

# ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

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## Civil War Strategy 1861-1865

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It is critically important to understand not only *how* a war's battles were fought, but also *why*, and it is in this arena of *why* that we enter into strategy. During the Civil War, as in many conflicts pre-dating World War I, a method of differentiating the levels of war—tactical, operational, and strategic—did not exist in the manner in which we understand it today. Most military and civilian leaders of the time looked only at the prospective battle (tactical issues); the education of Civil War officers simply did not prepare them to think strategically.<sup>1</sup> The diagram below shows these key levels of conflict:



*Strategy* is a piece of the puzzle that is warfare, the most confusing and complex of human endeavors, and cannot be studied apart from its critical accompanying factors. The most important of these is *policy*, meaning the political objective or objectives sought by the governments in arms (these are sometimes described as war aims, or what they are fighting for). *Policy* should inform strategy and provide the framework for its

pursuit, but not dictate it.<sup>ii</sup> Understanding the political objective is critical because it determines so much of where and how the war will be fought. Strategy flows from this. Unfortunately, the term *policy* is often used when what is really being discussed is strategy or operations. Civil War leaders often spoke of *military policy* when today we would speak of *military strategy* or *operations*, depending upon the context.<sup>iii</sup>

To pursue their goals in wartime, states tap their economic, political, and diplomatic resources and capabilities, as well as their military ones. All of these are elements of *grand strategy*.<sup>iv</sup> *Strategy* means the larger use of military force.<sup>v</sup> Some examples include implementing blockades, attrition, exhaustion, and applying simultaneous pressure at many points.

Ideally, once strategy is determined, it is then executed. *Operations* (or campaigns) are what military forces mount in an effort to implement military strategy. Importantly, this includes the activities of military forces before and after combat.<sup>vi</sup> While no one from the Civil War era would have been familiar with this exact terminology, they often thought this way.

*Tactics* govern the execution of battles fought in the course of operations. In much military literature the words *tactics* and *strategy* are used interchangeably and indiscriminately; they are starkly different.

Here, our focus is upon military strategy, with a little help from its indispensable adjunct, operations. The available space does not allow a complete discussion of the strategies of both sides, but we will touch upon some key points.

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Since strategy flows from policy, it is here where we must begin. The North's initial political objective was clear: Restore the Union. Later, emancipation, or freeing the slaves, became another objective. The Confederacy wanted its independence.

The Confederacy initially implemented a *cordon strategy* or *cordon defense*, meaning that it tried to defend the entire scope of the Confederacy, and soon had troops scattered from Virginia to Texas. Politically, Confederate president Jefferson Davis had little choice but to do this. Governors worried about Union descents, and the Southern people expected to see physical manifestations of their new government's military strength. Davis also feared that any Union penetrations into the Confederacy, even if the captured lands were recovered, would completely destroy the slave system in the area, making it irredeemable. Importantly, this was a *de facto* instead of a purposeful decision.<sup>vii</sup>

The Union's most important initial strategic proposal came from Major General Winfield Scott. The 300-plus pound septuagenarian general-in-chief proposed what became derisively known as the "Anaconda Plan." Scott foresaw a Union column of 80,000 men pushing down the Mississippi River, severing the Confederacy in twain

while the Union navy instituted a blockade to suffocate the South.<sup>viii</sup> One of the factors underlying Scott's strategy was his belief (common among Union military and civilian leaders) that the bulk of Southerners were pro-Unionists simply suppressed by a troublesome minority. This meant that a slow approach to waging the war would allow time for this latent Union sentiment to reclaim its rightful place. Scott's scheme overestimated the depth and strength of Southern Unionism, and underestimated Southern support for secession. President Abraham Lincoln instituted the blockade, something that became a foundational and consistent element of Union strategy, and the primary plank of Union naval strategy (the South responded by trying to break the blockade with ironclads, while conducting *guerre de course*, or commerce raiding). Lincoln, though, did not support Scott's slow squeeze. He wanted a quick war, and pushed for action. Believing it militarily feasible, Lincoln ordered an offensive in Virginia by the armies of Major Generals Robert "Granny" Patterson and Irvin McDowell that aimed to take Manassas Junction. This culminated in a Union defeat on the banks of Bull Run (July 21, 1861).<sup>ix</sup> The Southern cordon held—for now.

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The Union regrouped and in August 1861 Lincoln brought to Washington George B. McClellan, the successful commander of Union forces in what became West Virginia. Though not yet general-in-chief, McClellan immediately proposed one of the earliest and most far reaching of American strategic plans for prosecuting a war. It called for offensive action against a variety of points of the Confederacy at the same time, and even urged the consideration of assistance from Mexico. McClellan hoped to end the war in one campaign—after properly preparing. The key components of his strategic plan included: Clearing Missouri with the troops there; sending a force of 20,000 men, plus those raised in eastern Tennessee and Kentucky (once it abandoned its neutrality), down the Mississippi River; the seizure of Nashville, as well as eastern Tennessee and the state's rail lines; a move from Kansas and Nebraska against the Red River and western Texas, all intended to take advantage of supposed Union and free state sentiment; and consideration of an advance from California via New Mexico, as well as help from Mexico itself. Most importantly, a force of 273,000 would be raised for an advance into Virginia (which McClellan viewed as the main theater), and then further into the Deep South in conjunction with the forces in the west. Naval forces would support these moves and cooperate with Union troops to seize key Confederate ports. What modern military parlance defines as *jointness*, meaning joint army-navy operations, was a consistent characteristic of McClellan's strategic and operational planning.<sup>x</sup> This initial plan became the cornerstone of McClellan's strategic thought and the fact that the administration never gave him *exactly* what he wanted, or allowed him to act *exactly* when and where he wanted, and under the conditions *he* desired, became an excuse for inaction by McClellan. Moreover, this plan, and its subsequent manifestations in various forms, were all weakened by the fact that McClellan intended for the army under his command to deliver the biggest and decisive punch. In other words, other Union offensive movements were subservient to his advance.<sup>xi</sup>

