities, left unrevealed by its previous commanders. As Brooks Simpson observed, in the Wilderness the crisis comes not from Lee, but from within the Army of the Potomac itself.²⁸

In addition to the celebrated crisis spawned by the fear of Lee’s gymnastic abilities, the Army of the Potomac generated other incidents, real or imagined, all mastered by Grant. Confused reports asserted the scattering of Sedgwick’s corps and the capture or death of both Sedgwick and Wright. Grant sifted through all of this information finding most of it a gross exaggeration and stated, “I don’t believe it.” After

²⁷ Horace Porter, Campaigning With Grant, (New York: Century, 1906), 69-70.

²⁸ Simpson, Triumph, 298.

dark, further reports arrived of a disaster on Grant's right. An unnamed staff officer expressed concern for the army's supply train, if the position gave way. Grant responded: "When the army is defeated and I am driven from this line, it will be when I have so few men left that they will not want any trains."²⁹

Grant demonstrated moral courage and balance in the Wilderness. Clausewitz noted the limits of "the imperfect knowledge," of intelligence. A commander must evaluate and dismiss or embrace a mass of information, "unreliable and transient," until a commander realizes "that war is a flimsy structure that can easily collapse and bury us in its ruins." Danger recurs like incoming waves; fear multiplies lies and inaccuracies and drives most men to moderation, or worse, inaction. Grant's actions in the Wilderness epitomize Clausewitz's solution, as a commander "must trust his judgment and stand like a rock on which the waves break in vain." Above all a commander must "give his troops and not his fears the benefit of the doubt. Only thus can he preserve a proper balance."³⁰

General Porter observed Grant's "proper balance," relating a conversation with the General, in which he reveals his thoughts during the battle:

All things in the world are relative. While we were engaged in the Wilderness I could not keep from thinking of the first fight I ever saw—the battle of Palo Alto. As I looked at the long line of battle, consisting of three thousand men, I felt that General Taylor had such a fearful responsibility resting upon him that I wondered how he ever had the nerve to assume it. It was largely instrumental in making General Taylor President of the United States. Now such an affair would scarcely be deemed important enough to report to headquarters.³¹

²⁹ Catton, *Command*, 215.

³⁰ Porter, *Campaigning*, 69-71; Simpson, *Triumph*, 298; Clausewitz, *War*, 84-85, 117.

³¹ Porter, *Campaigning*, 85.

Confusion and casualties in the Wilderness affected the Confederates as well, wearing down their military machine. General Longstreet's own troops shot him in the face; Lee's army suffered proportionately similar losses as the Army of the Potomac. In purely material terms, the fighting cost the larger Union army casualties not quite double those of the Southerners. Like at Shiloh, perhaps a majority of soldiers believed Lee's actions in the Wilderness constituted another Confederate victory. Union losses probably surpassed those of a previous battle over the same ground the year before. In that battle Lee inflicted losses of 16,845 men in exchange for 12,764 Confederate casualties. In the Wilderness, Lee did a little better, as Grant suffered 17,666 killed, wounded and missing to Lee's 11,400. Thinking tactically, Grant should have retreated as Hooker did under less sanguine circumstance.³²

Grant determined the outcome of the battle, its true strategic climax, after the fighting ended. Grant ordered a move south, towards Spotsylvania Courthouse, remarking to a worried cavalry officer, "it's all right, Wilson; the army is moving toward Richmond." The columns of marching infantry responded with cheers, when upon reaching a crossroads they turned south. The newspaper man Cadwallader, believing he must now report on yet another defeat of the Army of the Potomac, changed his mind after talking to Grant: "It was the greatest sunburst of my life. I had suddenly emerged from the slough of despond, to the solid bed-rock of unwavering faith." Sherman said it

³² Fuller, *Personality*, 191; James Marshall-Cornwall, *Grant as Military Commander*, (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1995), 61; Fuller, *Generalship*, 252, quotes Livermore's figures more favorable to Grant, listing 14,322 Union casualties (12.5% of Grant's army) and 12,000 Confederate (19.7%) for Lee.

best: “When Grant cried ‘Forward!’ after the battle of the Wilderness, I said: ‘This is the grandest act of his life; now I feel that the rebellion will be crushed.”³³

At Spotsylvania—A Breath of Tactical Innovation

To-day has been occupied with strategy; but our strategy is of a bloody kind—Theodore Lyman, Meade’s Chief-of-Staff

A brigade today—we’ll try a corps tomorrow—Grant³⁴

Upon taking command of the Army of the Potomac in the seven days from May 5th through May 12th Grant suffered 32,000 casualties. In the Seven Days Battle in late June of 1862, Lee’s first battle as commander of the Army of Northern Virginia, the Confederates lost 30,000 men. Both men directed armies defective in their command structure; both suffered from bad staff work and the errors of their subordinates. Both paid in blood as they educated themselves and their armies and “got them in hand.” Both sought accomplishment of specific political goals (Lee getting McClellan away from Richmond, Grant confronting Lee’s army and rendering it irrelevant for use in other theatres). In the estimation of Paddy Griffith, Lee’s offensive tactics proved “irrational but effective,” a description equally applicable to Grant’s during much of the Overland Campaign. A Clausewitzian finds the tactics of both irrational, with Grant’s wedded firmly to a policy to close out the war. The choices sometimes absent in strategy extend

³³ Sylvanus Cadwallader, Three Years With Grant, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 181-82; Porter, Campaigning, 291.

³⁴ Theodore Lyman, Meade’s Headquarters 1863-1865, (Freeport: Books for Libraries Press, 1970), 138. Simpson, Triumph, 308

to the practical methods of its implementation. In the both the Wilderness and the Seven Days Battle, policy determined offensive tactical methods directed against fortified enemies, carried out by imperfect instruments.³⁵

After the Wilderness Grant moved by his left, this time directing the routes for each of Meade's corps directly. Grant preferred not to let the commander of his principle army do so, "reserving control of its redeployment for himself." Even so, continued friction within the army and bad luck caused Grant to lose the race to Spotsylvania Courthouse. Grant failed to interpose himself between Lee and Richmond and the Confederates entrenched.³⁶

Clausewitz's simplest description of war as a duel between two wrestlers seems most applicable to the Union assaults of the Confederate position at Spotsylvania. The two armies "grappled like muscle-bound giants," to stalemate. Friction again dismantled Union efforts and coordinated assaults degenerated into piecemeal actions, each part of the army seemingly unable to support the other in accordance with orders. Colonel Emory Upton provided an opportunity for Union victory. Upton devised an effective tactic appropriate to attacking the fortifications now characteristic of Civil War battlefields. Upton's brigade of twelve picked regiments attacked at a run without stopping to fire. Divided into four waves, the first achieved a breakthrough and fanned out to roll up the outer-works of the Confederate entrenchments. The second waved moved on and attacked the inner fortifications. Subsequently, the third and fourth waves

³⁵McPherson, *Cry*, 471, 732. Paddy Griffith, *Battle Tactics of the Civil War*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 33.

³⁶ Simpson, *Triumph*, 300, 303.

widened the breach and rounded-up dazed prisoners. Upton then suffered a withering counter-attack as other Union forces failed to effectively support him.³⁷

Grant promoted the now wounded Upton on the spot and the next day ordered Hancock's entire corps to repeat the attack using Upton's tactics, supported (in theory) by the rest of the army. Lee's personal intervention prevented a Confederate disaster as Hancock's troops threatened to split their enemy's army in two. Despite closer observation and control over his subordinates and some further success with Upton's tactic, the Army of the Potomac again failed to gain a decisive advantage. Even with Upton's innovations, strategically and tactically Spotsylvania denoted a replay of the Wilderness. Bad staff work and poor coordination of the Corps of the Army of Potomac again derailed Grant's designs. Burnside and Warren's attacks in support of Hancock's attempted emulation of Upton misfired. Wright, new to Corps command, proved a disappointment. As for Hancock, generally considered the best of the lot, "his aggressiveness concealed his inability to reconnoiter either the enemy's position or the ground over which he was to advance."³⁸

Repeated Union attacks and given the advantage of the defensive, Lee again inflicted greater casualties than he suffered, though the proportion diminished. Lee now found himself limited to countering Grant's moves, unable or unwilling to risk his army outside of its fortifications. Lee found himself pinned, the option of sending major components of his forces (i.e., corps size units) west even temporarily, now proved an

³⁷ McPhearson, *Cry*, 728-29.

³⁸ Simpson, *Triumph*, 309.

impossibility. As after the Wilderness, Grant again moved by Lee's right, heading south and east again to interpose himself between Lee and Richmond.

The Political Generals Misfire

Operationally, Grant's efforts to pin Lee while Sigel and Butler attacked his logistics, mirrors Grant's pinning of Lee strategically, while Sherman advanced to Atlanta and through Georgia and the Carolinas. The pinning was essential to the success of the other operations and also constituted the most dangerous job. Grant reserved this job for himself, as others may have been distracted by Washington or did not possess the tenacity to see it through in the face of the casualties suffered and the specter of Robert E. Lee.

The inaction and mistakes of subordinates, the immense friction within the army and the ineptitude of the political generals all define a "given" quantity, out of Grant's control, but part of the equation of strategy. Grant's strategy enabled him to overcome all of these failures and disappointments. As the events of the overland campaign unfolded and each of his operational plans misfired, Grant again improvised responses to each situation keeping his original strategy intact.

