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Challenging the "Butcher" Reputation: General Grant's Strategy in the Overland Campaign

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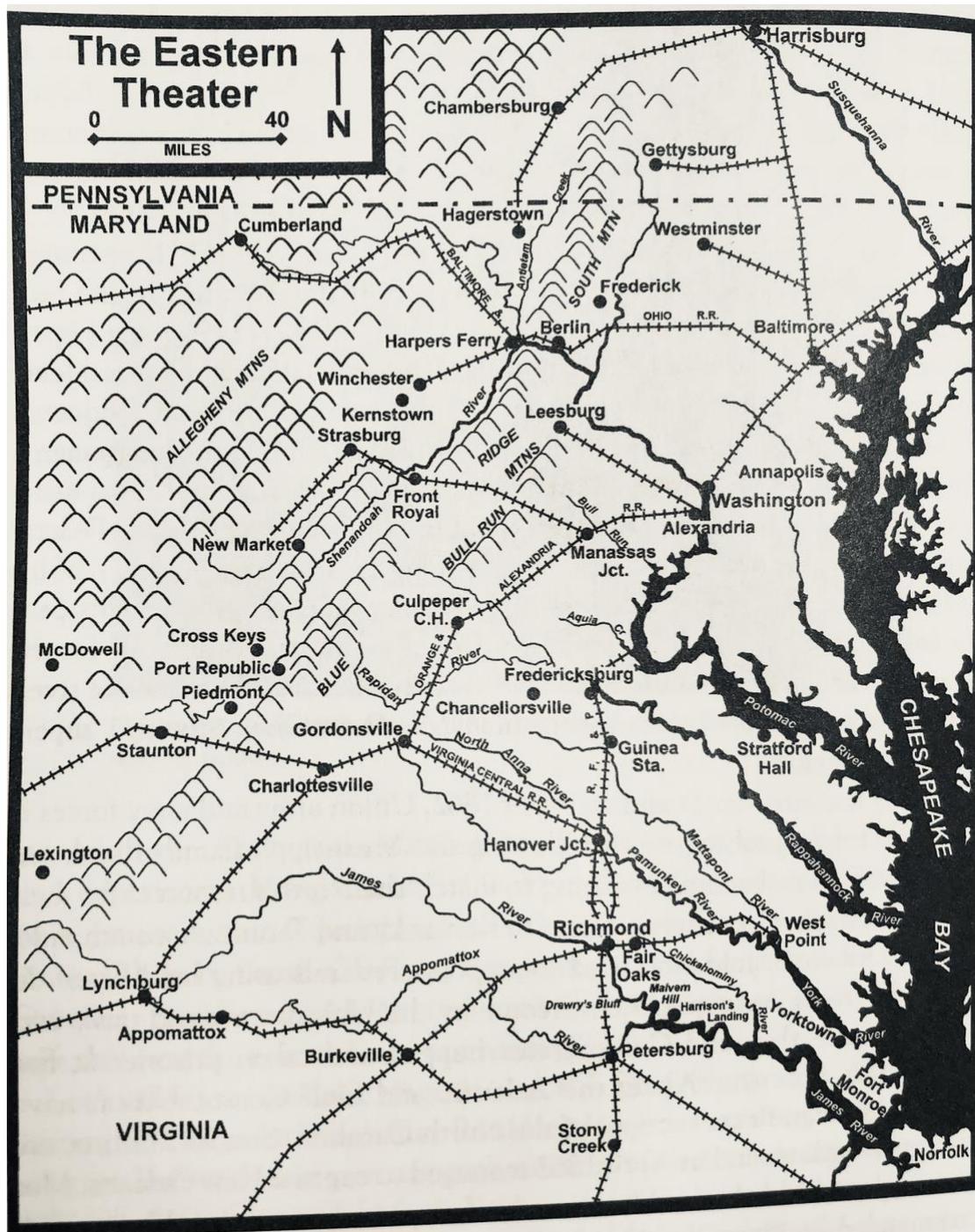


Figure 1. The Eastern Theater. Ethan Rafuse, *Robert E. Lee and the Fall of the Confederacy, 1863-1865* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2009), 10.

On March 10, 1864, as the United States prepared to enter its fourth year of civil war, President Abraham Lincoln elevated General Ulysses S. Grant to the position of Commanding General of all Union armies, one day after having bestowed on him the rank of Lieutenant General (a title previously held only by George Washington). Grant had won fame for his string of victories in the Western Theater. In 1862 he had captured Forts Henry and Donelson, enabling the Union to use the Tennessee and Cumberland rivers as routes for invading the South, and had wrestled victory out of a Confederate attack on his army at Shiloh. His successful campaign against Vicksburg in 1863 had reclaimed the Mississippi River for the Union and defeated a major enemy army. Later that year he had broken the siege of Chattanooga and organized a counter-offensive which resulted in a Confederate rout. His exploits had earned him a reputation as an offensive-minded general who was not afraid of hard fighting and made no excuses.

Yet Grant's accomplishments are overshadowed in American history and popular memory by the campaign that he would lead in Virginia from May to June 1864. The Overland Campaign would become notorious because of its high casualty count--around 65,000 Union men killed, wounded, or missing between May 4 and June 18--and would cause Grant to be remembered as a "butcher."¹ Historians have long debated how much blame Grant deserves for the bloodiness of the Overland Campaign. Some have reached damning conclusions. In *The Lost Cause* (1867), Edward Pollard states that Grant "contained no spark of military genius; his idea of war was to the last degree rude--no strategy, the mere application of the vis inertia... the momentum of numbers." William McFeely makes the same point in his 1981 biography of Grant, calling the Overland Campaign "a nightmare of inhumanity and inept military strategy

¹ James McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 742.