Both the plan and the outline upon which it was based foreshadowed a later conflict between McClellan and Lincoln: A disagreement on the level of violence that should be used to conduct the war. McClellan argued for light measures against civilians and their property. Initially, Lincoln did not disagree, but as the war dragged on, and grew deadlier, his attitude hardened. McClellan wanted a “soft” war (inasmuch as there is such a thing), recommending “a rigidly protective policy as to private property and unarmed persons.”<sup>xii</sup> His peers and superiors came to prefer something else.

There were problems with McClellan’s plan, the most obvious being the raising and provisioning of his 273,000-man force. This, though difficult, was not beyond Union means (McClellan had more than 200,000 in early 1862). But the most important issue was that if McClellan did not move strategic paralysis could grip the Union, and as McClellan acquired greater influence this was exactly what happened, at least for a time. Executed by someone with the talent for implementation, McClellan’s plan stood an excellent chance of delivering the Union political objective. Nonetheless, McClellan, for all his many gifts, lacked sufficient ability to effectively use his Army of the Potomac operationally or tactically. All of this only scratches the surface of a deeply complex issue.

When McClellan assumed the mantle of general-in-chief in November 1861, he reorganized the western theater, establishing two commands under Henry Wager “Old Brains” Halleck and Don Carlos Buell, respectively.<sup>xiii</sup> McClellan attempted to coordinate the movements of his western subordinates with his so that their advances would make possible his own. But the central issue of where to advance was almost incidental to McClellan and the Union departmental commanders because they invariably insisted that nothing could be done.<sup>xiv</sup>

Union Quartermaster General Montgomery Meigs wrote of McClellan that he “would prefer to send forward any other troops than those under his present command.”<sup>xv</sup> Meigs also identified one key to McClellan’s personality: an insufficiency of what Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz defined as the courage to bear the responsibility for tough decisions, something that may also help explain his propensity for exaggerating the size of the forces opposing the Army of the Potomac. McClellan had no lack of Clausewitz’s other kind of courage, the physical, his bravery under fire in the Mexican War attests to a surfeit of this.<sup>xvi</sup> And he was a man of many talents: planning, training, organizing, but what had become clear by January 1862 was that McClellan lacked the decisiveness Clausewitz believed necessary for good leadership at the topmost rungs. True to Meigs’s assessment, McClellan responded by ordering Buell to advance into Eastern Tennessee.

Lincoln, frustrated and besieged politically, produced his famous January 13, 1862, letter to Buell which showed a Lincoln absorbing the ideas of his military-related reading, as well as his military chiefs—then taking them further. “I state my general idea of this war to be that we have the *greater* numbers,” the president began, “and the enemy has the *greater* facility of concentrating forces upon points of collision; that we must fail,

unless we can find some way of making *our* advantage an overmatch for *his*; and that this can only be done by menacing him with superior forces at *different* points, at the *same* time; so that we can safely attack, one, or both, if he makes no change; and if he *weakens* one to *strengthen* the other, forbear to attack the strengthened one, but seize, and hold the weakened one, gaining so much.”<sup>xvii</sup>

“Simultaneous pressure” describes Lincoln’s strategic approach perfectly. The same phrase fits McClellan’s strategic ideas, but with Lincoln the prongs were potentially all equal in importance. To McClellan, the arm he intended to swing was decisive. Most importantly, none of this pried the Union generals from their stumps. This raises an important ancillary question, one that should be kept in mind in any discussion of Union strategy: If Lincoln was the brilliant, active strategist that so many have insisted, why do his ideas fail to produce strategic results?

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As the Union dithered, the Confederacy scrambled to gather its strength, both in the east and west. The cordon was expanded into Kentucky on September 3, 1861, when Confederate general Major General Leonidas K. Polk destroyed the state’s self-declared neutrality by authorizing its invasion. This disastrous act opened the western regions of the Confederacy to Union penetration—particularly via the Cumberland and Tennessee Rivers. Davis’s old friend, General Albert Sidney Johnston, assumed command of the bulk of Southern western forces on September 15, 1861. General Joseph E. Johnston controlled the most important Confederate troops in the eastern theater. Both commanders worried about the growing Union threat.<sup>xviii</sup> Strategically, the defense held sway.