Butler and Sigel's operations should have redeemed Grant's failure to decisively defeat Lee on the battlefields at the Wilderness and Spotsylvania. The mere pinning or negation of Lee presented all other Union commanders with great opportunity to accomplish his destruction indirectly. Soon after Spotsylvania word came of Sigel's defeat in the Shenandoah Valley at New Market; Sigel ran, just as Halleck said that he would. Not long after came the news that Butler, though temporarily able to break the

road between Richmond and Petersburg, chose to then retreat to the safety of his entrenchments. Butler removed himself from the battle as if “in a bottle strongly corked” in Grant’s memorable phrase.³⁹

Grant reassessed his campaign, exposing an army corps in isolation in an attempt to bait Lee into risking his forces outside their entrenchments. Lee declined to fight unfortified so Grant moved again by Lee’s right, renewed operations in the Shenandoah with a new commander, and looked for new opportunities to strike at Lee.

Grant at Cold Harbor—The Superiority of Strategy, Politics and the Numbers Game.

It was not war—it was murder—General D. H. Hill on Lee’s attack at Malvern Hill.

It was not war, it was murder—General E. M. Law on Grant’s attack at Cold Harbor

When we reached the James River, however, all of the effects of the battle of Cold Harbor seem to have disappeared—Grant in his memoirs.

History is nothing but a lying bitch—Jubal Early on Grant’s memoirs.⁴⁰

Grant’s reputation suffered, and continues to suffer, from the fighting occurring at Cold Harbor. None of Grant’s other tactical reversals elicited similar effects, either with the soldiers of his time (on both sides), within the political dynamic of the Army of the Potomac or with historians. Grant’s reputation suffered a great “hit” at Cold Harbor, representing to some an archetypal example of bloody Grantian strategy, to others further

³⁹ Porter, *Campaigning*, 124. Smith, *Grant*, 359.

⁴⁰ OR I, 2, 394; E. M. Law, “From the Wilderness to Cold Harbor,” in *Battles & Leaders of the Civil War*, 4 vol. (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, reprint 1956), 4:249; Grant, *Memoirs*, 444-445; William A. Blair “Grant’s Second Civil War: The battle for Historical Memory” in Gary W. Gallagher, *The Spotsylvania Campaign*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 223-253, 247.

example of the depth of the problems existing within the Army of the Potomac. While Grant suffered greater casualties in the Wilderness and at Spotsylvania, something about the way the battle unfolded, assumptions made by Grant and his officers and the intuitional and superior understanding of the true tactical situation by the troops combine to set Cold Harbor apart from previous battles in the Overland Campaign. Examining the battle from the standpoint of its effects on policy yields decidedly mixed results, both for Grant and for his critics.

Grant himself provides a first step in evaluating the true nature of the battle and its effects:

I always regretted that the last assault at Cold Harbor was ever made . . . no advantage whatsoever was gained to compensate for the heavy loss we sustained.⁴¹

Grant regrets rightly and significantly refer only to tactical failure. He regrets not the fight itself, the choice of neither the battlefield nor his intentions in assaulting Lee. Like the Wilderness, Spotsylvania and all the rest of the almost continuous combat before Cold Harbor, Grant is sure of his strategy and aware of its diminishment (failure to take Mobile, the failure of Butler, Banks and Sigel) and its imperfect application through the imperfect instrument of the Army of the Potomac. Grant takes little or no responsibility for that imperfection, neither does he question his decision to command through others. Grant at Cold Harbor exercised very little personal oversight over Meade or his obstructionist and often-incompetent corps commanders. Eventually, Meade in

⁴¹ Grant, Memoirs, 444-445.

exasperation ordered, “each corps ought to act for itself and not always be leaning on him.”⁴²

At Cold Harbor, in the final assault Grant regretted, the Union endured some 7,000 casualties. Useless and bloody frontal attacks took place elsewhere during the Civil War. In another famous and futile assault (one less damaging to the reputation of its instigator), Lee on day three at Gettysburg lost, some 7,000 casualties out of 14,000 attackers in half an hour. Overall, the percentages of Grant’s casualties in the Overland campaign proved smaller than those in many of the battles of 1862 and 1863.⁴³

Of greater interest than the numbers of dead such ill advised attacks against fortified positions generated, are the quite different political results in their respective armies. The great casualty differential at Cold Harbor produced significant problems with morale within the Army of the Potomac and also discouraged public opinion on the home front. McPherson identifies after the battle the existence of a “Cold Harbor syndrome,” in which Union troops no longer assaulted an entrenched enemy with anything like the élan necessary to carry them. The casualty rates of Cold Harbor represented the South’s best hope of victory; such loss rates were unsustainable even given Union superiority in numbers.⁴⁴ Lee’s greater failure generated no syndromes. Confederate soldiers and society, though disheartened and appalled, maintained faith in Lee and his methods. Lee

⁴² Brooks Simpson describes the command structure at Cold Harbor as “unraveling,” with Meade unwilling to direct and his senior commanders unwilling to cooperate. See Simpson, Triumph, 322-325.

⁴³ McPherson, Cry, 735 for Cold Harbor casualties, see 662 for Lee’s casualties during Pickett’s Charge at Gettysburg; Edward Hagerman, The American Civil War and the Origins of Modern Warfare, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 260, finds this due principally to the extensive use of entrenchments by both sides. According to Grady McWhiney and Perry D. Jamieson, Attack and Die: Civil War Tactics and the Southern Heritage, (University, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1982), 22, Lee’s casualties as a percentage proved the highest of any commander in the war.

⁴⁴ McPherson, Cry, 735, 741.

and Davis rationalized the Gettysburg campaign as a success. After the war, Grant's failure provided further ammunition for his critics, who saw in the great casualty differential proof of their view of Grant as a failure. Jubal Early found himself positively outraged at the way Grant put the battle into its proper strategic perspective in his memoirs. Ironically history as written by Grant proved less enduring than that of his Lost Cause critics. It is left to the modern critic to divine which history deserves the epithet "nothing but a lying bitch."⁴⁵

Strategically Cold Harbor proved itself a bloody and tragic irrelevancy. It failed to prevent Grant reaching the James, it failed to get Grant fired and it failed to disrupt Union strategy to win the war. Grant endured, using the engagement, be it victory or defeat to further the aims of strategy.

After Cold Harbor, Grant directed the following to Halleck:

I now find after more than thirty days of trial that the enemy deems it of the first importance to run no risks with the Armies they now have. They act purely on the defensive, behind breast works, or feebly on the offensive immediately in front of them and where, in case of repulse, they can instantly retire behind them . . . I will continue to hold substantially the ground now occupied by the Army of the Potomac, taking advantage of any favorable circumstance that may present itself.⁴⁶

The friction wearing down and hobbling the Army of the Potomac also worked to the detriment of the Confederates. Lee's casualties in the Overland Campaign had been proportionally as great as Grant's, despite the fact that Lee fought largely on the defensive and could be expected to suffer less. Of more significance, twenty of fifty-seven corps, division and brigade commanders became casualties. These casualties

⁴⁵ Hattaway and Jones, *How*, 413-14; Blair, "Second," 223.

⁴⁶GP 11:19.

included all four corps commanders dead, wounded, or ill. Such losses “played havoc” with the Army of Northern Virginia’s command structure. Oliver Wendell Holms described the effects of Grant’s “concentrated war,” as practiced at the Wilderness, Spotsylvania and Cold Harbor: “Many a man has gone crazy since the campaign began from the terrible pressure on mind and body.” If McPherson’s “Cold Harbor syndrome” prevented vigorous assaults on Confederate works by Union troops, Grant’s attacks and the casualties inflicted prevented Lee’s army from assaulting Union troops at all. Lee remained pinned, unable to maneuver, and acted “purely on the defensive” until the last act of the war.⁴⁷

The Overland Campaign in all events remained a very close-run thing. Lee said at Cold Harbor that he possessed no reserve, “not a regiment,” and added further that if he should shorten his lines to make a reserve the enemy would turn him, and if he should weaken his line to make a reserve they would be broken. Given Grant’s generally proportional losses and the political necessity of bringing Lee to battle, the Overland Campaign meets Clausewitzian descriptions of an effective use of the engagement to achieve the political goals of the war. Northern politics demanded keeping Lee on the defensive and “the country demanded a clash of titans.” However marginal the success over Lee in purely material terms, Grant imposed and retained the initiative militarily and politically: “Lee’s great weapon was maneuver, and Grant had taken it from him.”⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Smith, Grant, 355; 361. Morris Schaff, The Battle of the Wilderness, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1910), 201.

⁴⁸ Porter, Campaigning, 180; Simpson, Peace, 54-55⁴⁸ Alan T. Nolan, Lee Considered, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 105.