that ranks with the worst such episodes in the history of warfare."² On the other hand, many modern historians have transferred much of the responsibility for the campaign's carnage onto Grant's subordinates. James McPherson, Herman Hattaway, and Archer Jones, among others, detail how Benjamin F. Butler and Franz Sigel, generals in command of armies that were given important roles in the campaign, failed to carry out their missions, making Grant's and the Army of the Potomac's jobs much harder. In *Ulysses S. Grant: Triumph Over Adversity, 1822-1865*, Brooks Simpson details how the corps commanders of the Army of the Potomac, as well as its leader, George G. Meade, poorly executed tactical plans and let opportunities to defeat the Confederates slip away.³ Finally, some historians, such as Ethan Rafuse, place much of the blame for the high rate of casualties on the Lincoln administration, because it mandated that Grant campaign directly against Confederate general Robert E. Lee and his Army of Northern Virginia.⁴

This essay refutes the Pollard/McFeely school of thought--that during the Overland Campaign Grant was an unimaginative butcher whose only plan was to use his superior numbers to outlast the Confederates in a struggle of attrition. Grant's orders from the time period show that the plan he made was based on a thoughtful and non-attritional strategy (attritional warfare being defined as trying to destroy the enemy through slow and bloody sustained combat). Unfortunately, the plan fell apart due to subordinate generals Benjamin Butler and Franz Sigel failing to execute their responsibilities. As a result, Lee received reinforcements and was able to

² Pollard quoted in Gordon Rhea, "Butcher' Grant and the Overland Campaign," *North & South: The Magazine of Civil War Conflict* 4, no. 1 (2000): 46; McFeely quoted in Ethan Rafuse, "Still a Mystery? General Grant and the Historians, 1981-2006." *The Journal of Military History* 71, no.3 (2007): 853.

³ Brooks Simpson, *Ulysses S. Grant: Triumph Over Adversity, 1822-1865* (Minneapolis: Zenith Press, 2014), 306-307, 323.

⁴ Ethan Rafuse, *Robert E. Lee and the Fall of the Confederacy, 1863-1865* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2009).

put up stubborn resistance to Grant, Meade, and the Army of the Potomac. Left on its own, the Army of the Potomac could not defeat Lee in battle, not because of Grant, but because of mistakes made by Meade and his corps commanders as well as Lee's strategy of fighting on the defensive from behind intrenchments. Despite numerous setbacks, however, Grant still managed to achieve a desirable result--to reach the James River and besiege Richmond, an accomplishment that would mark the beginning of the end for the Confederacy.

* * *

After several failed Union offensives and two unsuccessful attempts by Lee to invade the North, the armies in the Virginia theater in March 1864 were locked in a stalemate. The Army of the Potomac and the Army of Northern Virginia--the main Union and Confederate forces in the east, respectively--were in winter quarters on opposite sides of the Rapidan River. Union General Benjamin Butler commanded the Army of the James, which was stationed at Fortress Monroe on the peninsula between the York and James Rivers, and several Northern divisions under General Franz Sigel were dispersed in West Virginia. Small Confederate forces were scattered throughout the state--some garrisoned Richmond, the capital of the Confederacy, while others were stationed in the Shenandoah Valley. By this point in the war the Virginia theater had become the main focus of Union attention and anxiety, since Lee had proven himself to be a dangerous foe who the previous commanders of the Army of the Potomac had been unable to defeat and even seemed afraid of. When Grant became Lieutenant General and took charge of all Union armies, he knew that he wanted to command from a headquarters in the field, as opposed to from a desk in the War Department building in Washington. He would therefore accompany the Army of the Potomac on campaign, though he kept Meade in place as its official leader. Henry W. Halleck was made Grant's chief of staff and would transmit messages between Grant

and the Lincoln administration and handle the logistical side of the war effort. With an efficient command structure in place, Grant began to design an offensive in Virginia to break the stalemate and turn the tide permanently in the Union's favor.

Grant did not have total freedom, however, when planning the Overland Campaign. The President and his Secretary of War, Edwin M. Stanton, imposed parameters that influenced Grant's operational strategy and ultimately contributed to a high rate of casualties. Because the battlezone was so close to Washington, President Lincoln and Stanton constantly feared for the safety of the capital, causing them to restrict the freedom of their generals in the theater. Their fear reached a fever pitch in the spring of 1862 when the Army of the Potomac's first commander, George B. McClellan, took the army off the line that covered Washington and to the York-James Peninsula. Although McClellan kept a body of troops at Washington to guard the city, Lincoln was beside himself with anxiety for the duration of McClellan's campaign. The army eventually returned to northern Virginia, but the experience had traumatized Lincoln and Stanton into believing "with almost religious fervor" that they could never again let the Army of the Potomac deviate from its position of covering Washington.⁵ The administration imposed the so-called "headquarters doctrine" on subsequent commanders of the army: when Meade first took command of the army before the Battle of Gettysburg, Union chief of staff Halleck instructed him to "keep in view the important fact that the Army of the Potomac is the covering army of Washington... You will, therefore, maneuver and fight in such a manner as to cover the capital and also Baltimore."⁶ Later that year, when Lee retreated south of the Rapidan, the administration constrained Meade's attempts to gain the initiative by mandating that he base his operations on the Orange & Alexandria Railroad in order to cover Washington, even when doing

⁵ Rafuse, *Robert E. Lee and the Fall of the Confederacy*, 23.

⁶ Halleck to Meade, June 27, 1863, quoted in Rafuse, 67.

so became impractical. In January 1864 Grant had seen for himself the tight control in which the Union high command held its eastern armies. Halleck had solicited his advice on the upcoming spring offensive, and Grant responded with a creative plan that proposed "an abandonment of all previously attempted lines to Richmond" and an invasion of North Carolina to be launched from Suffolk, Virginia. According to the January Plan, victory could be achieved in Virginia without having to fight Lee directly. The possible rewards of the operation were numerous, Grant maintained: not only would it cut railroad lines that brought supplies from North Carolina to Lee and Richmond, but it

would virtually force an evacuation of [Confederate troops in] Virginia and indirectly of East Tennessee. It would throw our Armies into new fields where they could partially live upon the country and would reduce the stores of the enemy. It would cause thousands of the North Carolina troops to desert and return to their homes. It would give us possession of many Negroes who are now indirectly aiding the rebellion. It would draw the enemy from Campaigns of their own choosing, and for which they are prepared, to new lines of operations never expected to become necessary. It would effectually [*sic*] blockade Wilmington, the port now of more value to the enemy than all the balance of their sea coast. It would enable operations to commence at once by removing the war to a more southern climate instead of months of inactivity in winter quarters. Other advantages might be cited which would be likely to grow out of this plan, but these are enough.⁷