The Union war machine finally began to uncoil itself on February 2, 1862, when Major General Ulysses S. Grant and Flag Officer Andrew H. Foote moved to take Fort Henry, then Fort Donelson, shattering the Confederate *cordon*. The impetus for this came not from Lincoln’s order to move, or from Halleck, the departmental commander, but from Halleck’s subordinate, Grant. Ironically, Halleck only approved the advance after receipt of an intelligence report indicating that Confederate General P.G.T. Beauregard was coming west with Confederate reinforcements, one that later proved half-false (Beauregard was coming, but without more troops). Moreover, Grant had to ask three times before Halleck bent.<sup>xix</sup> This push, combined with Buell’s drive into Kentucky and Central Tennessee, completely destroyed the South’s strategic position in the west.

This disaster struck a great Confederate nerve, and well it should it have. The South responded by adopting what is best called a strategy of concentration. The much reviled general, Braxton Bragg, in a letter to Secretary of War Judah Benjamin, not only relayed the reasons for Confederate failure in the west, but also proposed the most cogent strategic plan offered by any Confederate leader during the course of the war: “Our means and resources are too much scattered,” Bragg wrote. “The protection of persons and property, as such, should be abandoned, and all our means applied to the Government and the cause. Important strategic points only should be held. All means not necessary to

secure these should be concentrated for a heavy blow upon the enemy where we can best assail him. Kentucky is now that point.” Bragg recommended abandoning all their posts on the Gulf of Mexico except Pensacola, Mobile, and New Orleans, as well as all of Texas and Florida, “and our means there made available for other service.” “A small loss of property would result from their occupation by the enemy,” he continued, “but our military strength would not be lessened thereby, whilst the enemy would be weakened by dispersion. We could then beat him in detail, instead of the reverse. The same remark applies to our Atlantic seaboard. In Missouri the same rule can be applied to a great extent. Deploring the misfortunes of that gallant people, I can but think their relief must reach them through Kentucky.”<sup>xx</sup> He also stressed the need for unity transcending local interests. His later correspondence with Beauregard reinforced these views. “We should cease our policy [strategy] of protecting persons and property, by which we are being defeated in detail.”<sup>xxi</sup> But doing this left the Confederates weak in many areas where they could not afford to be.

The same month, in the east, both Davis and Joseph Johnston began worrying over the exposed position of Johnston’s forces in northern Virginia. When McClellan launched his Peninsula campaign in March, Johnston pushed for the concentration of the Confederate forces in his department.<sup>xxii</sup>

In the east, the South had no choice but to concentrate against McClellan’s forces. But in the west the questions were: Where to concentrate? What should be protected? What really mattered? Albert Sidney Johnston, with Davis’s advice and assistance, eventually gathered an army at Corinth, Mississippi, to protect the Mississippi Valley. Davis urged a counteroffensive, the South hoping to recoup its losses.<sup>xxiii</sup> Concentration was certainly the correct Confederate response, but choosing Corinth was a strategic error of monumental proportions. By doing this A.S. Johnston left the vital center of the Confederacy unprotected. The only thing that could now save the South from destruction was failure on the part of the Union high command. They proved very obliging.

A portion of Buell’s force entered Nashville on February 25, 1862.<sup>xxiv</sup> Three days later, he reported that his advance elements were ten miles down the rail lines toward Murfreesboro.<sup>xxv</sup> McClellan, as general in chief, now decided what the Union should do. He wired Halleck on March 2, “Buell thinks the enemy intends uniting behind the Tennessee River, so as to be able to concentrate either on you or Buell.” He therefore emphasized that it was “doubly important” to hold Nashville and to take Decatur, Alabama, thereby isolating Memphis and Columbus and making them ripe to fall. Critically, he noted that “Chattanooga is also a point of great importance for us.”<sup>xxvi</sup>

McClellan wanted the Union to take Chattanooga, the doorway to the Deep South. It was virtually undefended and Union forces under Major General Ormsby Mitchel were in striking distance in mid-April, but Mitchel’s pleas for reinforcements so that he could take the city went unheeded.<sup>xxvii</sup> This situation dragged on through the spring and into the summer.<sup>xxviii</sup>

Meanwhile, McClellan, after a prolonged battle with Lincoln, received permission to launch what became known as his Peninsula Campaign. What is often overlooked is that McClellan saw his Peninsula Campaign as one element of a larger offensive that included blows against the Confederacy at various points at the same time. He was still thinking in terms of destroying the South in a single, multi-pronged campaign.<sup>xxix</sup> But when McClellan went to the Peninsula the unexpected happened. On March 11, 1862, Lincoln relieved him from this post as general-in-chief.<sup>xxx</sup> Lincoln put no one else in the job and proceeded, with the help of Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton, to do the job himself. The result was that Union strategy now spun completely out of control. Moreover, this happened at a time when the Union had a chance to secure an early victory.

