



## Ulysses S. Grant Devises a New Union Strategy

(1885)

*After he was appointed commander of all the Union armies in March 1864, Grant devised a strategy to exert maximum pressure on the Confederacy's armies. Discerning that the problem in the past was that Union armies "acted independently and without concert, like a balky team, no two ever pulling together," he planned to launch a series of coordinated attacks against the Confederate armies along a front extending more than one thousand miles. Somewhere, he reasoned, the Union could punch through the overextended Confederate defenses. Instead of straggling the Confederacy into submission, as Scott's Anaconda Plan (see p. 83) had envisioned, Grant intended to defeat the Confederacy with a series of sledgehammer blows. In the following passage from his memoirs, he described his strategy.*

The Union armies were now divided into nine-teen departments, though four of them in the West had been concentrated into a single military division. The Army of the Potomac was a separate command and had no territorial limits. There were thus seventeen distinct commanders. Before this time these various armies had acted separately and independently of each other, giving the enemy an opportunity often of depleting one command, not pressed, to reinforce another more actively engaged. I determined to stop this. To this end I regarded the Army of the Potomac as the centre, and all west to Memphis along the line described as our position at the time, and north of it, the right wing; the Army of the James, under General Butler, as the left wing, and all the troops south, as a force in rear of the enemy. Some of these latter were occu-

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pying positions from which they could not render service proportionate to their numerical strength. All such were depleted to the minimum necessary to hold their positions as a guard against blockade runners; where they could not do this their positions were abandoned altogether. In this way ten thousand men were added to the Army of the James from South Carolina alone, with General Gillmore in command. It was not contemplated that General Gillmore should leave his department; but as most of his troops were taken, presumably for active service, he asked to accompany them and was permitted to do so. Officers and soldiers on furlough, of whom there were many thousands, were ordered to their proper commands; concentration was the order of the day, and to have it accomplished in time to advance at the earliest moment the roads would permit was the problem. . . .

My general plan now was to concentrate all the force possible against the Confederate armies in

the field. There were but two such, as we have seen, east of the Mississippi River and facing north. The Army of Northern Virginia, General Robert E. Lee commanding, was on the south bank of the Rapidan, confronting the Army of the Potomac; the second, under General Joseph E. Johnston, was at Dalton, Georgia, opposed to Sherman who was still at Chattanooga. Beside these main armies the Confederates had to guard the Shenandoah Valley, a great storehouse to feed their armies from, and their line of communications from Richmond to Tennessee. Forest, a brave and intrepid cavalry general, was in the West with a large force; making a larger command necessary to hold what we had gained in Middle and West Tennessee. We could not abandon any territory north of the line held by the enemy because it would lay the Northern States open to invasion. But as the Army of the Potomac was the principal garrison for the protection of Washington even while it was moving on Lee, so all the forces to the west, and the Army of the James, guarded their special trusts when advancing from them as well as when remaining at them. Better indeed, for they forced the enemy to guard his own lines and resources at a greater distance from ours, and with a greater force. Little expeditions could not so well be sent out to destroy a bridge or tear up a few miles of railroad track, burn a store-house, or inflict other little annoyances. Accordingly I arranged for a simultaneous movement all along the line. Sherman was to move from Chat-tanooga, Johnston's army and Atlanta being his objective points. Crook, commanding in West Virginia, was to move from the mouth of the Gauley River with a cavalry force and some artillery, the Virginia and Tennessee Railroad to be his objec-

tive. Either the enemy would have to keep a large force to protect their communications, or see them destroyed and a large amount of forage and provisions, which they so much needed, fall into our hands. Sigel was in command in the Valley of Virginia. He was to advance up the valley, covering the North from an invasion through that channel as well while advancing as by remaining near Harper's Ferry. Every mile he advanced also gave us possession of stores on which Lee relied. Butler was to advance by the James River, having Richmond and Petersburg as his objective. . . .

Banks in the Department of the Gulf was ordered to assemble all the troops he had at New Orleans in time to join in the general move, Mobile to be his objective.

At this time I was not entirely decided as to whether I should move the Army of the Potomac by the right flank of the enemy, or by his left. Each plan presented advantages. If by his right—my left—the Potomac, Chesapeake Bay and tributaries would furnish us an easy line over which to bring all supplies to within easy hauling distance of every position the army could occupy from the Rapidan to the James River. But Lee could, if he chose, detach or move his whole army north on a line rather interior to the one I would have to take in following. A movement by his left—our right—would obviate this; but all that was done would have to be done with the supplies and ammunition we started with. All idea of adopting this latter plan was abandoned when the limited quantity of supplies possible to take with us was considered. The country over which we would have to pass was so exhausted of all food or forage that we would be obliged to carry everything with us.