In a way Grant's operations were Napoleonic. Napoleon generally sought to pin and engage a major part of his opponent's army ultimately delivering a destabilizing and shattering blow, often against his flank or rear. Flanking efforts, designed to separate Lee from Richmond, aimed at Lee's rear on the battlefield itself. Sigel and Butler aimed at Lee's rear operationally within the theatre. Sherman's marches aimed at Lee's rear from another theatre. The raiding strategy from Atlanta and Mobile aimed at Lee's rear through destroying his logistics and the will of the people. After the failure of Butler, Banks and Sigel, Sherman became the *Mass de la Maneuver*, working against the rear of Lee and indeed the rear of the whole confederacy. "Strategically Lee was in trouble." He could only await Grant's next move; his only move could be south, a retreat strategically inadvisable and politically impossible. Overall "Grant's relentless pounding was fast reducing the Army of Northern Virginia to a ghost of its former self." Grant out-generated Lee; not through maneuver but through the great casualties inflicted.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Gordon C. Rhea, Cold Harbor: Grant and Lee May 26—June 3, 1864, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002), 18-19.

Chapter 15

Striking With a Wounded Hand—Siege Warfare, Petersburg and Appomattox

As for Grant, he was like Thor, the hammerer; striking blow after blow—Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain

There were screws loose somewhere and the machine would not work—Grant's staff on the Army of the Potomac

You cannot strike a full blow with a wounded hand—Meade¹

Few generals owe a reputation for greatness due to conducting siege warfare. For the military historian, surprise, deception and brilliant lightning like strikes offer more interest than the systematic and rather dreary progress of a successful siege. So it is with the Civil War. Lee's actions at Chancellorsville and those of Jackson in the Shenandoah Valley enjoy immense attention and admiration while Grant's overland campaign, his operations South of the James and especially the lengthy siege of Richmond and Petersburg receive less respect. Some question the legitimacy of Grant's victories at Donalson and Vicksburg, as his opponents proved less than competent. In a similar manner then Lee's greatest achievements must also suffer as he too often faced inferior generals. Others malign Grant's Appomattox victory as a legitimate military

¹Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain, The Passing of the Armies, (Gettysburg: Stan Clark Military Books, 1994) 29; John Y. Simon, *et al.*, editors Papers of Ulysses S. Grant. Vols., 1-22, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press: 1967— I. 97), 11:363. Hereafter abbreviated as GP, quoting an unnamed member of Grant's staff after the battle of the crater. Theodore Lyman, Meade's Headquarters 1863-1865, (Freeport: Books for Libraries Press, 1970) 170.

achievement. Critics also point to the worn down condition of Lee's army forgetting to attribute its condition to the "political attrition" of Grant's overall war strategy.²

Clausewitz's insight in looking to the success of the whole as the supreme measure of the value of a campaign (and by implication, a general) dictates admiration of Grant's understanding of both the true nature of the Civil War and the strategy and tactics appropriate to win it. Lee, for all of his virtuosity and greatness, never captured an army in the Civil War. Grant's capture of three armies, the last and most formidable commanded by Lee himself, proves his understanding. All three of his captures include some element of siege warfare, demonstrating that Grant perceived something about the changes in tactics and firepower that Lee did not: Napoleonic-style battles of annihilation no longer proved possible. Annihilation and "success of the whole" now required a different type of battle. Clausewitz offered some views on the role of sieges in offensive warfare: "Reducing an enemy fortress does not amount to halting the offensive." Instead Clausewitz sees it "as a means of strengthening an advance." Sieges appear to involve a suspension or reduction of effort, but this in Clausewitz's view also defines a fallacy.³

Grant understood the offensive strategic role of the siege and also recognized the use of entrenchments as an offensive tactic. At Donalson Grant's investment tactics (without entrenchments) anticipated a siege and defeated an army initially larger than his

² Brooks D. Simpson, "Continuous Hammering and Mere Attrition: Lost Cause Critics and the Military Reputation of Ulysses S. Grant," in Gary W. Gallagher and Alan T. Nolan, eds. The Myth of the Lost Cause and Civil War History, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 200), 147-169, provides a good overview of the historiography of these issues.

³Paddy Griffith, Battle Tactics of the Civil War, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 40 uses the term "non-battle" to describe siege at Petersburg, distinguishing it from the methods used by others elsewhere during the war. Clausewitz includes battles that include no actual combat as part of the engagement, Carl von Clausewitz, On War (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 97, 599.

own when its breakout failed. The use of this means to reduce a fortified opponent (as at Vicksburg) is of course a standard means and signals no tactical innovation. Strategically the siege crowned final fulfillment of an offensive campaign. The siege at Petersburg-Richmond as well constitutes something original, though critics again criticize Grant's seeming lack of imagination in perusing the ponderous moves of the siege. Grant's ponderous tactics worked on many levels. Entrenchments are essentially a force multiplier, whether used offensively or defensively. By Petersburg Lee no longer possessed the power to attack Grant even on open ground. Union troops in fortifications offered an even less desirable target. Union defensive works freed the troops necessary for employment offensively against Lee's flanks. Unable to actually surround Lee, Grant's siege pinned him "while Grant's other armies," in the words of Sherman, "were absolutely annihilating the Southern Confederacy."⁴

Remaining on the offensive strategically, Grant abandoned overtly offensive tactics for entrenchments at Petersburg. Grant won the war not as the "blitzkrieg" Grant of Vicksburg, not even as Thor the hammerer, but as a strategist striking blow after blow with the wounded hand of the Army of the Potomac.

Blunted Instruments—The Dysfunctional Political Culture of the Eastern Armies

Late in the war, the spirit of George B. McClellan could still palsy the army—Russell Weigly

Thus did Smith the Bald try the Machiavelli against Butler the cross-eyed, and got floored in the first round—Thaddeus Lyman

⁴ Battles & Leaders of the Civil War, 4 vol. (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, reprint 1956), 4:249.

It was almost as if he felt he was teaching a spoiled, bad-tempered rich kid to walk—Geoffrey Perrot.⁵

By the time of Grant's ascension to the rank of Commander-in-Chief, he without question understood as much as anyone the kind of war he was fighting and could conceptualize the war as a whole. Grant completed his education through practical command experience at many levels. Schooling through experience generated the plans to end the war. Grant recognized Clausewitz's concept of war as a political instrument. He understood he must cultivate his most politically important "true political instrument," the Army of the Potomac. Material factors remained a given. Divining moral factors limiting that instrument, the "*experience and courage of the troops, and their patriotic spirit,*" proved a difficult and trying process for Grant. Planning to end the war proved much simpler than evaluating and understanding the Army of the Potomac.⁶

Clausewitz in his trinitarian definition of war identifies an unknown, "the play of chance and probability," of an army and its commander. An army's experience, talents and courage (or its absence) present its own equation and define the degree to which that army overcomes friction and successfully carries out the strategist's intentions. Knowing one's army allows a commander to define the "possible," and effectively match planning to the capabilities of the troops. Grant knew each army possesses its own unique character; its own "political culture" and his awareness of problems with the principle

⁵Russel Weigly, *A Great Civil War*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 427; McPherson, *Trial*, 224; Geoffrey Perrot, *Ulysses S. Grant: Soldier and President*, (New York: Random House, 1997), 306.

⁶ Clausewitz, *War*, 186.

Eastern army existed for sometime. He rejected its command in August of 1863, explaining to Charles A. Dana:

Here I know the officers and men and what each Gen. is capable of as a separate commander. There I would have all to learn. Besides more or less dissatisfaction would necessarily be produced by importing a General to command an Army already well supplied with those who have grown up, and been promoted, with it.⁷

Reading between the lines, Grant's fears echoed those of Meade, who also understood the "notorious fact that the Army of the Potomac's officer corps was hopelessly divided into cliques, jealous and full of suspicion."⁸ None of the mutual confidence, cooperation as existed in large part in the west existed in the Army of the Potomac. Rival cliques competed for promotion, apportioned blame and mutual denunciation after every military setback. Grenville Dodge "discovered a feeling that was a stranger to us in the west" during his stay with the Eastern army. The various corps and divisional commanders *all* criticized the general commanding or some other officer. General Slocum's experience succinctly illustrates the political culture of the Eastern army as he moved west to command the garrison at Vicksburg: "I passed away from the field of controversy and faction to the field of hearty cooperation."⁹

Given the negativity, division and climate of failure of his new command, Grant attempted to "sharpen" his instruments. In doing so many of his political solutions taken in deference to the unique atmosphere of that army produced decidedly mixed results. To what degree his solutions alleviated or exacerbated his problems remains an open question. Many advised Grant to relieve Meade and command the army directly. Meade

⁷ GP 9:145-146.

⁸ Bruce Catton, Grant Takes Command, (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1968), 7.

⁹ *Ibid*, 342, 166.

himself expected to be relieved. Grant chose not to replace him, being favorably impressed by Meade personally and leery of the effects the appointment of a westerner or some other “outsider” might have on an already difficult situation. In addition, Grant preserved IXth Corps as a separate entity, avoiding the issue of Burnside accepting orders from Meade, whom he ranked. In retaining Meade and preserving Burnside’s independence, Grant consciously traded a degree of political harmony within the Army of the Potomac for an inefficient command structure.¹⁰

While we can properly criticize Grant for not taking personal control of the army, and we can identify all of the problems caused by his handling of Burnside and the employment of other political generals, we can only speculate as to the moral effects of Meade’s relief or the heavy-handed dismissal of a Butler or Sigel. All of Grant’s officers in the Army exhibited deficiencies. Even Sheridan, an import from the Western army and Winfield Scott Hancock, perhaps the best corps commander in the Army of the Potomac failed Grant in the campaign.