Yet despite its merits, the idea had drawn strong objections from Halleck. Following a line set forth by Lincoln, he declared that the most effective way to attack Lee and Richmond was not by going around him, but by engaging him directly while also covering Washington.⁸ When Grant became Lieutenant General two months later, he clearly understood the mandate of the headquarters doctrine and began devising a new plan that would fit within its parameters. However, operating against Lee in northern Virginia was disadvantageous to the Army of the Potomac for two principal reasons. First, the army would have to use the Orange & Alexandria

⁷ Grant to Halleck, January 19, 1864, in *The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant*, edited by John Y. Simon, vol. 10 (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967–2005), 40. (hereafter *PUSG*).

⁸ Simpson, *Ulysses S. Grant: Triumph Over Adversity*, 251.

Railroad as its line of supply. This necessitated a diversion of manpower, as many Union troops would be required to protect it from Confederate cavalry raids. Second, since Grant and Meade had to fight Lee directly instead of going around him in an operation like that of the January Plan, the Army of the Potomac would necessarily take on battle casualties, which could be especially severe if Lee decided (as he eventually did) to remain on the defensive behind earthworks. Ethan Rafuse summarizes the connection between Washington's devotion to the headquarters doctrine and the casualties of the Overland Campaign, writing, "Lincoln and Halleck decided the Army of the Potomac would simply have to do the best it could north of Richmond. If that meant condemning the [army] to a line of operations that favored the Confederates, bloody battles, and operational stalemate, Lincoln accepted that."⁹

Another way in which the President had an impact on the casualty rate of the campaign was his insistence that Grant keep incompetent generals in crucial command positions, for when they eventually failed, the Army of the Potomac would bear the full brunt of a reinforced Army of Northern Virginia. During the Civil War, both the North and the South promoted a handful of generals to a high rank for purely political reasons. Benjamin Butler and Franz Sigel were two of the Union's "political generals." They owed their positions to the fact that they were from constituencies that Lincoln wanted to win support from: Butler was a Democrat, and Sigel was a German-American. By March 1864, Lincoln had elevated them to high positions in the Virginia theater: Sigel commanded the Department of West Virginia and all the troops within it, while Butler headed the Department of Virginia and North Carolina, as well as the Army of the James. The two men were unqualified--Butler had never commanded an army in the field before being named department head. Yet the President was not inclined to risk the political consequences of

⁹ Rafuse, *Robert E. Lee and the Fall of the Confederacy*, 24.

replacing them especially in the election year of 1864. Halleck saw the danger of having political generals in such powerful spots, but acknowledged that the matter was in Lincoln's hands, saying, "It seems but little better than murder to give important commands to such men as Banks, Butler, McClelland, Sigel and Lew Wallace and yet it seems impossible to prevent it."¹⁰ If Grant wanted the Army of the James and the forces in the Department of West Virginia to participate in the campaign, he would have to work with and rely on Butler and Sigel. As we will see, the two generals bungled their responsibilities, resulting in severe Union casualties.

Before moving on, we must return to Grant's January Plan one more time, as it is evidence against the image of Grant as an attrition-minded general. It tells us that Grant envisioned defeating the Confederacy not by sending men against its armies--which would result in Union casualties--but by maneuvering and attacking logistics like railroads and the port of Wilmington, North Carolina. Grant's awareness of the small benefits of the operation--such as that it could induce soldiers from North Carolina to desert Lee's army while allowing the Union invasion force to live partly off the land and move into a warmer climate--shows that his sense of strategy was comprehensive and not, as his critics maintain, narrowly focused on direct assaults. "One looks in vain for the unimaginative slugger and butcher," Brooks Simpson writes of Grant's plan. "Instead, one finds a strategist...it promised a war of maneuver, not of bloody attrition."¹¹ The idea was not in harmony with Lincoln's headquarters doctrine, however, and Grant was forced to abandon the January Plan and take the Army of the Potomac on a less favorable route.

* * *

¹⁰ Simpson, *Ulysses S. Grant: Triumph Over Adversity*, 290; Nathaniel P. Banks, John A. McClelland, and Lewis Wallace were other Union political generals

¹¹ Simpson, 252.

Working within the parameters laid out by his superiors, in late March Grant started to design what would become known as the Overland Campaign. Studying his plan of operations will show that Grant did not intend for the campaign's eventual casualties and attritional appearance. On the contrary, he tried to prevent bloody battles by basing his plan around attacking multiple places simultaneously. The operation took on its notorious qualities only when it deviated from his plan due to elements that were for the most part out of his control.

Grant knew that it was necessary for the Union army to wage an offensive campaign, since the Confederacy would never be defeated unless it was invaded. Therefore, every body of Union troops in Virginia and West Virginia would advance, each on a specific target. The Army of the Potomac was to cross the Rapidan and move directly on the Army of Northern Virginia. The Army of the James would sail up the James River, land south of Richmond, and threaten the city. Sigel's forces would cross into Virginia and attack railroad tracks and junctions. What worried Grant, however, was the possibility of Confederates using their interior lines to concentrate troops against these movements and defeat them one by one. Indeed, he remembered that in 1863 when he was dispatched to lift the siege of Chattanooga, he had had to contend with General James Longstreet's corps, which had been sent from Virginia to Tennessee via railroad. In order to prevent the Confederates in Virginia from doing something similar, Grant planned for all Union advances to be simultaneous, so as to make each Confederate force--Lee's army, the garrisons of Richmond and the nearby city of Petersburg, and the contingent under John C. Breckinridge in the western part of the state--too occupied to detach any troops. Butler's movement on Richmond, for example, would ensure that the garrisons of Richmond and nearby Petersburg did not send men to reinforce the Army of Northern Virginia, since they would need every soldier they could spare to defend the cities. Grant instructed Butler that once the Army of

the James was outside Richmond, if he heard that the Army of the Potomac was making progress in northern Virginia, he must "attack vigorously [*sic*] and if you cannot carry the City at least detain as large a force there as possible."¹² The offensive by Sigel's troops in the western part of the state would serve the same purpose: it would keep the Breckinridge's men busy enough to prevent them from sending men to Lee or Richmond. To prevent Confederates from the West from reinforcing Lee (or vice versa) Grant's plan called for the three Virginia offensives to commence at the same time that Union General William T. Sherman advanced from Chattanooga to Atlanta.