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When he removed McClellan as general-in-chief, Lincoln reorganized the Union's departmental structures. One of his mistakes was to place Halleck in command of the west. Halleck had some talent as an operational planner, but none as a strategist. When he took up his new post he had two primary options: He could drive on Corinth and the Confederate forces under Beauregard, or he could follow McClellan's plan and take Chattanooga and push deeper into the Confederacy. Clausewitz, when advising commanders to go after enemy centers of gravity, includes among them the enemy's army. Indeed, to Clausewitz, this is the most important point at which to strike. But he also says that sometimes an opening may arise that is so advantageous that a commander should ignore the enemy's center of gravity and seize the golden opportunity.<sup>xxxi</sup> Such was the Union's situation in the west that in the spring of 1862 Halleck could strike the enemy's main western army at Corinth, Mississippi, or seize Chattanooga. Doing either would have again cracked the South's strategic position in the west and laid the groundwork not only for the capture of the Deep South, but more importantly, Union victory. Halleck chose to do neither. He marched on Corinth, but he aimed at the city as a valuable point, as a rail junction, he did not go there with the intent of destroying the Confederate army. Moreover, he did this slowly, ignoring the critical factor of time and giving the enemy a chance to extract the army, as well as rebuild the defenses of Chattanooga.<sup>xxxii</sup> At the end of May the Confederates stole a march on Halleck, evacuating their army to Tupelo, Mississippi. They did it again at the end of July when Bragg shifted this force to central Tennessee.<sup>xxxiii</sup> Halleck compounded his failure in the summer by refusing to send some of his more than 100,000 men to help David Farragut take a virtually undefended Vicksburg.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

None of this prevented Lincoln from appointing Halleck general-in-chief. His tactical and operational success stood in stark contrast to McClellan's perceived indolence and supposed lack of enthusiasm for the Union cause. Halleck was given *carte blanche* over Union strategy, but his indecisiveness and hesitant nature soon became apparent to Lincoln, as well as others in the cabinet who dealt regularly with "Old Brains." Lincoln was soon referring to Halleck as little better than a "first-rate clerk." When a leader has this opinion of his general-in-chief it is time to replace him. Lincoln

failed to do this and Union strategy suffered as a result. One imagines his attitude was much like that which sometimes characterized his dealings with McClellan: He felt he simply had to use the tools at hand.<sup>xxxv</sup> The biggest obstacle to Union victory remained a lack of firm, aggressive, strategic leadership consistently exercised. When this changed, the Union, after much hard fighting, brought the war to a close.

Halleck's appointment destroyed Union strategy. He pulled McClellan's army from the Peninsula, giving Confederate General Robert E. Lee complete freedom to maneuver his Army of Northern Virginia, and then failed to exercise his command over the various Union forces in Virginia, directly contributing to the Union debacle that occurred at Second Manassas at the end of August 1862. In the West, things completely broke down. Buell refused to move. Grant's army was left rudderless. The Confederacy was given time to breath, time to plan—time to strike.

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By July 1862 Davis's military thoughts had clearly turned to the offensive. Moreover, he now had two generals willing and eager to give life to his intentions, Braxton Bragg and Robert E. Lee, and in fact, they were already doing so without his prompting. There seems to have arisen nearly simultaneously among the three of them the idea that the South's poor strategic situation in July 1862 could be salvaged only by offensive action. This took the form of a multi-pronged, multi-army offensive that stretched from Mississippi to Maryland. Davis had clear strategic objectives for this campaign: regaining Tennessee, and bringing Kentucky and Maryland into the Confederate fold. Nothing went as the South planned. The Confederates headed north laboring under the impression that the residents of Kentucky and Maryland eagerly awaited freedom from repressive Union bondage. This was certainly not the case.<sup>xxxvi</sup> Moreover, particularly in the western theater, the offensive was plagued by poor operational planning, an unclear command structure, and fuzzy operational objectives.

These offensives accomplished very little. Confederate Major General Sterling Price was defeated at Iuka on September 19. His comrade, Major General Earl Van Dorn, was repulsed at Corinth a few days later.<sup>xxxvii</sup> Bragg and Edmund Kirby Smith forced the Union to surrender some of its gains in Alabama and eastern Tennessee, at heavy cost to their forces.<sup>xxxviii</sup> Lee accomplished even less. He went north and nearly had his army destroyed at Antietam. Only McClellan's failure to act in the battle's aftermath kept Lee's defeat from becoming a disaster.

But was any of this a good idea strategically? The Confederates certainly needed to regain lost territory in the west for supply and recruiting reasons. And a *cordon defense* had not served the Confederates well, especially in the vast reaches of the Confederacy's west, but offensive warfare, badly planned and badly executed, proved no better. Indeed, under concerted Union pressure the South failed even to hold its original territory in the west, and struggled to do so in the east. Attempting to push the war northward was a waste of the valuable human and material resources of the Confederacy, both of which they possessed in amounts far below that of their foe. In the end, in both theaters, the



Confederates were simply outfought and retreated south. The failures demonstrated the Confederacy's inability to project power in a sustained manner. This was also the only time the Confederacy launched such a series of intertwined offensive operations.

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The 1862 Confederate offensive corresponded to a hardening of the Union response to the Confederacy. Clausewitz wrote about the tendency of wars to escalate.<sup>xxxix</sup> The Civil War was no exception. Lee's defeat at Antietam proved the event Lincoln was waiting for to issue the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, which laid the foundation for freeing the slaves in areas in rebellion.<sup>xl</sup> This was an effort to take one of the enemy's strengths and make it work for the Union. It was also part of a general attack on Southern-owned property, for such were the slaves. McClellan had tried to wage war without enraging the Southern people or destroying their property. But in the wake of the failure of the Peninsula Campaign the Union leadership concluded that it was perfectly acceptable, even desirable, for the Rebels to feel what William Tecumseh Sherman later called "the hard hand of war."<sup>xli</sup> Union armies began taking any useful Southern food, supplies, and animals, and burning any facilities of military value. The tempo of destruction would continually increase, becoming an element of a Union strategy of exhaustion, meaning they would simply destroy or erode the South's material and psychological ability to resist.