Grant declined to exhibit many of the trappings of command of his predecessors when raised to higher command. Grant cultivated cooperation through professional example. After the opening of the “cracker line” at Chattanooga, Grant and his staff took advantage of the improving conditions, dining on roast beef and potatoes with Grant doing the carving. Grant also “democratized” his staff in the east, all of his officers dined with their chief informally, with conversation “as familiar as that which occurs in the

¹⁰ Ulysses S. Grant, *Personal Memoirs of U. S. Grant*, (New York: Da Capo Press, 1952), 359. Grant believed all actions, even personal ones, should serve the goals of the war. Meade impressed Grant with his offer to serve in any capacity required for the good of the service.

household of any private family.” Grant respected officers like himself who served policy in whatever capacity without regard for show or purely personal gains.¹¹

Other problem existed as well. The army, according to some critics, remained “thoroughly McClellanized, “ in that some of its commanders deemed it proper to question orders, postpone attacks, negotiate and not fight. Grant remarked on the “feeble character” of Warren’s assaults at Spotsylvania, when he believed support on his flanks insufficient. “He could see every danger at a glance before he had encountered it.” In the Wilderness, Meade issued orders to corps commanders who gave orders to divisional commanders whose brigade commanders questioned those orders and then sent officers back to division asking for delays. Emory Upton, the competent brigade and division commander and innovator of the offensive tactics used at Spotsylvania critiqued his own army suggesting, “Some of our corps commanders are not fit to be corporals.”¹²

Butler’s Army of the James offered its own unique problems, first among them Butler himself. Grant attempts to “sharpen” Butler, through the appointment of Generals W. F. Smith and Quincy Gilmore as field commanders backfired. Grant understood Smith’s shortcomings: “General Smith whilst a very able officer, is obstinate and is likely to condemn whatever is not suggested by himself.” The professional Smith, like the political generals, proved unable to carry out Grant’s wishes.¹³

¹¹ T. Harry Williams, Lincoln and His Generals, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1952. 293, 213; Brooks Simpson, Ulysses S. Grant: Triumph over Adversity, 1822-1865, (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000), 233; Horace Porter, Campaigning With Grant, (New York: Century, 1906), 45.

¹²Ibid, 108. Grant, Memoirs, 534; Catton, Command, 187-88; Simpson, Triumph, 309, 330.

¹³GP 10:475.

Generals like Smith intrigued against each other and against their superiors, often going outside the chain of command to lobby politically for their own advancement or another's displacement. Grant found Smith useful as a sounding board during the process of planning and hoped to use him to provide Butler with the military expertise Butler clearly lacked, but "neither could get on well with anyone, much less with each other." "Baldy" Smith directed "Machiavellian" schemes against Meade, Butler and even Grant himself; the cross-eyed Butler proved a superior conspirator to Smith and accomplished his dismissal. Meade's contentiousness created other problems, his own staff officers reportedly afraid to speak to him "for fear of either curses or sneers." Grant derided these actions. Such intrigues generated immense friction and seldom ended with a positive result. As General-in-Chief Grant's professional manner elicited a great degree of cooperation from the Army of the Potomac, many of whose officers resented the appointment of a Grant to the top command. Porter observed: "whatever his subordinates may have thought of one another, to him they were at all times well disposed and perfectly loyal."¹⁴

The unique status of General Lee added to all the other problems of the Army of the Potomac. Rightly believed the best General the South produced and the best hope for independence, Col. G. F. R. Henderson observed, "that the mere mention of Lee's name seems . . . to have been enough. They (officers like Hooker and Burnside) were paralyzed at once."¹⁵ On some level most of the officers of the Army of the Potomac feared Lee and it affected their performance on the battlefield. This is not to say they

¹⁴Catton, *Command*, 333; Porter, *Campaigning*, 248.

¹⁵ Col. G. F. R. Henderson, *The Civil War: A Soldier's View*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 266.

exhibited physical fear under fire, but they hesitated and harbored reservation about their own moves and ability in the face of Lee. Generals sometimes seemed reluctant to attack until all of their troops were up and delayed when units on their flanks did not behave as ordered. Repeated tactical reversal ultimately generated moral effects of strategic importance.¹⁶

In his memoirs Grant claimed he never “suffered trepidation upon confronting an enemy” after the movement of his regiment to Florida, Missouri. There is no evidence to indicate Grant felt any differently about his confrontations with Robert E. Lee, though many of the officers of the Potomac army repeatedly pointed out, “you have not yet met Bobby Lee.” Grant never let anyone gain the upper hand psychologically. After the war Grant remarked: “I never ranked Lee as high as some other of the army, That is to say I never had as much anxiety when he was in my front as when Joe Johnston was in front.” Unlike many of the officers in his Eastern army, in the words of the private soldiers, “Ulysses don’t scare worth a d—n.”¹⁷

The character of the Army of the Potomac itself and the immense friction it generated represented another of the “given” factors in Grant’s strategic equation. No real practical solution existed to change the political culture defining an army; any more than one could change the political culture defining a country. Probability and chance remained in play and probability stated that the Army of the Potomac remained inefficient, cumbersome and slow. James Wilson, a member of Grant’s staff offered a

¹⁶ Micheal C. C. Adams, Our Masters the Rebels: a Speculation on Union Military Failure in the East, 1861-1865, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), discusses this phenomenon in great detail.

¹⁷ Grant, Memoirs, 127; Porter, Campaigning, 96-97; Catton, Command, 170.

solution: “Give Parker (a full-blooded Native-American also on Grant’s staff) a tomahawk, a supply of commissary whiskey and a scalping knife and send him out with orders to bring in the scalps of general officers.” Grant asked, “which ones?” Any six would do, the act itself would encourage the others.¹⁸

Conversely, Southern soldiers identified with the Army of Northern Virginia, with Lee and with victory in an almost mystical manner. Trust in Lee and their own abilities, their history of winning and a perception of Union mediocrity factor into any discussion of the campaign of 1864. The value of this moral advantage deriving to the Confederates can’t be quantified, any more than Union disadvantages stemming from problems within their army. Suffice it to say, Southerners enjoyed a moral superiority that functions as a force multiplier when considering Grant and Lee’s relative strengths and weaknesses in the coming campaign. Grant understood that this disadvantage also offered an opportunity. Like Southern soldiers, Confederate civilians identified Robert E. Lee with the rebellion itself. If Lee and his mythical army are defeated or rendered impotent, no hope exists for the South.

In addition to problems caused by the political culture of the Army of the Potomac, many technical problems existed as well, also effecting the “blunting” of the Grant’s instrument. The first involved the quality of the troops. One Union army Colonel estimated that a third of the army of the Potomac was “green” and in new regiments. Rather than rebuild veteran units the Union army generally fielded new regiments forwarded directly from the states. So the best regiments in the army slowly wasted away from combat, resulting in a general diminishing of the overall quality of the army. Also

¹⁸ James H. Wilson, Under the Old Flag, ((New York: D. Appleton, 1912) 1:400; Simpson, Triumph, 348.

expiring enlistments of the so-called three-year men removed many of the best and most experienced soldiers from Grant's army. While Grant did all that he could to have regiments forwarded from rear areas it proved politically impossible to extend the enlistments of the many veteran regiments who left during the siege.¹⁹

Grant attempted to preserve a "balance" in all things dealing with the Eastern army. When he judged Sherman due for promotion to Major General in the regular army, he also requested a similar promotion for Meade, including the statement: "I would not like to see one of these promotions at this time without seeing both." In all things Grant sought to reduce the great friction generated by his imperfect armies and reduce the uncertainties blunting his instrument.²⁰

Friction, Petersburg, Craters, and Butler

Paralysis of the army's central nervous system could go no further—Bruce Catton

The nerve which enables the higher political will to act—Clausewitz on the desire for victory

As helpless as a child on the field of battle, & as visionary as an opium eater in council—William F. Smith on Butler.²¹

¹⁹ Mark Grimsley, *And Keep Moving On* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press), 21-22. William T. Sherman, *Home Letters of General Sherman*, M. A. deWolf Howe ed., (New York: Scribners, 1909), 254-55, calls the breaking up or failure to rebuild veteran regiments "as one of the fatal mistakes of the war."

²⁰ GP 10:434.

²¹ Catton, *Command*, 293; Clausewitz, *War*, 245, on the desire for victory. Simpson, *Triumph*, 350.