An indirect benefit of the strategy of simultaneous advances made Grant hope that the Army of the Potomac would not actually have to fight Lee. If the Richmond garrison could not defend against Butler, Lee would be forced to retreat from northern Virginia to save the city. That would result in an easy campaign for Meade's army, which would follow Lee southward and join the Army of the James in besieging the Confederate capital. Grant tried to increase Butler's power to threaten Richmond by giving him ten thousand reinforcements from South Carolina, which brought his numbers up to 33,000. Grant fully expected the campaign to turn into a siege. In April he ordered the necessary equipment to be made ready for use, and told Butler the contingency for such a scenario--that "should the enemy [Lee] be forced into his intrenchments in Richmond the Army of the Potomac would follow" and "would become a unit" with the Army of the James.¹³

So far Grant's plan shows no attritional aspects. He actively tried to limit casualties in the Army of the Potomac, using simultaneous advances to prevent the Confederates from concentrating against Meade. In sending Sigel's forces against railroads, Grant also showed that

¹² Grant to Butler, April 19, 1864, *PUSG*, 10:327

¹³ Grant to Butler, April 2, 1864, *PUSG*, 10:247.

he knew that battle was not the only way to weaken the enemy. Additionally, destroying the railways would make it less costly in human lives for Meade to defeat Lee or for Butler to take Richmond, since the Confederate armies and cities relied on the railroad for supplies and weapons. Forced by his superiors to campaign on a less-than-ideal line, Grant created a clever plan of operations that attempted to negate the disadvantages of fighting Lee directly.

The only instructions Grant gave Meade before the Overland Campaign began as to how to take on Lee was, "Lee's Army will be your objective point. Wherever Lee goes there you will go also."¹⁴ It was entirely possible that Lee would retreat from the Army of the Potomac to save Richmond from Butler, and Grant made no troop dispositions to prevent this from happening (which contradicts the notion, held by some historians, that Grant desperately wanted to avoid a siege at all costs). However, Grant was not averse to fighting Lee, since defeating the Army of Northern Virginia was the quickest way to end the war. After the campaign commenced upon Grant, Meade, and the Army of the Potomac crossing the Rapidan on May 4, Grant was eager to do battle with Lee, writing Meade, "If any opportunity presents [it]self for pitching into a part of Lee's Army do so..."¹⁵ Yet Grant wanted the fight to be on his terms. He wanted to attack the Army of Northern Virginia when it was in a disadvantageous position, such as an open field, where Grant's superior numbers would make more of a difference. Several times during the campaign he would maneuver the Army of the Potomac to a different spot in northern Virginia because the fight was not on his terms where he was. He would remain at a location only as long as he felt that he still had a chance of breaking through Lee's line. The way Grant would move to try to bring about an easier battle would demonstrate that his strategy for combating Lee was not

¹⁴ Grant to Meade, April 9, 1864, *PUSG*, 10:274.

¹⁵ Grant to Meade, May 5, 1864, *PUSG*, 10:399.

one of attrition, but one of annihilation, in that he hoped to destroy Lee's army in a decisive battle.

While Meade moved against Lee in the north, Butler was to sail up the James River with a Union navy escort and land south of Richmond at City Point. There he was to, as Grant put it, "[f]ortify, or rather intrench, at once and concentrate all your troops for the field, there, as rapidly as you can," From City Point, Butler would operate on Richmond, taking the capital if he could, but at the very least interdicting supplies coming from North Carolina by cutting the Weldon Railroad south of Petersburg, and threatening the two cities enough to prevent the sending of reinforcements to bolster Lee's army. Having told Butler the goals of the operation, however, Grant let him handle the finer details of carrying it out: "...I do not pretend to say how your work is to be done," Grant wrote, "but simply lay down what, and trust to you, and those under you, for doing it well."¹⁶ His confidence in Butler would prove to be a mistake.

The third of the three simultaneous advances that Grant's Virginia plan called for was a raid into the western part of the state by Franz Sigel's forces. An offensive in this region would keep Breckinridge's troops from aiding Lee or the Richmond garrison and sever the Virginia & Tennessee Railroad, cutting Lee's army off from resources west of the Appalachian Mountains. Grant wrote Sigel, "you must occupy the attention of a large force, (and thereby hold them from reinforcing elsewhere) or must inflict a blow upon the enemies [*sic*] resources, which will materially aid us."¹⁷ He told Sigel to form two columns--one under General George R. Crook, the other under General Edward O. C. Ord--to launch a raid that would cross from West Virginia into Virginia and make for the railroad. Crook was to destroy the railroad around Saltville, then turn east and follow the tracks, wrecking them as he went, to join Ord near Lynchburg. Because

¹⁶ Grant to Butler, April 16, 1864, *PUSG*, 10:293.