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After the failure of the Confederate combined offensive, Jefferson Davis sought the establishment of better command and control over the Western Theater. Though he did not like doing so, he gave General Joseph Johnston the command.<sup>xlii</sup> Effectively running this vast area necessitated a leader with vision and decisiveness. Johnston possessed neither of these. He was certainly a very brave man, his many wounds in three wars attest to this, but he consistently proved unwilling to exercise his command. In Johnston's defense was the fact that the situation he faced was nearly impossible to deal with. Grant's troops bore down on Vicksburg, Major General Nathaniel Banks pressed Port Hudson, Major General William S. Rosecrans threatened Chattanooga and thus the gateway into Georgia (though not nearly as much as he should have.) Johnston did not have the troops to meet all of these dangers.

Johnston's most immediate problem, particularly in the spring of 1863, was trying to save Vicksburg. To do this he believed he needed a larger field army to attack Grant, something about which he was undoubtedly correct. Johnston assessed the situation and told Davis that the President had to decide between saving Vicksburg or Tennessee.<sup>xliii</sup> This was a tough question, and one that Johnston was right to push up the chain of command. Davis replied that the Mississippi was the priority. He also addressed what became Johnston's complaints: His command area was too large, and the distance between the primary Confederate armies was too great for him to handle. In Johnston's favor is that his Division of the West was indeed big, comprising Alabama, Mississippi, parts of eastern Tennessee, the eastern area of Louisiana, and small bits of Georgia and

South Carolina. But what grew from this was a running battle between Davis and Johnston over the extent of Johnston's command authority. Davis consistently told Johnston that the general had the right to move the troops in his area as he saw fit, including those of Braxton Bragg's army. Johnston consistently refused take this for what it said and declined to exercise his command, severely undermining the Confederate effort to save Vicksburg.<sup>xliv</sup>

There is also another point to consider: What was more important, Vicksburg, or the army defending it? Johnston figured it out: Vicksburg's army, led by Lieutenant General John Pemberton, mattered most. Vicksburg itself mattered very little. Its fall would not dramatically impact the Confederacy's ability to resist, losing Pemberton's army would. But the problem was that Davis wanted Vicksburg held.<sup>xlv</sup> On May 17, 1863, Johnston sent a note to Pemberton telling him to abandon the city and save the army if Haines Bluff, north of the city, became untenable. Pemberton elected to stay.<sup>xlvi</sup> This cumulative failure of Confederate leadership not only cost the South Vicksburg, but also Pemberton's army (though some of it would fight again).

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As Grant's forces made yet another attempt to take Vicksburg, Robert E. Lee again went north. Just what Lee hoped to accomplish here is open to debate. But what consistently shines through in the sources is that Lee had operational as well as strategic objectives. Strategically, Lee believed that the only way the Confederacy could win the war was to convince the North to stop fighting. In other words, the South had to break the Union's will, thus convincing the Northern people to stop supporting the struggle.<sup>xlvii</sup> This was an apt assessment, one Clausewitz would likely have agreed with. This raises key questions though: If public opinion is the Union center of gravity, how should the Confederacy go about crushing it? Lee believed that this could be done through defeating Union armies, particularly doing this in the North, perhaps even destroying a Union force in the field.<sup>xlviii</sup> This was probably what Lee hoped to do when he crossed the Potomac, and was a complete misreading of what was the best way for the South to achieve this. The best chance the South had of cracking Union public opinion was to protract the war, thus raising its costs (particularly in blood) beyond what the Union populace was willing to pay. Protraction does not necessarily mean the pursuit of a Fabian-style strategy built upon the avoidance of battle, though this is one mode of doing so. Many students of the Civil War forget that the North Vietnamese pursued a strategy of protraction against the United States in Vietnam, but combat was a key element of this. Operationally, Lee's objectives were much clearer. He wanted to upset the Union's plans, throw their forces north of the Potomac, clear the Shenandoah, and feed his army on the enemy for the summer to save Southern resources.<sup>xlix</sup> Additionally, as the Confederates advanced, Lee aimed for Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, and the severing of its critical rail junction.<sup>1</sup>

As Lee's campaign unwound, Lincoln removed Joseph Hooker as the head of the Army of the Potomac and replaced him with a tough Pennsylvanian named George Gordon Meade. In a three day slugfest Major General Meade defeated Lee's army at

Gettysburg. Strategically, what is perhaps most critical is what happened after Gettysburg. Meade let a great opportunity slip through his fingers. Union cavalry destroyed the Confederate bridges over the Potomac and the high waters prevented Lee's army from crossing. Lincoln prodded, cajoled, whipped, and begged, but Meade would not attack Lee's mangled force.<sup>li</sup> In the end Meade missed a chance to destroy Lee's army, a clear element of Confederate strength. Lincoln believed that such a blow landed against the South, combined with Grant's capture of Vicksburg, would have ensured a Union victory.<sup>lii</sup>