Grant's last move by Lee's right ended the Overland Campaign, proved the most innovative and daring, and offered the greatest opportunity for inflicting decisive defeat on the Confederacy. It also again revealed the greatest shortcomings of his blunted instruments. Grant's move south of the James surprised Lee, flanked Richmond and nearly took Petersburg. Grant aimed at Petersburg in order to cut the communications of the Army of Northern Virginia and isolate it and the Southern capital from the rest of the South. Butler's army, under Smith's tactical command, advanced from Bermuda Hundred, broke into the nearly empty entrenchments at Petersburg, and then stopped. General Hancock "the Superb," led the march across the James towards Petersburg. Generally thought of as the best of the Army of the Potomac's corps commanders Hancock seemed ignorant of the entire point of the campaign and failed to attack Petersburg after his troops got into position along side Smith's. As at Cold Harbor when the failures became excessive Meade abdicated his command, telling his corps commanders to operate independently, as he found "it useless to appoint an hour to effect cooperation"²²

The move to take Petersburg and end the war, like so many of Grant's schemes, remained stillborn. Grant reached the James. It became a siege and a matter of time, as Lee predicted. The siege itself appeared to Grant's contemporaries and to many scholars as an unfortunate halt to the offensive and as evidence of the failure of Grant's offensive strategy. Grant's waged siege warfare actively, as a necessary part of his offensive, and it strengthened his advance. Though negatively affecting Northern public opinion, the siege proved of even greater consequence to all but the most sanguine of Southern patriots. Lee

²²Catton, Command, 293; Simpson, Triumph, 339.

and Richmond might survive for a time, but neither the political leadership nor the army possessed an active means to materially affect the outcome of the war. All they could do is wait. Grant clearly stated their position: “They hope for a counter revolution. They hope for the election of the peace candidate. In fact like McCawber, they hope something to turn up.”²³

The tedium of siege warfare included incidents of high drama. The troops themselves instigated the drama of the Crater. Pennsylvania miners dug underneath the Confederate lines and planted a mine. Its explosion signaled an attack, ill conceived and poorly supervised. “Stupendous failure” and four thousand casualties resulted as the tactical dysfunction of the Army of the Potomac reached new heights. Grant called the fiasco of the Crater “the saddest affair I have ever witnessed in this war.” Grant’s frustration devolved less from tactical misfortune than from the knowledge that he must break down Lee’s military machine before friction destroyed his own.²⁴

General Butler offered his own plan to take a fortified position, equipping a derelict steamer with copious amounts of powder and attempting to flatten the walls of Fort Fisher and capture it. Fort Fisher controlled the approaches to the port of Wilmington, a principle destination of blockade-runners. At the Crater at least the mine functioned as expected. Butler’s explosion steamer failed to make any impression whatsoever on the fort. Butler then gave up the assault, ignoring Grant’s orders to lay siege to the fort if an assault failed. Grant again used defeat in an engagement to his strategic advantage. Grant leveraged Butler’s failure at Fort Fisher to relieve him of his

²³ GP 12:16-17.

²⁴ Grant, *Memoirs*, 466-68; Jean Edward Smith, *Grant*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), 181.

command, remarking, “Failure at Fort Fisher was not without important and valuable results.” Always conscious of politics within the army, Grant appointed the able volunteer officer A. H. Terry, as the volunteer Butler’s replacement. The largely volunteer army remained skeptical of professionals. Recognition and promotion of competent volunteer officers contributed to army unity and morale.²⁵

The civil/military relationship limited Grant’s options in dealings with political generals. Over time, Grant lessened his reliance on political generals, as by degree they demonstrated through their failures their unfitness for command. The character of the Army of the Potomac also limited his options with that army. As always, Grant persisted. Grant throughout the siege repeatedly attacked Lee’s flanks, attempting again to reach the railways supplying Lee. None of these actions proved decisive, but Grant extended his lines until Lee, exhausted and over-stretched, ultimately reached the breaking point. Lee instigated the next drama of the siege, a Confederate move north to threaten Washington.

Early

His one and only grand strategical principle was to terrify Washington—J. F. C. Fuller on Lee

I want Sheridan put in command of all the troops in the field with instructions to put himself south of the enemy and follow him to the death—Grant²⁶

²⁵ Simpson, *Triumph*, 401; Grant, *Memoirs*, 509; Porter, *Campaigning*, 368.

²⁶ J. F. C. Fuller, *Grant and Lee: A Study in Personality and Generalship*, (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1957), 253; GP 11:358-59.

Robert E. Lee ran out of cards to play. As we have seen, before the Overland Campaign even began, Lee remarked, “If he (Grant) gets there (the James), it will become a siege, and then it will be *a mere question of time*.” Grant got there and the siege commenced. The question of time remained, dependent chiefly on the degree of tactical ineptitude of Grant’s subordinates and Lee’s mastery of defensive warfare. Lee resorted to a proven device and detached a segment of his army to the Shenandoah Valley to force a dispersal of Grant’s besieging forces. Other events also threatened to disperse Grant’s concentration at Petersburg. Halleck suggested a withdrawal of troops in the field to put down the riots sure to accompany the next draft. Grant suggested the use local troops and militias to maintain order.²⁷

Lee’s detachment of General Early’s corps up the valley, a “direct line of political attack,” terrified Washington yet again, forcing Grant’s reinforcement of its garrison with troops from General Wright’s 6th corps. Grant postponed offensive moves planned in front of Richmond. Grant gave Sheridan command of the forces arrayed against Early, with orders to “put himself south of the enemy and follow him to the death.”²⁸ The ever-skeptical Lincoln, while approving whole-heartedly Grant’s sentiments offered a warning and explanation for some of the great friction generated by the Union civilian command structure (i.e., Halleck and Stanton):

Please look over the dispatches you may have received from here ever since you made that order, and discover, if you can that there is any idea in the head of any one here of ‘ putting our army south of the enemy,’ or of ‘ following him to the death’ in any direction. I repeat to you it will

²⁷Porter, Campaigning, 279.

²⁸Fuller, Generalship, 218; Porter, Campaigning, 237-38, 271; GP 11:358-59.

neither be done nor attempted unless you watch it every day and hour, and force it.²⁹

Grant responded to Lincoln's challenge by unifying the departments around Washington and appointing Sheridan to command. Sheridan defeated Early at Winchester and Cedar Creek and then devastated the valley. Grant famously ordered Sheridan to "turn the Shenandoah [into] a barren waste." Sheridan did so. Aside from Sheridan, Grant's eastern armies continued to turn in mediocre performances. The remainder of Grant's strategic combinations more than compensated.³⁰

Sherman, Hood and Savannah

The Confederacy is a mere shell—Grant

My marches were as much an attack on Lee's army as though I were operating within the sound of his artillery—Sherman

The immediate object here is neither to conquer the enemy country nor to destroy its army, but simply to cause general damage--Clausewitz.³¹

Attributing appropriate responsibility to the originator of Sherman's famous march deserves consideration. Grant always generously credited Sherman with its successful execution (understandable) and its inception (less understandable). Grant's cutting loose from his communications (against Sherman's advice) at Vicksburg proved the feasibility of such moves. His sending Sherman to Meridian and his plans for the

²⁹ Smith, Grant, 379.

³⁰ James M. McPherson, Battle Cry of Freedom, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 778.

³¹ Simpson, Triumph, 391; Herman Hattaway and Archer Jones, How the North Won, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1983), 669; Clausewitz, War, 93.

Mobile campaign and his North Carolina plan all defined the strategy of “political attrition” through the targeting of logistics. Sherman carried out Grant’s raiding strategy effectively and completely, but the strategy itself remains Grant’s.

Both Grant and Sherman preferred not to permanently occupy Atlanta, “a prize which demanded half an army to defend it,” and another to maintain its communications. Atlanta possessed no material utility as a Union asset: its occupation only aided the North through the destruction of its warmaking potential. Politically its fall and Sheridan’s successes in the valley ensured Lincoln’s reelection. Grant believed this event greater in scale than battlefield victories, its effects extending beyond the armies and home front to public opinion abroad: “The immense majority which Mr. Lincoln has received is worth more to us than a victory in the field, both in its effect on the rebels, and in its foreign influence.” Of special note, Lincoln received the soldier’s vote 3-1 over their former General-in-Chief McClellan.³²

The capture of Atlanta aided Lincoln but broke no army. The question remained: How does taking a place objective (another Jominian strategic point?) like Atlanta win the war, especially with enemy armies intact? Sherman’s thinking proved innovative in that marching through Georgia solved the problem of Hood’s army without requiring the difficult and time consuming step of breaking it up directly as Grant imagined. The question remained tactical, of the best method to deal with Hood’s army in order to facilitate strategy of the march.³³

³²GP 12:415-16; Smith, Grant, 387.

³³ Peter Parish, The American Civil War, (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1975), 474.

Before deferring to Sherman's tactical advice Grant needed convincing, as did Lincoln. Sherman's arguments advocating this course included the material: "By attempting to hold the roads we will lose 1,000 men monthly, and will gain no result." Defending railroads generates no positive political change, so Sherman next focused on the strategic benefits of his campaign: "I can make the march, and make Georgia howl." Sherman proposed making Georgia howl not for mere material destruction but for its political effect: "Even without battle the results, operating upon the minds of sensible men, would produce fruits more than compensating for the expense, trouble, and risk."³⁴

In an ill-advised attempt to shore up Southern morale, Jefferson Davis publicly compared Sherman's taking of Atlanta with Napoleon's taking of Moscow and forecasted a similar disaster for the Union. Upon hearing of the contents of Davis's speeches, Grant concluded the following:

Mr. Davis has not made it quite plain who is to furnish the snow for this Moscow retreat through Georgia and Tennessee. However he has rendered us one good service at least in notifying us of Hood's intended plan of campaign.³⁵

Eventually Sherman's arguments convinced Grant: "On mature reflection I believe Sherman's proposition is the best that can be adopted." With Hood on the move, Grant and Sherman chose the politically astute option of attacking Georgia and proving Davis wrong rather than the difficult and lengthy and perhaps indecisive tactical course of chasing Hood and continuing to simply occupy territory.³⁶

³⁴ OR I, XXXVIII, 3, p. 162; J. F. C. Fuller, *The Generalship of Ulysses S. Grant*, (New York: Da Capo Press, 1929), 322.