¹⁷ Grant to Sigel, April 15, 1864, *PUSG*, 10:287.

the operation was to be conducted as a raid, Crook's and Ord's men would only have access to what supplies they could carry. Grant therefore ordered Sigel to command a third column that would move south up the Shenandoah Valley to bring food to Ord and Crook when they came together near Lynchburg. However, when Ord was "relieved from duty at his own request," the two-pronged offensive had to be amended.¹⁸ Sigel proposed another idea: he would lead a force of seven thousand up the Valley to "threaten the force of the Enemy" and advance "as far as possible," while another ten thousand men under Crook targeted the railroad and destroyed miles of track and a bridge over the New River.¹⁹ The movement would still serve to detain supplies and reinforcements from the Confederates in the east. Grant approved the proposal and made it clear to Sigel that "[t]o cut New River bridge and the [rail]road ten or twenty miles East from there would be the most important work Crook could do."²⁰

The offensive in western Virginia was meant to supplement that of the Army of the Potomac. By cutting lines of supply and occupying the attention of thousands of Confederate soldiers, it would make it easier to fight Lee. That Grant's plan included two offensives (those under Butler and Sigel) designed to prevent Confederates from concentrating against Meade's army shows that Grant tried to prevent heavy casualties. Even though the Army of the Potomac's numerical superiority made it likely that it would eventually triumph over Lee in an attritional campaign, Grant did not plan that kind of combat. Instead, he attempted to weaken Lee's army in creative ways through Sigel and Butler's movements so that it would give Meade the least resistance possible, saving countless Union lives. If the plan had worked as Grant intended--if Butler had captured Richmond or menaced it enough for Lee to feel like he had to come to its

¹⁸ Grant to Sigel, April 17, 1864, *PUSG*, 10:310

¹⁹ Grant to Sigel, April 18, 1864, *PUSG*, 10:311.

²⁰ Grant to Sigel, May 2, 1864, *PUSG*, 10:390.

rescue, if Butler and Sigel had severed the Weldon and Virginia & Tennessee railroads, depriving Virginia Confederates of two of their three sources of food (the third being the Richmond & Danville Railroad)--the Overland Campaign may have been much shorter, the siege of Richmond and Petersburg started much earlier, and the casualties counted at only a fraction of what they ended up being. To summarize the findings on the previous pages, Grant was not an attritional general, nor did he plan an attritional campaign in Virginia in 1864. He knew that maneuver was often better than direct assault. As the January Plan indicates, he preferred not to attack Lee from the north using a rail-based line of supply that would be vulnerable to Confederate cavalry raids. However, the headquarters doctrine that Lincoln and Stanton had enforced on every commander of the Army of the Potomac since McClellan made Grant take that route. Yet Grant crafted an operational plan that tried to counter the disadvantages of such a route: Butler's offensive was to force Lee to move south so that Meade did not have to fight him, Sigel and Butler were to prevent Confederates from concentrating against Meade, and a siege of Richmond by a combined Army of the Potomac and James would use the James River and not the railroad as a line of supply.

* * *

The Overland Campaign commenced just after 12:00 AM on May 4, 1864, when the Army of the Potomac and General Ambrose Burnside's separate corps--together 118,000 strong--began marching toward the Rapidan River. The three corps of Meade's army were led by the veteran commanders John Sedgwick (who had been wounded three times at Antietam), Gouverneur K. Warren (who had earned the nickname "Hero of Little Round Top" for his actions at Gettysburg), and Winfield Scott Hancock (who would run for president as a Democrat against James A. Garfield in 1880). Heading the cavalry corps was Philip H. Sheridan, whom

Grant had brought with him from the Western Theater. Ambrose Burnside, a former commander of the Army of the Potomac, now had his own corps, which would campaign with the army as an independent unit that reported to Grant. Later that day, Grant telegraphed Halleck that he and most of the army had crossed the river. "Forty Eight hours now will demonstrate," he added, "whether the enemy intends giving battle this side of Richmond."²¹ If Butler carried out his duties well, Grant expected that Lee would choose not to fight and instead retreat to save the Confederate capital. According to one account, he told a reporter that if all went according to plan he should be at the outskirts of Richmond in four days.²² As Grant pondered the future, the Union troops continued marching south, soon entering a dense forest called the Wilderness.

In the ensuing month, the Army of the Potomac would suffer such a high rate of casualties that Grant's contemporary reputation and memory would be tainted with blood. An analysis of the course of the campaign, however, reveals that Grant was not to blame for the attrition. The blame should instead be transferred onto Benjamin Butler and Franz Sigel for failing Grant in their execution of his plan and for causing Lee to be able to fight outside of Richmond and obtain reinforcements to concentrate against the Army of the Potomac. Meade's corps commanders and Burnside letting opportunities to defeat Lee slip away is another reason why the campaign turned out the way it did, as is the fact that Lee stayed on the operational defensive, which forced the Army of the Potomac to assault Lee's entrenched forces. As the situation deteriorated into a month-long battle of Grant versus Lee in northern Virginia, Grant made efforts to bring about a desirable result: he switched supply lines, constantly maneuvered in the hopes of luring Lee out of his trenches, and sent Sheridan on a raid to cut railways to Richmond.

²¹ Grant to Halleck, May 4, 1864, *PUSG*, 10:397.

²² Simpson, *Ulysses S. Grant: Triumph Over Adversity*, 293.