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After the twin Union victories of Vicksburg and Gettysburg in early July 1863, and Rosecrans's relatively bloodless securing (finally) of Chattanooga and its environs the month before, the Union gave the Confederacy the most important strategic gift it could bequeath: *Time*. The Confederacy was beginning to succumb to the effects of simultaneous pressure from Union forces. Instead of striking the body, the Union flailed at the edges. Two things drove this: Lincoln's desire to counter French political influence deriving from Napoleon III's Mexican intervention, and Halleck's insistence upon "cleaning up" the Confederacy's peripheral regions. This led to Union moves against Arkansas, Texas, and other areas.<sup>liii</sup> Grant and Sherman also embarked upon what became a Union raiding strategy aimed at destroying Southern resources and transportation.<sup>liv</sup>

Meanwhile, the South strengthened itself as best it could and Confederate leaders looked to recoup their territorial losses in the west, particularly in Tennessee. What emerged was an enormously convoluted and often irrational discussion over just how this should be done. The key figure in this mess was James Longstreet, who composed a number of operational plans that completely ignored logistics, geography, time, space, weather, and any enemy counter moves.<sup>lv</sup> Moreover, none of this debate, which was typical of Confederate operational and strategic planning, did anything to address the key issue: How does the South win the war? Strategically, the North gave the Confederates a breather when they did not have to, and the South failed to use this to improve its strategic position.

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All of the strands of Union strategy came together when Ulysses S. Grant became general-in-chief of the Union armies in February 1864. He composed a strategic plan for ending the war by November that included simultaneous attacks against the main Confederate armies in Georgia and Virginia, as well as key areas and cities. The plan was a good one, based upon a clear understanding of the political, strategic, and operational realities facing any Union offensive, and comprised of mutually supporting operations. Grant also was willing to destroy Confederate armies using attrition if his primary plan did not yield victory.<sup>lvi</sup> An adjunct element was the use of raids against Confederate supply and industrial points.<sup>lvii</sup> But there was a big flaw in all of this: Success depended upon some very weak reeds. These various operational prongs needed good commanders;

most did not have them. As a result, Grant's great plan fell apart almost immediately. The opportunity to win by November quickly passed away.

Grant's plan though, and its modifications, did succeed in laying the groundwork for victory. Sherman would take Atlanta on September 2, 1865, securing Lincoln's reelection, and thus the continuance of the war. The Confederate defense of Atlanta and Virginia would half-destroy the Army of Tennessee, and eventually kill the Army of Northern Virginia. Sherman would also proceed to attack Southern resources, armies, and will in his march across Georgia and the Carolinas. Simultaneous advances; destroying Confederate armies and resources; attacking the people's will; these became the primary strategic actions that brought the Union success.

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This brief overview merely scratches the surface of the formulation and execution of strategy in the Civil War. In the end, the decisive element in Union victory was its construction and implementation of a coherent strategy that addressed the nature of the war, one the North tenaciously pursued for as long as it took. This was in part the result of the critical fact that from the beginning of the conflict Lincoln sought a method for winning the war; Davis never sat down and tried to figure out how the South could achieve its political objective of independence—and the Confederacy perished.

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<sup>i</sup> Russell F. Weigley, *A Great Civil War: A Military and Political History, 1861-1865* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), xx–xxi; Theodore Ropp, “Anacondas Anyone?” *Military Affairs* 27, 2 (Summer 1963): 72–73.

<sup>ii</sup> *U.S. Naval War College, College of Distance Education, Strategy and War Syllabus* (Newport, RI: U.S. Naval War College, 2007), 15.

<sup>iii</sup> The term *national strategy* is often invoked for *grand strategy*, but its use leads to confusion between what is sought (the policy objective) and the route to getting there (the strategy). Moreover, all of the various strategies used are, by default, “national.” I am indebted to George Baer for pointing this out.

<sup>iv</sup> The term *grand strategy* is also sometimes used to describe a major campaign or the broad sweep of a war (William Tecumseh Sherman used it this way), but this is too limited in scope and not the commonly accepted definition of the term today. William T. Sherman, “The Grand Strategy of the Last Year of the War,” in Robert U. Johnson and Clarence C. Buell, eds., *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War* [hereafter *B&L*] (Edison, NJ: Castle, 1995), 4:247–59.

<sup>v</sup> U.S. Naval War College, *College of Distance Education, Strategy and War Syllabus* (Newport, RI: U.S. Naval War College, 2007), 15.

<sup>vi</sup> U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Operations*, Joint Publication 3-0 (Sept. 17, 2006, incorporating Change 1, Feb. 13, 2008), II-2; *Strategy and War Syllabus*, 15.

<sup>vii</sup> Inaugural Address, Feb. 22, 1862, Lynda Lasswell Crist, Mary Seaton Dix, and Kenneth H. Williams, eds., *The Papers of Jefferson Davis* [hereafter *Davis Papers*] (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1979– ), 8:58–62; Archer Jones, *Confederate Strategy from Shiloh to Vicksburg* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1991), 20–21; Robert G. Tanner, *Retreat to Victory? Confederate Strategy Reconsidered* (Washington, DC: Scholarly Resources, 2002), 3.

<sup>viii</sup> Scott to McClellan, May 3, 1861, in U.S. Congress, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 128 vols. [hereafter *OR*] (Washington, DC: GPO, 1880–1901; on CD-ROM as Phillip Oliver, ed., *The Civil War CD-ROM* (Carmel, IN: Guild Press of Indiana, 1996–2000) [all *OR* notes are from series 1], 51/1:369–70, 386–87.