³⁵ Porter, *Campaigning*, 313.

³⁶ Catton, *Command*, 390.

The fruits Sherman expected to harvest manifested themselves on the many levels included in Clausewitz's inclusive definition of the term strategy. At the highest political level Sherman offered, "This may not be war, but rather statesmanship." The march demonstrated to loyalists, those in rebellion and to the world, the true power relationship between the combatants. "Crazy Bill" will go "where he wants to and the rebs can't help themselves." Sherman attacked in one direction and Hood in another, the difference being Thomas intercepted Hood while no Southern army existed to challenge Sherman. Hood, like Pemberton at Vicksburg, operated against Union communications that no longer existed. This demonstrated the powerlessness and bankruptcy of Southern strategy and the Southern state, as enemy armies roamed seemingly at will throughout "the mere shell" of the Confederacy.

On a personal level all Southern individuals found themselves confronted with the facts of war in a manner no previous events conveyed. Formerly a great victory or defeat constituted something of an abstraction for most Southerners. Even those directly affected by a loss could comfort themselves by finding the sacrifice necessary for the achievement of the larger and future goal of independence. Union troops marching through Georgia confirmed: "war and individual ruin are synonymous terms" in a way a victory in Virginia or a defeat in Pennsylvania could not. Predictably, individual soldiers from the areas transited by Sherman deserted in large numbers and Southern governors retained or recalled troops from national service. Grant's use of Sherman demolished the faith, hopes and wishful thinking propping up the Confederate war effort.³⁷

³⁷Walter Millis, *American Military Thought*, (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966), 159; Joseph T. Glatthar, *Partners in Command: The Relationships Between Leaders in the Civil War*, (New York: Free Press, 1994), 158; OR, I, XXXIX, 3, p. 378.

Capture of Savannah and Sherman's subsequent march through the Carolinas continued the process. Sherman felt the march through the Carolinas ten times more important for winning the war and ten times more difficult than the march through Georgia. The effect on Lee's army accelerated as if Sherman "operated within the sound of his artillery." In a single month (February of 1865) Lee lost some eight percent of his army through desertion. As Grant predicted in his North Carolina plan, that state's commitment to the war proved questionable. North Carolinians in particular deserted in large numbers.³⁸

Grant set in motion other potential Sherman style penetrations of the Confederacy, expeditions that go "to destroy and not to fight battles, but to avoid them." Grant renewed his Mobile plan under R. S. Canby, sent Stoneman into East Tennessee and James H. Wilson into Alabama. All of these expeditions proved a disappointment, ruined by delays and misunderstandings. None of these officers seemingly understood the true purpose of Grant's strategy and the importance of its timing. Grant lectured Canby, who requested materials to develop rail communications prior to his advance. Grant told him to "push forward promptly and live off the country" and reminded him his job was to destroy railroads, not build them.

Throughout the war Grant ably used drawn engagements or even tactical reversals strategically to serve "the object of the war." Paradoxically Grant found Canby, Wilson and Stoneman's clear tactical successes failed to serve the object of war: "they were all eminently successful, but without any good result." Coming too late in the war to contribute to the final destruction of the Confederacy they proved potentially damaging to

³⁸ McPherson, *Cry*, 827, 821; William T. Sherman, *Memoirs of William T. Sherman*, 2 vols. (New York: Charles Webster & Co., 1891) 2:221.

the war aim of reunion and reconciliation. Judging the overall moral effects of the marches themselves remains “incomplete and impressionistic” as Clausewitz suggests. Though impossible to quantify, the positive effects of destruction and plunder in terms of ending the war quickly must be contrasted with its post-war effects on the peace. J. F. C. Fuller found Sherman’s march politically counter-productive, given the war aim of reintegration of the country after the end of hostilities: “Sherman’s ruthlessness and wasteful destruction had a bad influence on the peace which followed the war.” Grant lamented the unnecessary loss of lives and property destroyed when he wished to spare them, for their wastefulness and also for their negative effects, both moral and material, on opponents soon expected to return to the Union. Sherman’s impressionistic evaluation of his marches moral effects on the course of the war remained explicit: “I regard my two moves from Atlanta to Savannah and Savannah to Goldsboro as great blows as if we had fought a dozen successful battles.”³⁹

The “End”

How one destroyed the Confederacy was as important as that it be destroyed—Brooks Simpson

The son of a tanner behaved with a delicacy and consideration as if he were dealing with a sensitive woman—J. F. C. Fuller

There is only one result that counts: *final victory*—Clausewitz⁴⁰

³⁹ Simpson, Triumph, 403; Hattaway and Jones, How, 688; Sherman Memoirs 2:309; Grant, Memoirs, 571; Fuller, Personality, 323; Sherman, Letters, 337.

⁴⁰ Simpson, Triumph, 390; Fuller, Generalship, 377; Clausewitz, War, 583.

Grant's considered waiting for General Sherman's further great blows to generate the effects of further successful battles. The Union quickly approached the culminating point of victory. Time now only worked to Grant's advantage as his strategic combinations ruined Lee and the Confederacy. Lee could not continue to handle Grant, and Sherman's arrival in his rear clearly guaranteed an end to Lee in Richmond. Grant, typically conscious of the political ramifications of all military events, informed Lincoln of his thinking in closing out the war in the east without using Sherman:

If the Western troops were even to put in an appearance against Lee's army it might give some of our politicians a chance to stir up sectional feeling in claiming everything for their own section of the country.⁴¹

Lincoln admitted he never thought of the issue in that manner. Grant elaborated in his memoirs. The Eastern armies throughout the war "were not able to capture an army," and Grant believed the eastern army thoroughly capable of capturing Lee. Grant preferred "to end the business here" allowing the Army of the Potomac to "capture the only army they had been engaged with." Lee provided the initial opportunity. Grant "with his usual foresight had predicted Lee would make a determined assault at some point" in order to loosen Grant's grip and facilitate Lee's departure from Petersburg. This attack, on the 25th of March on Fort Stedman, proved a costly failure.⁴²

Grant used the opportunity to launch a final move by Lee's right, sending Sheridan's cavalry and Warren's infantry to confront two divisions under General

⁴¹Porter, *Campaigning*, 451

⁴² Grant, *Memoirs*, 542; McPherson, *Cry*, 844; Porter, *Campaigning*, 403.

Pickett. On March 31, 1865, Lee hit Warren with four infantry brigades, a total of perhaps 5,000 men. Warren's troops numbered about 15,000 effectives. Disconnected and uncoordinated, Warren's units went into action separately and were defeated one at a time. Ayer's division ran to the rear; Crawford's division collapsed falling back on Griffin, who eventually managed to retrieve the situation. So the Army of the Potomac remained true to form even at the moment of triumph, suffering a significant tactical reverse as prelude to its victory at Five Forks, the storming of the trenches at Petersburg and Lee's surrender at Appomattox. Warren's failure cost him his job just before final victory, removed at Grant's suggestion and on Sheridan's judgment as the commander on the spot. Grant remarked after the war on the situation:

Had Warren invested half the energy in exercising command before his removal that he did in seeking vindication afterward, he never would have suffered such humiliation.⁴³

Grant again feared that tactical or operational failures on the part of his subordinates might delay victory and allowed Sheridan the discretion to deal with Warren. Grant now took charge of the pursuit personally:

I shall move out by my left with all the force I can, holding present entrenched lines. I shall start with no distinct view further than holding Lee's forces from following Sheridan. But I shall be along myself and will take advantage of any thing that turns up. If Lee detaches I will attack or if comes out of his lines I will endeavor to repulse him and follow it up to the best advantage.⁴⁴

Lee bowed to the inevitable and sought terms. Grant's blunt instrument finally killed an army, and killed it just as dead as the more finely honed blade of the Western Armies had killed previous armies at Donalson and Vicksburg. Grant offered liberal

⁴³ Catton, Command, 442-45.

⁴⁴ GP 14:195-96, 202-203.

conditions of surrender, destroying his foe in a manner designed to aid reconciliation. Grant offered parole of both officers and men, “not to be disturbed by United States Authority so long as they observe their parole.” In a bold stroke Grant made policy (as he understood Lincoln’s intentions) and undercut those bent on retaliation or reprisal against their former enemies. Parolees, including Robert E. Lee, could not be tried for treason under the terms of the agreement. Grant required no surrender of Lee’s sword or the side arms of officers. Grant also conceded Lee’s request allowing individual Southern soldiers claiming ownership of a horse or mule to take it enabling an early return to their primary occupation of farming.⁴⁵

In his peace terms as well as his warfighting, Grant sought the political goal of reunion and reconciliation. Immediately after the signing of the peace, Grant attempted to enlist Lee’s support to secure a quick surrender of the remaining Confederate forces; Lee declined. Grant challenged both the harsh peace of revenge-seeking radicals and also the lenience of Sherman, who mistakenly offered Joe Johnston terms beyond those Grant had offered Lee. Ultimately fear of losing the peace drove Grant’s formal entry into the political arena of reconstruction.⁴⁶

The “end” at Appomattox offered no end to the struggle to achieve and implement the aims of the war. As Clausewitz observed, the political lines present during war continue into the subsequent peace. Parties wishing success in war must recognize the necessity to live with their former enemy after the end of hostilities. An indelicate peace

⁴⁵ Brooks Simpson, *Let Us Have Peace*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 84, 106-109. Grant did ultimately threaten to resign to maintain enforcement of his terms of surrender when Andrew Johnson considered such prosecutions. Grant, *Memoirs*, 556-57.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 559; Simpson, *Triumph*, 445.

derails war aims and assures continuation of conflict at some future date, as the results of war are never final. Grant in his actions following peace walked a tightrope defining the nature of reconstruction and the limits of citizenship for newly liberated slaves. Grant after Appomattox pursued the same war aims during reconstruction he pursued during the war. Above all he feared losing the peace through the blunders and malice of politicians or the racism and intractability of the country as a whole. Like Lincoln, Grant desired that “the fruits of victory ennobled the notions.”⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Clausewitz, War, 605; Simpson, Triumph, 446.