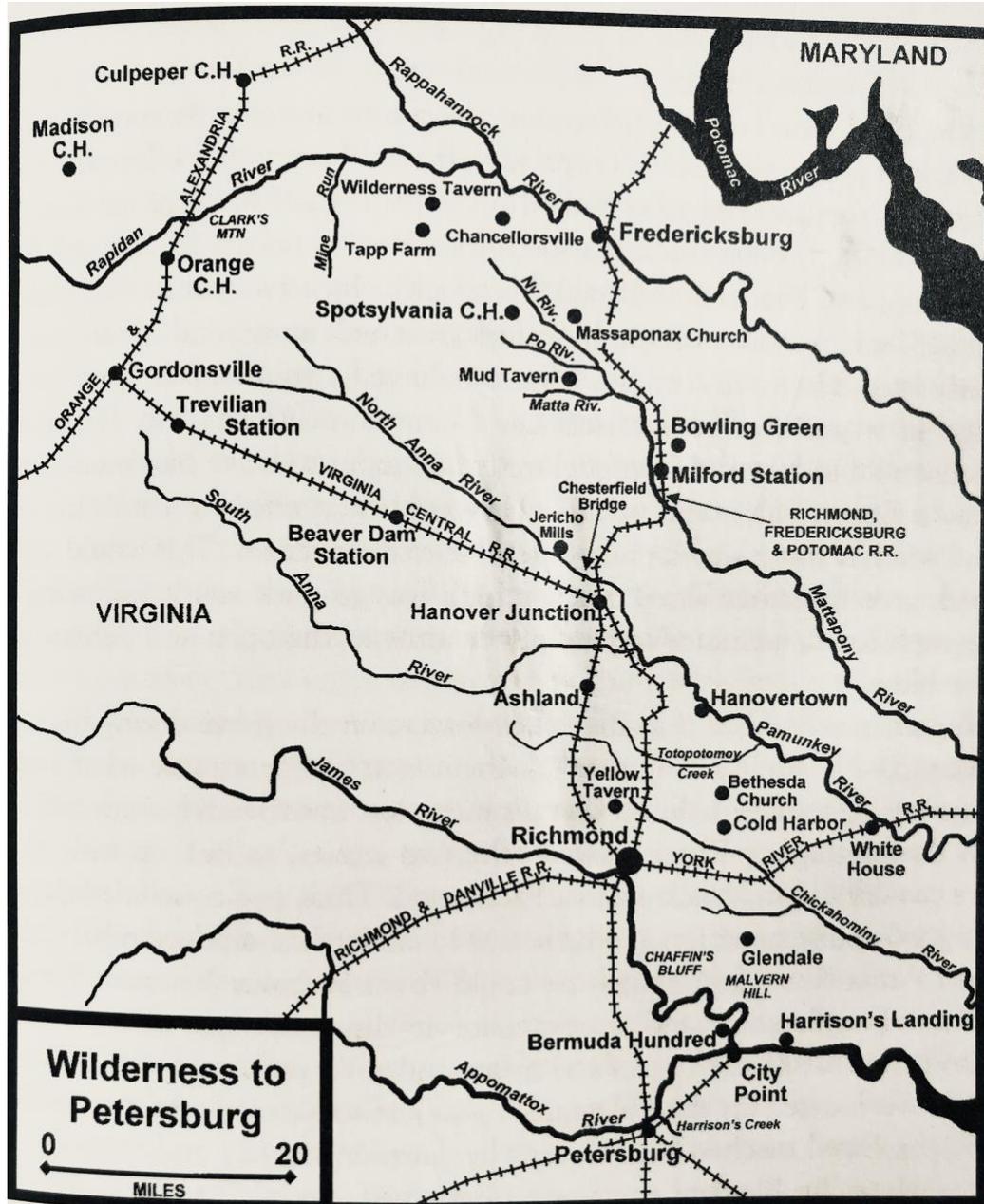


Figure 2. Wilderness to Petersburg. Ethan Rafuse, *Robert E. Lee and the Fall of the Confederacy*, 155.

On the afternoon of the May 4, Meade made two momentous decisions: he ordered the army to halt in the Wilderness so that its supply wagons could catch up, and chose to spend valuable time establishing a line across three roads in the forest instead of making a rapid march to get out of the woods. His decisions ensured that the Army of the Potomac would still be in the Wilderness when it encountered Lee's men early the next day. The Union troops would have less

chance of defeating the Confederates in the forest than on open ground, since the densely wooded terrain made it difficult for Meade to concentrate his army and effectively use his artillery. Yet Grant allowed Meade to have his way because the Army of the Potomac command structure was designed so that Meade, not Grant, had authority over tactical matters. Grant had decided that Meade should retain tactical control of the Army of the Potomac shortly after he had first come east in March, because Meade was already familiar with the capacities of his men, Grant did not want to have to worry about battlefield tactics as he tried to command all Union armies, and Meade himself wanted to remain in charge of his troops. Therefore, after Grant planned that the Army of the Potomac would engage Lee in the spring campaign, it was up to Meade to determine exactly how to do it. Meade was in direct command of the army, with the corps commanders reporting to him, not Grant. His choice to modify the original plan--which called for the army to be clear of the Wilderness by the evening of May 4--in favor of ordering the troops to halt in the forest to wait for the wagon train to catch up, resulted in negative consequences. As historian Gordon C. Rhea writes,

The Wilderness was manifestly a bad place to meet Lee, as difficult ground would enable the smaller Confederate army to fight Meade's larger force on near-equal terms. One solution was for Meade to continue through the Wilderness on his first-day's march. Meade, however, rejected this option out of fear that he might outpace his supply wagons. Acting on the assumption that Lee could not react quickly enough to catch him in the Wilderness, Meade decided to stop there for the night while his wagons caught up. A Union officer aptly termed the decision the 'first misfortune of the campaign.'²³

Grant was always hesitant to overrule Meade's decisions because Meade was very sensitive to perceived attempts to undermine his authority. When Grant would try, as he would throughout the campaign, to manage the Army of the Potomac more closely, Meade would become angry and often lose his hair-trigger temper. Therefore, when Meade told Grant that he ordered the

²³ Rhea, "'Butcher' Grant and the Overland Campaign," 47.

army to wait for the wagons, Grant let him have his way, although the decision proved damaging to the Federal army.

As the Battle of the Wilderness began, Grant received good news from Butler. That day Butler's army had sailed up the James River and landed at City Point and Bermuda Hundred. "No opposition thus far," he telegraphed Grant, "Apparently a complete Surprise."²⁴ The landings were not disturbed that night, and by the afternoon of May 6 Butler reported that the entire Army of the James had come ashore. He soon sent cavalry to break the Weldon Railroad, which connected Petersburg with the Carolinas, while his army neared the railroad joining Petersburg and Richmond. But although he was so far doing all that was asked of him by gaining a position south of Richmond and threatening to cut its communications, he missed a perfect opportunity to take both Richmond and Petersburg. On May 5 the two cities were defended by only 5,000 troops, plus hastily mobilized government clerks serving as militia. Confederate general Pierre G. T. Beauregard, who had been appointed to take charge of the garrisons, was still in transit from Charleston, South Carolina. If Butler had moved quickly, the 30,000 troops of the Army of the James might have been able to seize the cities. However, he advanced cautiously with detached units and did not send his main force toward Richmond until May 12. By then the garrisons had been reinforced and Beauregard had arrived on the scene.²⁵ Butler lost his chance and from that point on the James operation stalled and soon began to derail. On May 16, Beauregard attacked Butler in the Battle of Drewry's Bluff, causing the Army of the James, although it greatly outnumbered Beauregard's force, to pull back to a peninsula between the James and Appomattox rivers and abandon its effort to cut the Confederate railroads. Beauregard then entrenched his men across the base of the peninsula, pinning the Army of the James in

²⁴ Butler to Grant, May 5, 1864, *PUSG*, 10:411.