<sup>ix</sup> E. D. Townsend, *Anecdotes of the Civil War in the United States* (New York: D. Appleton, 1884), 55–56; David Herbert Donald, *Lincoln* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 260; Charles Winslow Eliot, *Winfield Scott: The Soldier and the Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1937), 696–97; Theodore C. Pease, ed., *The Diary of Orville Hickman Browning* (Springfield: Illinois State Historical Library, 1925), 1:447–48; Message to Congress in Special Session, July 4, 1861, in *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* [hereafter *CWL*], Roy P. Basler, ed. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 4:432–33; “Proclamation of Blockade,” Apr. 19 and 27, “Proclamation Forbidding Intercourse with Rebel States,” Aug. 16, 1861, *CWL*, 4: 338–39, 346–47, 487–89; McDowell to Townsend, [c. June 24,] 1861 (two notes), *OR*, 2:718–21; *Report of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War, 1863* (Washington: GPO, 1863), 2:35–36; *B&L*, 2:144; Eliot, *Scott*, 727; T. Harry Williams, *Lincoln and His Generals* (New York: Knopf, 1952), 20–21. T. Harry Williams, among others, insists that the Union aimed at Richmond. McDowell says otherwise.

<sup>x</sup> McClellan report, *OR*, 5:7–8.

<sup>xi</sup> For evidence of the plan’s future importance see Stephen W. Sears, ed., *The Civil War Papers of George B. McClellan: Selected Correspondence, 1860–1865* [hereafter *McClellan Papers*], (New York: Ticknor and Fields, 1989), 95–97, 114–18, 147–48, and *OR*, 5:9–10.

<sup>xii</sup> McClellan report, *OR*, 5:6.

<sup>xiii</sup> Williams, *Lincoln and His Generals*, 47.

<sup>xiv</sup> Buell to McClellan, Nov. 27, 1861, *OR*, 7:450–52; Halleck to McClellan, Nov. 27, Dec. 6, 1861, *OR*, 8:382, 408.

<sup>xv</sup> M.C. Meigs, “General M.C. Meigs on the Conduct of the Civil War,” *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (Jan. 1921), 293.

<sup>xvi</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 101-2.

<sup>xvii</sup> Lincoln to Buell, Jan. 13, 1862, *CWL*, 5:98–99; *OR*, 7:928–29.

<sup>xviii</sup> Harris to Davis, Sept. 4, 1861, *Davis Papers*, 7:325; Polk to Harris, Sept. 4, 1861, *OR*, 4:180; E.B. Long and Barbara Long, *The Civil War Day by Day: An Almanac, 1861-1865* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971), 118.

<sup>xix</sup> Ulysses S. Grant, *Memoirs and Selected Letters: Personal Memoirs of U. S. Grant. Selected Letters, 1839–1865* (New York: Literary Classics, 1990), 189–90; Grant to Halleck, [Jan.] 28, 1862, *The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant*, John Y. Simon, ed. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967–2005), 4:99, 99–100nn; *McClellan Papers*, 160n.1; Stephen E. Ambrose, “The Union Command System and the Donelson Campaign,” *Military Affairs* 24, 2 (Summer 1960): 81; McClellan to Halleck and Buell, Jan. 29, 1862, *OR*, 7:571; Halleck to Grant, Feb. 1, 1862, *OR*, 7:577; Halleck to McClellan, Feb. 6, 1862, *OR*, 7:586–7.

<sup>xx</sup> Bragg to Benjamin, Feb. 15, 1862, *OR*, 6:826–27.

<sup>xxi</sup> Bragg to Beauregard, Feb. 27, 1862, *OR*, 6:836.

<sup>xxii</sup> Davis to J. E. Johnston, *Davis Papers*, Feb. 28, 1862, 8:67–69, 69 nn. 6, 7; Lee to J. E. Johnston, Mar. 28, 1862, *OR*, 11/3:408; J. E. Johnston to Lee, Mar. 27, 28, 1862, *OR*, 11/3:405–6.

<sup>xxiii</sup> A. S. Johnston to Davis, Mar. 18, 1862, *OR*, 7:258–61; Davis to [A. S. Johnston?], Mar. 12, 1862, *OR*, 7:257–58. See also Davis to A. S. Johnston, Mar. 12, 1862, *Davis Papers*, 8:92–94.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Buell to Halleck, Feb. 26, 1862, *OR*, 7:668–69.

<sup>xxv</sup> Buell to McClellan, Feb. 28, 1862, *OR*, 7:671.

<sup>xxvi</sup> McClellan to Halleck, Mar. 2, 1862, *OR*, 7:678.

<sup>xxvii</sup> Mitchel to Stanton, Apr. 17, 24, 25, 1862, *OR*, 10/2:111, 114, 125-26; Mitchel to Chase, Apr. 19, 1862, *OR*, 10/2:115; Mitchel to Buell, Apr. 20, 24, 1862, *OR*, 10/2:124-25, 619–20.

<sup>xxviii</sup> Hambright report, June 8, 1862, *OR*, 10/1:920–21; Steven E. Woodworth, *Jefferson Davis and His Generals: The Failure of Confederate Command in the West* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1990), 126–28; E. K. Smith to Cooper, June 12, 1862, *OR*, 16/2:679; Cooper to E. K. Smith, June 12, 1862, *OR*, 16/2:679.