Chapter 16

Conclusions—I: Grant's Intellect and Genius

It was common knowledge Stonewall Jackson was the greatest Civil War general—Richard Nixon

He has become the most famous drunk in American history—Geoffrey Perret

He lacked the high intelligence of Lee and Halleck—Archer Jones¹

J. F. C. Fuller suggests Grant throughout his life remained “oblivious of his genius; for common sense is genius and of no common order.” A great many of Grant’s contemporary admirers remained similarly oblivious. Sherman said of Grant, “he is not a brilliant man,” but “a good and brave soldier,” and added “as kind as a child.” Charles A. Dana described him as “not an original or brilliant man, but sincere, thoughtful, deep and gifted with a courage that never faltered.” Confederate General Ewell who upon the outbreak of war feared him more than any Union officer labeled him “not a man of genius” but continued, “He is clear-headed quick and daring.”²

¹ Alfred D. Chandler and Stephen Ambrose, ed, 18 vols., The Papers of Dwight Davd Eisenhower, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 1970.) 4:2255. Eisenhower contradicted Nixon, identifying Grant as superior to both Jackson and Lee. Geoffrey Perret, Ulysses S. Grant: Soldier and President, (New York: Random House, 1997), 203; Archer Jones, Civil War Command & Strategy: The Process of Victory and Defeat, (New York: Free Press, 1992), 229.

² J. F. C. Fuller, The Generalship of Ulyssess S. Grant, (New York: Da Capo Press, 1929), 185. William T. Sherman, Home Letters of General Sherman, M. A. deWolf Howe ed., (New York: Scribners, 1909), 228, 27; Charles A. Dana, Recollections of the Civil War, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 61; J. F. C. Fuller, Grant and Lee: A Study in Personality and Generalship, (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1957), 59.

Others viewed him less charitably. Colonel Charles Wainwright, in command of Fifth Corps' artillery, considered him "only distinguished for the mediocrity of his mind, his great good nature and his insatiable love of whiskey." General Meade identified in him "a want of sensibility" and asserted he possessed "a simple and guileless disposition." Lincoln fought a war-long battle against Grant's civilian critics, who generally coupled their criticisms of Grant's intellect with charges of alcohol abuse:

Our noble army of the Mississippi is being wasted by the foolish, drunken, stupid Grant. He can't organize or control or fight an army. I have no personal feeling about it, but I know he is an ass.³

Grant deceived even himself. Most of Grant's contemporaries and even his admirers proved as unmindful of his genius as he was, as the popular notions and images of genius in war are false; Grant's critics and supporters simply did not know what to look for. Richard H. Dana found him on ascension to General-in-Chief completely unremarkable: "He had no gait, no station, no manner" and looked slightly seedy and "rather scrubby." Dana, aware of Grant's reputation saw "the look of a man who did, or once did, take a little too much to drink." On the occasion of Lee's surrender, perhaps the essential and defining moment of Grant's career Amos Webster commented, "Grant looked like a fly on a shoulder of beef."⁴

Clausewitz's counter-intuitive description of military genius appears tailor made for Grant and explains why so few understand Grant and the "true" character of war in general and military leadership in particular. In war "strictly logical reasoning often plays

³ Brooks Simpson, *Ulysses S. Grant: Triumph over Adversity, 1822-1865*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000), 284; Bruce Catton, *Grant Takes Command*, (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1968), 410, 395.

⁴ Simpson, *Triumph*, 287; Catton, *Command*, 464.

no part at all and is always apt to be a most unsuitable and awkward intellectual tool.”

Grant, often viewed as unsuitable for command and awkward when compared to typecast images of a great war leader, defines military genius. When Grant describes Zachary Taylor’s ability to calmly face danger or responsibility, “qualities more rarely found than genius or physical courage,” he exhibits a similar misunderstanding. In his description of the ability to face danger and responsibility, Grant describes military genius and also himself.⁵

Grant’s knowledge and way of thinking differed from that needed for pursuits other than war, differences recognized by Clausewitz: “Here ideas are governed by other factors, that the light of reason is refracted in a manner quite different from that which is normal in academic speculation.” For military genius “ordinary qualities are not enough” as reasoning for war, given its uncertainty and masses of misleading information, remains impressionistic and intuitional. Grant’s mind operated in a different manner than the “normal” academic Halleck or the brilliant gamesman Lee. Superior qualities of intuition and subconscious reasoning, “Which he often could not explain or justify to someone else,” define Grant’s unique intellect. “He talked less and thought more than anyone in the service.” General Porter reported and “it was this quiet but intense think, and the well matured ideas which resulted from it, that led to the prompt and vigorous action which was constantly witnessed during this year, so pregnant with events.”⁶

⁵ Perrett, *Soldier*, 295; Catton, *Command*, 464; Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 580. Ulysses S. Grant, *Personal Memoirs of U. S. Grant*, (New York: Da Capo Press, 1952), 47.

⁶ Clausewitz, *War*, 113. A. L. Conger, *Rise of U. S. Grant*, (New York: Century, 1931), 273; Jean Edward Smith, *Grant*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), 208; Horace Porter, *Campaigning With Grant*, (New York: Century, 1906), 250.

Clausewitz observations on military ability require new definitions of words such as intelligence, genius and brilliance. As popularly used the words mean something apart from their function in war or in describing warriors. In war Grant, less “intelligent” than Halleck or Lee, not “brilliant” in the estimation of his good friend Sherman and “not a man of genius” in Ewell’s words proved superior to all. In war Grant defined all of those words in a Clausewitzian sense evidenced through the success of the political whole, the only thing that ultimately matters in war. Grant excelled at the logic of war, a logic war shares with politics. Einstein, who perhaps epitomizes the popular image of “genius,” said it best: “Politics is much harder than physics.”⁷

Conclusions II—Grant’s Simplicity

Rather than try to outbid the enemy with complicated schemes, one should on the contrary, try to outdo him in simplicity—Clausewitz

The most extraordinary quality of his was his extreme simplicity—so extreme that many have entirely overlooked it in their search for some deeply hidden secret to account for so great a character, unmindful that simplicity is one of the most prominent attributes of greatness—John Schofield.⁸

Critics often confuse simplicity with simplemindedness or simplicity with a lack of imagination. Grant’s well-documented modesty stems partly from his sharing with others a definition of genius as something complicated, esoteric and “brilliant” due to the mastery of some esoteric and impenetrable complexity. Grant’s example demonstrates the astuteness of Clausewitz’s description of military genius. Genius destroys complexity

⁷ Bernard Brodie, Politics and War, 150.

⁸ Clausewitz, War, 229. John M. Schofield, Forty-Six Years in the Army, (New York: Century Co., 1897), 524, 544.

and simplifies, discards irrelevant thoughts and actions, evaluates masses of information and acts according to intuition and sound judgment. Genius establishes a focus for all information, thought and action, reducing everything to its fundamentals. Fuller remarked on this quality:

He was one of those inscrutably simple men who from time to time appear in history, who manifest at some critical moment, and who being oblivious of their own greatness and desiring no renown, set fire to an epoch.⁹

Simplicity provides unity to all actions and imparts “policy” and purpose apparent to civilians and soldiers at all levels. Simplicity eases fear and uncertainty, cuts through the “fog of war” giving the mind the “freedom it needs to dominate events rather than be dominated by them.” The ability to see things simply and “identify the whole business of war completely with himself . . . is the essence of good generalship”

Many accuse Grant of lacking imagination due to the sheer simplicity of some of his operations. Grant sought simple schemes to get at his enemy and eschewed complicated tactical formulations and so “refused to found his campaigns on a hope.” Lee often based his campaigns on “hope,” counting on the weakness and mistakes of his enemies in order to win battlefield victories. Lee hoped the North would fail to find a general he did not understand. He hoped to continually befuddle and confuse his opponents until the North tired of the war. Grant’s simpler combinations accommodated failure, either Grant’s own or that of his subordinates, and also accommodated the skill of

⁹ Fuller, Personality, 58.