²⁵ McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 723.

place. A Union general later sent to inspect Butler's precarious position compared it to "a bottle with Butler corked up inside of it."²⁶ A major part of Grant's Virginia Plan had come to a disappointing end.

Butler's failure had extensive consequences. Confederates could now be sent from Richmond and Petersburg to help Lee. On May 22, Grant reported to Halleck that some of the prisoners he captured that day were from George Pickett's division, which had previously been assigned to defend Petersburg, "and there is [e]vidence of other troops having been sent from Richmond also."²⁷ Another result of the breakdown of Butler's operation was that Lee could stand his ground and fight the Army of the Potomac instead of being forced to retreat south to save Richmond. The effort to take Richmond had started out promisingly, since it had caught the Confederates unawares and undermanned, yet failed "probably only because of Butler's bungling," according to historians Herman Hattaway and Archer Jones.²⁸ The campaign became much more difficult for Grant and Meade, as they would have more opposition facing them as they tried to defeat the Army of Northern Virginia.

Sigel's operation, like Butler's, started out well but then fell apart. His forces moved out simultaneously with the other two Union armies. Crook crossed into Virginia, cut the Eastern Tennessee & Virginia Railroad, and destroyed the New River Bridge and a Confederate supply depot. But, although Grant hoped that Crook would advance to Lynchburg next, he returned to West Virginia to await further orders, unaware of Grant's intentions. Sigel, meanwhile, advanced up the Shenandoah Valley toward Staunton, through which ran the Virginia Central Railroad, an important line of supply for eastern Virginia. On May 15, however, John C. Breckinridge's force

²⁶ Herman Hattaway and Archer Jones, *How the North Won: A Military History of the Civil War* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 563.

²⁷ Grant to Halleck, May 22, 1864, *PUSG*, 10:477.

²⁸ Hattaway and Jones, *How the North Won*, 558.

attacked him at New Market and drove him back. Halleck relayed the news to Grant with bitterness, writing, "Instead of advancing on Staunton [Sigel] is already in full retreat on Strausburg. If you expect anything from him you will be mistaken."²⁹ The fact that Sigel's troops had outnumbered Breckinridge's by over 1,300 did not ease the pain of the defeat. Lee could now draw reinforcements from the Valley. Indeed, men from Breckinridge's command later fought the Army of the Potomac near the North Anna River and at Cold Harbor. In an attempt to reignite the Valley offensive, Grant replaced Sigel as head of the Department of West Virginia with General David Hunter, risking presidential displeasure in the interest of military success. He wanted Hunter to attack important locations like Staunton and Lynchburg and to cut the railroads "beyond possibility of repair for [wee]ks."³⁰ Grant also explicitly stated another objective he had for Hunter, writing Halleck, "[i]f he can hold at bay a force equal to his own he will be doing good service."³¹ It would take until June for Hunter to finish making preparations and begin an operation in the Shenandoah, though, and in the meantime Grant and the Army of the Potomac would have to face pressure from a reinforced Army of Northern Virginia.

Understanding the great responsibilities that Butler and Sigel had during the spring offensive and how their failures impacted the Overland Campaign is central when evaluating Grant's liability for high Union casualties in 1864. One immediately impactful result of Butler and Sigel's neutralization was that Confederates of the Richmond and Petersburg garrisons and the Shenandoah Valley were free to reinforce Lee. In addition to that, Virginia's rail connections with the rest of the Confederacy remained intact, for Butler had to abandon his position on the Richmond & Petersburg Railroad after the Battle of Drewry's Bluff and did not even reach the

²⁹ Halleck to Grant, May 17, 1864, *PUSG*, 10:460.

³⁰ Grant to Halleck May 25, 1864, *PUSG*, 10:487-8.

³¹ Grant to Halleck, May 20, 1864, *PUSG*, 10:469.

other railroads extending from those two cities. Instead of three simultaneous Virginia offensives attacking Lee, Richmond, and lines of communications and keeping Confederate armies throughout the state from concentrating, the Union was now only conducting one offensive, which had to bear the brunt of a reinforced Army of Northern Virginia. The breakdown of Butler and Sigel's supporting operations changed the nature of the Overland Campaign.

Meanwhile in the Wilderness, by the morning of May 7 Lee's men had taken a defensive position in earthworks. If Grant wanted to keep the initiative, he would have to either launch an assault or move the Army of the Potomac to another location. Eager to leave the forest for open ground, Grant chose the latter, ordering the army to follow the Brock Road south-east to Spotsylvania Court House. He knew this would draw the Army of Northern Virginia out from its trenches, since the Confederates would now have to position themselves south of Spotsylvania if they wanted to stay between Grant and Richmond. Lee, however, was able to reach Spotsylvania first because he had suspected Grant's move and sent a significant portion of his army to the town as a precaution, and also because the Army of the Potomac's march was slowed by traffic jams between its infantry and cavalry as the gigantic force tried to navigate one-lane dirt roads. Grant was unable to prevent Lee's men from establishing a strong defensive position at Spotsylvania, but decided to try to break through the Confederate line.