<sup>xxix</sup> McClellan to Stanton, Jan. 31 [Feb. 3], 1862, *McClellan Papers*, 167–70.

<sup>xxx</sup> President's War Order No. 3, Mar. 11, 1862, *CWL*, 5:155.

<sup>xxxi</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, Michael Howard and Peter Paret, eds. and trans. (Princeton:

Princeton University Press, 1976, 1984), 595–97, 617–19. I am indebted to George Baer for this reference.

<sup>xxxii</sup> John F. Marszalek, *Commander of All Lincoln's Armies: A Life of General Henry Wager Halleck* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2004), 123–25; Halleck to Stanton, Apr. 8, 1862, *OR*, 10/2:98–99; Mitchel to Halleck, Apr. [14], 1862, *OR*, 10/2:618; Halleck to Pope, Apr. 22, 1862, *OR*, 10/2:117.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> Beauregard to Villepigue, May 28, 1862, *OR*, 10/1:902–3; Bragg to Davis, July 21, 22, 1862, *OR*, 52/2:330.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> Halleck to Farragut, July 3, 1862, U.S. Congress, *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion*, 30 vols. (Washington, DC: GPO, 1894–1922), [hereafter *ORN*], ser. 1, 18:593; Stanton to Halleck, July 14, 1862, *ORN*, ser. 1, 18:636; Halleck to Stanton, July 15, 1862, *ORN*, ser. 1, 18:636; Park to Davis, June 6, 1862, *ORN*, ser. 1, 23:121.

<sup>xxxv</sup> Stanton to Halleck, July 11, 1862, *OR*, 17/2:90; Gideon Welles, *The Diary of Gideon Welles*, 2 vols. (Boston: Houghton and Mifflin, 1911), 1:113; Michael Burlingame and John R. T. Ettlinger, eds., *Inside Lincoln's White House: The Complete Civil War Diary of John Hay* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1997), 38–39.

<sup>xxxvi</sup> Bragg to Adjutant-General, Oct. 12, 1862, *OR*, 16/1:1087–8; Lee to Davis, Sept. 3, 1862, in Clifford Dowdey and Louis H. Manarin, eds., *The Wartime Papers of R. E. Lee* [hereafter *Wartime Papers*] (Boston: Little, Brown, 1961), 292–93; *OR*, 19/2:590–91; Davis to Lee, Bragg, and E. K. Smith, Sept. 12, 1862, in *Jefferson Davis: The Essential Writings*, William J. Cooper Jr., ed. (New York: Modern Library, 2003), 260–62.

<sup>xxxvii</sup> Van Dorn to Randolph, Oct. 7, 1862, *OR*, 17/1:375–76; Van Dorn report, Oct. 20, 1862, *OR*, 17/1:376–82; Shelby Foote, *The Civil War: A Narrative*, 3 vols. (New York: Random House, 1958–1974), 1:717–20; Mark M. Boatner, III, *The Civil War Dictionary* (New York: McKay, 1959), 176–77, 428–29.

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xxxix Clausewitz, *On War*, 75-76.

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xli Sherman to Halleck, Dec. 24, 1864, *OR*, 44:798-800.

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lvi Special Orders No. 275, Nov. 24, 1862, *OR*, 17/2:757-58; Davis to J. E. Johnston, Jan. 8, 1863, *OR*, 52/2:404; J. E. Johnston to Davis, Jan. 10-31, 1863, *Davis Papers*, 9:19; Davis to J. E. Johnston, Jan. 22, 1863, *OR*, 23/2:613-14; Seddon to J. E. Johnston, Feb. 5, 1863, *OR*, 23/2:626-27; Boatner, *Dictionary*, 241.

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<sup>i</sup> *Davis Papers*, 9:261, n.3; James McPherson, *This Mighty Scourge: Perspectives on the Civil War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 85.

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<sup>lii</sup> Lincoln to Halleck, [July 7, 1863], *CWL*, 6:319.

<sup>liii</sup> Halleck to Grant, July 15, 1863, *OR*, 24/3:513 (two notes); Lincoln to Stanton, July 29, 1863, *CWL*, 6:354–55, 355 n. 1; *OR*, 26/1:659.

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<sup>lv</sup> Longstreet to Lee, Feb. 2, 21, 1864, *OR*, 32/2:652–54, 790–91; Lee to Davis, Feb. 3, 1864, *OR*, 32/2:667; Lawton to Lee, Feb. 17, 1864, *OR*, 32/2:762; Longstreet to Seddon, Feb. 22, 1864, *OR*, 32/2:791–92; Longstreet to Davis, Cooper to Longstreet, Feb. 29, 1864, *OR*, 32/2:818; Longstreet to Beauregard, Mar. 7, 1864, *OR*, 32/3:590–91; Lawton to Longstreet, Mar. 9, 1864, *OR*, 32/3:598–99; Davis to Longstreet, Mar. 7, 1864, *OR*, 52/2:634–35; Douglas Southall Freeman, *R. E. Lee: A Biography*, 4 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1935), 3:260; Douglas Southall Freeman, *Lee’s Lieutenants: A Study in Command*, 3 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1944), 3:307–8.

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