Lee and his highly motivated army. When Grant failed to act as Lee hoped, he could no longer win engagements and he was undone.¹⁰

Clausewitz qualifies his statement “everything in strategy is very simple” to include the observation that simple does not mean easy. Simple but not easy also applies to Grant’s thinking and conduct of the war. Great effort and thought drove his simple solutions in finding the proper military means to solve complex problems of politics and win a war.¹¹

Conclusions III—Grant’s Honesty

The most honest man I ever knew—Charles A. Dana

He was the most modest of men—Mark Twain

This honesty, which I think may be traced to his primitive nature, separated him from ordinary men—J. F. C. Fuller¹²

McClellan and Halleck preceded Grant as General-in-Chief. Both their strategy and the war effort suffered from their dishonesty. McClellan possessed the gift of self-deception. He dishonestly overrated his abilities and belittled those of both his civilian superiors, disrupting the Union war effort. A fundamental fear underlay McClellan’s

¹⁰ Clausewitz, War, 578. Fuller, Generalship, 217, 379.

¹¹ Clausewitz, War, 178.

¹² Catton, South, 389. Fuller, Personality, 58.

posing and exaggerated ego, rendering him unable to genuinely evaluate his opponents' numbers and capabilities. Clausewitz commented on the function of such doubt, regardless of their origins: "the effect of fear is to multiply lies and inaccuracies." McClellan's self-deceptions and lack of moral courage ruined his ability to honestly evaluate danger, as "war has a way of masking the stage with scenery crudely daubed with fearsome apparitions." His fears prevented the formulation and execution of realistic plans; his inflated self-image prevented his working within the political framework of American democracy.¹³

Halleck's dishonesty derived from a quite different set of flaws, although some identify in his apparent jealousy of Grant similar problems with ego. His "academic" approach to war proved incompatible with the true spirit of inquiry and his method essentially ideological. Rather than allowing the events of real war to inform his ideology, Halleck used ideology to determine his interpretation of events. His rules regarding war never changed and remained largely devoid of the incorporation of new information. His pedantry limited his ability to function as an effective strategist.

Grant's essential honesty made for good strategic decisions. Grant's pre-war failures left him with no false self-image regarding his own abilities or delusions regarding the difficulties of success in any human endeavor including war. Grant evidenced none of the arrogance and assurance of an ideologue like Halleck and required none of the messianic posturing and affectation of command required by a McClellan. Grant never took mere image seriously, either of himself, fellow officers, or politicians. Grant "knew that politics were both silly and potent." Silly, in that they often bestowed

¹³ Clausewitz, War, 117-118.

high rank on incompetents and derailed sound military decisions for no substantive reason, but potent in that they define the realities of power and policy.¹⁴

Grant declined to play political “games” throughout the war, trusting in his own performance and the essential correctness and simplicity of the civil-military relationship as outlined in the Constitution. Grant refused to seek undeserved promotions. Grant’s political power and power over his troops stemmed from definable objective achievements rather than from popularity, charisma or patronage. His authority proved more potent due to its origins in real events. Grant took winning the war seriously and possessed the necessary perspective (modesty, openness or honesty) necessary to do so. Grant’s desire to achieve advancement through battlefield success rather than political lobbying reflects his essential honesty. Each increase in rank derived from proven and demonstrable capability. While others (Halleck and Sherman) considered political influence over the army as a concept in itself pejorative, Grant never confused the policies he served (subject to evolution and change) with the unchangeable universality of the influence itself. Advancement for Grant came from “honest” political influence deriving from military victory, rather than the “dishonest” baseless political influence abhorred by Halleck and Sherman.

Conclusions IV—A Strong Mind, Moral Courage and Endurance

Just as it takes a powerful archer to bend the bow beyond the average, so it takes a powerful mind to drive his army to the limit—Clausewitz

¹⁴ McFeely, Grant, 787.

Meekness and grimness meet in him—Herman Melville

When he could not control, he endured—Porter¹⁵

Those who fail to find in the sheer power of Grant's mind a great general, military genius or high intelligence overlook the essential qualities of the skillful commander. None could argue possession of courage undesirable in war, though many misunderstand its origins. Clausewitz finds no true courage exists apart from reflection. Courage itself stems from intelligence, a special mental act having little in common with popular notions of "mere" bravery under fire. "Men of low intelligence" who act unhesitatingly without reflection, cannot exhibit courage in a Clausewitzian sense. Many soldiers possess great physical courage and intellect and still fail at command: "Their courage and intellect work in separate compartments, not together." Grant fused intellect and courage throughout his career until it became "a mental habit" which functioned to "limit the agonies of doubt and the perils of hesitation."¹⁶

Captain Charles Francis Adams evaluated the state of the Army of the Potomac after its failure to take Petersburg: "Grant has pushed his Army to the extreme limit of human endurance." Grant possessed the powerful mind and proved capable of managing "the sense of responsibility that lays a tenfold burden on the commander's mind" necessary to drive an army. Grant got more out of an army than most others during the Civil War. Clausewitz asserted it is such "miracles of execution that we admire." Equally

¹⁵ Clausewitz, *War*, 115. Herman Melville, *Battle Pieces: Civil War Poems of Herman Melville*, (Edison, New Jersey: Castle, 2000), 99.. Porter, *Campaigning*, 248.

¹⁶ Clausewitz, *War*, 102-03.

admirably, Lee also pushed his army to its absolute limit. Less admirably Lee failed to match Grant in using those “miracles of execution” to win a war.¹⁷

Conclusions V—Great Generals

It is difficult to know what constitutes a great general—Grant

I have carefully searched the military records of both ancient and modern history, and have never found Grant’s superior as a general—Robert E. Lee.

He was the steadfast center about and on which everything else turned—Philip Sheridan¹⁸

T. Harry Williams believed Grant always conformed to Lincoln’s strategic ideas, found Lincoln always in charge, and credits Grant simply as the effective instrument of Lincoln’s policy. While Brooks Simpson finds Lincoln capable of “flashes of military insight” he correctly looks to Grant’s acceptance of the wars’ political constraints (many imposed by Lincoln) as the more essential component of victory. Though Clausewitz always identified policy and political purpose paramount in any discussion of war he reminded readers “the political aim is not a tyrant. It must adapt itself to its chosen means.” Though war shares the logic of politics, its own unique grammar often limits its utility politically. If Lincoln (as is proper) defined the political goals permeating all military operations, Grant melded policy and bloodshed into the coherent whole, winning the war. Grant understood what war could and could not accomplish, limiting it, escalating it and ending it according to his best judgment to gain the political aim

¹⁷ Simpson, Triumph, 340, Adams observation is a criticism of Grant’s methods, but it correctly describes his ability. Clausewitz, War, 138. 180.

¹⁸ Young, World, 2:351-52. Hassler, Commanders, 261. Porter, Campaigning, 515.

defining victory. Politics comprised part of the equation of Grant's strategy and Lincoln's policies both aided and diminished Grant's effective prosecution of the war.¹⁹

Lee's evaluation of Grant pays tribute to Lee as well. Diminishing Grant also diminishes Lee. Given the natural tendency to compare the two, Lee prefers to lose to a great general. That both were great and very different often eludes the many critics comparing them. J. F. C. Fuller, a critic of Lee offered the following: "in Grant, there was something cosmic," while in Lee, "with all his greatness, there was something parochial." More properly and simply, each thought differently about war and a commander's role in it. Grant's understanding derived from intuition and natural ability, as well as experience. Grant accepted the political nature of all of his commands and actions, just as he accepted responsibility for military decisions.

Lee's interpretation of the civil/military relationship proved limiting and less flexible than Grant's. Lee, when named general-in-chief of all of the Southern armies abdicated any political role to Davis: "I must not wander into politics, a subject which I carefully avoid." Lee declined to comment on strategic questions as momentous for the continuation of the war as the abandonment of Richmond and Petersburg: "that is a political question," adding "you politicians must determine it." While both Grant and Lee properly deferred to civilian authority, Grant integrated politics within all his military thought. Lee saw himself as an expert executing policy handed down to him, seemingly unaware that every military decision he made also made policy.²⁰

¹⁹ Williams, Generals, 301-311. Simpson, "Problems," 138. Clausewitz, War, 87

²⁰ Fuller, Personality, 113-14.

Grant's inner logic and spirit remained intact throughout his life. That failure manifested itself for Grant between two wars and appeared again after the war reflects less on Grant than on the play of chance and probability evident in all human undertakings. That Grant evidenced an aptitude for war is beyond doubt. Yet even Grant acknowledged that given different circumstances, he might have failed at war also. Grant's response to failure speaks to the content of his character more than any lack of ability. Personal failure, adversity and hardship revealed that character and that strong mind and character drove him to the end of his life.²¹

²¹ Simpson, Triumph, 466.

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VITA

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ABSTRACT

A STRONG MIND: A CLAUSEWITZIAN BIOGRAPHY OF U. S. GRANT

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The scholarship on Grant is voluminous, but incomplete. To date there is no systematic Clausewitzian evaluation of U. S. Grant or his campaigns. This dissertation attempts to analyze both the life and military history of U. S. Grant in light of the theory of Carl von Clausewitz, as set forth in his book On War.

Part one uses well-known events and examples from the American Civil War and military history in general to illustrate the methods and thought of Clausewitz. Part two comprises a biography of Grant, using Clausewitzian theory to analyze and evaluate Grant's actions and campaigns.. .

The work pays particular attention to definitions of strategy, tactics and operations and the use and misuse of such terms by both soldiers and historians. Grant's understanding of war parallels that of Clausewitz, though he never was exposed to Clausewitz's writings, or those of other major theorists.