HORACE PORTER

## A Union Officer Depicts the Fury of the Fighting at Spotsylvania (1897)

*The Battle of Spotsylvania (May 8–12, 1864) witnessed some of the most savage fighting of the war, particularly at a salient in the Confederate line known as Bloody Angle. One veteran Union officer remarked, “I never expect to be fully believed when I tell what I saw of the horrors of Spotsylvania, because I should be loth to believe it myself, were the case reversed.” The Confederate fieldworks at Spotsylvania were the strongest constructed during the entire war, and at places the two lines were only a quarter mile apart. For eighteen hours on May 12, from dawn until past midnight, the battle raged along a few hundred yards of the lines; it was one of the few times during the war that the two armies engaged in hand-to-hand combat. Horace Porter, who served on Grant’s staff, described the furious struggle at Bloody Angle.*

logs in the parapet which separated the combatants. Wild cheers, savage yells, and frantic shrieks rose above the sighing of the wind and the patterning of the rain, and formed a demoniacal accompaniment to the booming of the guns as they hurled their missiles of death into the contending ranks. Even the darkness of night and the pitiless storm failed to stop the fierce contest, and the deadly strife did not cease till after midnight. Our troops had been under fire for twenty hours, but they still held the position which they had so dearly purchased. My duties carried me again to the spot the next day, and the appalling sight presented was harrowing in the extreme. Our own killed were scattered over a large space near the “angle,” while in front of the captured breastworks the enemy’s dead, vastly more numerous than our own, were piled upon each other in some places four layers deep, exhibiting every ghastly phase of mutilation. . . . The place was well named the “Bloody Angle.”

The battle near the “angle” was probably the most desperate engagement in the history of modern warfare, and presented features which were absolutely appalling. It was chiefly a savage hand-to-hand fight across the breastworks. Rank after rank was riddled by shot and shell and bayonet-thrusts, and finally sank, a mass of torn and mutilated corpses; then fresh troops rushed madly forward to replace the dead, and so the murderous work went on. Guns were run up close to the parapet, and double charges of canister played their part in the bloody work. The fence-rails and logs in the breastworks were shattered into splinters, and trees over a foot and a half in diameter were cut completely in two by the incessant musketry fire. . . . The opposing flags were in places thrust against each other, and muskets were fired with muzzle against muzzle. Skulls were crushed to death with swords and bayonets thrust between the



ROBERT E. LEE

## Our Numbers Are Daily Decreasing (1864)

*After the advance units of the Army of the Potomac failed to seize Petersburg, Virginia, before Lee arrived with the main body of his army, Grant settled into a siege. Steadily Grant extended his lines, intending to use his superior numbers to weaken Lee's defensive line to the point where it could be taken by a direct assault. With his army guarding Richmond's last remaining rail links to the south, Lee knew that if he failed to maintain his position, the Confederate capital would have to be evacuated. As he scrambled to maintain his defensive works, Lee stressed the urgency of mobilizing every possible man.*

Headquarters Army of Northern Virginia

August 23, 1864.

Hon. Secretary of War [James A. Seddon]

Sir:

The subject of recruiting the ranks of our army is growing in importance and has occupied much of my attention. Unless some measures can be devised to replace our losses, the consequences may be disastrous. I think that there must be more men in the country liable to military duty than the small number of recruits received would seem to indicate. It has been several months since the passage of the last conscript law, and a large number of able-bodied men and officers are engaged in enforcing it. They should by this time, if they have not been remiss, have brought out most of the men liable to conscription, and should have no duty to perform, except to send to the army those who arrive at the legal age of service.

I recommend that the facts of the case be investigated, and that if the officers and men engaged in enrolling have finished their work, with the exception indicated, they be returned to the army, where their presence is much needed. It is evidently in-

pedient to keep a larger number out of service in order to get a smaller. I would also respectfully recommend that the list of detailed men be revised, and that all details of arms bearing men be revoked, except in cases of absolute necessity. I have myself seen numbers of men claiming to be detailed in different parts of the country who it seemed to me might well be in service. The corps are generally secured, or beyond the necessity of further labor, and I hope some of the agricultural details may be revoked. Our numbers are daily decreasing, and the time has arrived in my opinion when no man should be excused from service, except for the purpose of doing work absolutely necessary for the support of the army. If we had here a few thousand men more to hold the stronger parts of our lines where an attack is least likely to be made, it would enable us to employ with good effect our veteran troops. Without some increase of our strength, I cannot see how we are to escape the natural military consequences of the enemy's numerical superiority.

Very respectfully, your obedient servant,

R. E. Lee  
General.

Following the capture of Atlanta, Sherman ordered the civilian population to evacuate the city. When the mayor and city council protested his order, Sherman wrote the following reply, discussing the nature of the war. More bluntly than any other commander, Sherman expressed the meaning of total war in the context of the Civil War. When he left the city to begin his famous march to the sea, Sherman burned Atlanta to prevent it from again being used by the Confederacy as a military base.

## War Is Cruelty, and You Cannot Refine It (1864)

WILLIAM TECUMSEH SHERMAN



FROM ROBERT STILES, *Four Years under Marse Robert* (New York: The Neale Publishing Company, 1903), p. 290.

One can readily understand, now, the supreme discomfort and even suffering of "the lines." Thousands of men cramped up in a narrow trench, unable to go out, or to get up, or to stretch or to stand without danger to life and limb; unable to lie down, or to sleep, for lack of room and pressure of peril; night alarms, day attacks, hunger, thirst, cup of water from the spring.

The increased range and accuracy of Civil War weapons literally drove men into the ground to escape the rain of bullets and artillery shells that sprayed across a battle-field. Defending soldiers increasingly fought behind earthworks and other defensive works. Robert Stiles was educated in the North, but soon after the war began he headed south with his brothers and Georgia-born father and enlisted as a private in the Confederate Army. Stiles, who served in the Army of Northern Virginia and rose to the rank of major, described the hardship of living and fighting in the trenches at Cold Harbor, which was a foretaste of the experience of both sides during the drawn-out siege of Petersburg, Virginia, which commenced soon thereafter.

## A Confederate Soldier Describes the Pressure of Fighting in the Trenches (1903)

ROBERT STILES