Grant could not defeat Lee in the ensuing two-week battle. The lack of success can be chalked up to the underperformance of subordinate generals of the Army of the Potomac and the skillful generalship of Robert E. Lee. When on May 9 Grant told Burnside (who outranked Meade and so reported directly to Grant) to test Lee's right flank, Burnside "frittered away a chance to inflict a major blow."³² The next day, an attack in which Union generals Gershom

³² Simpson, *Ulysses S. Grant: Triumph Over Adversity*, 305.

Mott, Emory Upton, and Gouverneur Warren were supposed to act in coordination "disintegrated into several piecemeal thrusts," which Lee repulsed in turn.³³ The failure of the assault represented a great opportunity squandered, as Upton's force achieved a breakthrough but, due to lack of support, could not exploit it before Confederate reinforcements pushed him back. Brooks Simpson lists further problems with the generalship of the Army of the Potomac. Among them: corps commander Winfield Scott Hancock did not reconnoiter enemy positions before attacking, Meade had difficulty carrying out Grant's directives and required supervision, and Burnside would procrastinate and often acted on his own preferences instead of those of Grant.³⁴ Throughout the battle, Lee's military prowess was on full display. His trenches were in the shape of an upside-down U, which gave him the advantage of interior lines, making it easy to quickly shift troops to locations that were threatened by the Federals. A cardinal rule of war is that assaulting fortifications is tougher than defending them, and Lee's men were secure behind the "strongest...fieldworks in the war so far."³⁵ He believed that he could foil Grant by keeping his army on the tactical defense, thwarting attempts to turn or break through his line, and declining to attack Grant unless a favorable opportunity presented itself.³⁶

Grant suffered about 18,000 casualties from May 8 through 21 trying in vain to defeat Lee at Spotsylvania.³⁷ There are two explanations for why Grant chose to fight a fruitless battle for so long and at such great cost. First, he believed on several occasions that he was close to success, and chose at these times to try to grasp it by sending more men into the fray. For instance, after Upton's short-lived breakthrough showed that the Confederate center was

³³ Simpson, 306.

³⁴ Simpson, 307-309.

³⁵ McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 728.

³⁶ Rafuse, *Robert E. Lee and the Fall of the Confederacy*, 149.

³⁷ Rhea 49; Confederate losses were about 12,500

vulnerable, Grant thought that another, better organized attack on that spot might be able to penetrate. "There is but little doubt in my mind," he wrote Meade on May 11, "...that the assault last evening would have proven entirely successful if it had commenced one hour earlier [*sic*] and had been heartily entered into."³⁸ When the new assault was launched the morning of May 12, therefore, Grant had high hopes. Union troops managed to punch a hole in the Confederate line and capture large numbers of prisoners, but Confederate resistance soon stiffened, and Grant's generals failed to keep pressing. Warren was reluctant to commit his corps to the action, and at one point Burnside crumpled up orders from Grant urging aggressive action.³⁹ Not helping matters was the fact that Meade, who was in charge of planning the attack, did not arrange for reconnaissance and "performed poorly" at this time.⁴⁰ Grant was unable to continue the offensive, and many lives were lost to try to seize an opportunity that slipped through his grasp. The second possible explanation as to why Grant fought so hard for such a long time at Spotsylvania is that he wanted to prevent Lee from sending men to protect Richmond from Butler, who at this point had not yet been forced back. As Grant later wrote in his memoirs, "My object in moving to Spotsylvania [*sic*] was two-fold: first, I did not want Lee to get back to Richmond in time to attempt to crush Butler before I could get there."⁴¹ It is probable that Grant deliberately kept Lee engaged in order to increase Butler's chances of capturing the city. Butler's operation was certainly on his mind during the battle, for on May 11 Grant reported to Halleck that "[u]p to this time there is no indication of any portion of Lee's Army being detached for the defence of Richmond."⁴² Eventually, however, Grant was informed of Butler's repulse at

³⁸ Grant to Meade, May 11, 1864, *PUSG*, 10:427.

³⁹ Simpson, *Ulysses S. Grant: Triumph Over Adversity*, 311.

⁴⁰ Simpson, 310.

⁴¹ Ulysses S. Grant, *Personal Memoirs of U. S. Grant*. New York: Charles L. Webster & Company, 1885-86. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/4367/4367-h/4367-h.htm>, Ch. LI. (hereafter *PMUSG*).

⁴² Grant to Halleck, May 11, 1864, *PUSG*, 10:423.

Drewry's Bluff and realized that the Army of the Potomac could not break through Lee's line. He saw no reason to remain at Spotsylvania, and the Federals withdrew between May 19 and 20.

At the time of the Battles of New Market and Drewry's Bluff on May 15 and 16, respectively, the Army of the Potomac had been locked in a continuous fight with Lee for over a week. Lee refused to fall back to Richmond, dashing Grant's hopes of reaching the Confederate capital in four days. The enemy "evinces strong determination to interpose between us and Richmond to the last," Grant wrote Halleck.⁴³ Lee also held out against Grant's attempts to defeat his army in the field. The campaign therefore saw hard fighting, stubborn resistance, and massive casualties on both sides, causing Grant to be heavily criticized by the Northern public. While many of his detractors were Democrats with political motives, there was no question that the attrition rate of the Army of the Potomac was horrendous. In the first three weeks of the Overland Campaign the army had lost about one-third of its numbers, or nearly 40,000 men, with Winfield Scott Hancock's corps suffering fifty percent casualties.⁴⁴ The enormous losses attracted comments from leading Union generals: Meade called them "frightful," adding, "I do not like to estimate them," and Sherman stated they were "fearful but necessary."⁴⁵ The blame fell on Grant, as he was the man in charge, doing damage to his reputation and memory in American history.

Two colossal battles had been fought, and more were to come, but it would be a misunderstanding to think that Grant operated against Lee solely through set-piece battles. Grant relied on methods other than hard fighting and simple frontal assaults as he tried to defeat Lee, refuting the notion held by Grant's critics that the only thing he did was assault Lee's lines with

⁴³ Grant to Halleck, May 10, 1864, *PUSG*, 10:418.

⁴⁴ Hattaway and Jones, *How the North Won*, 570

⁴⁵ Hattaway and Jones, *How the North Won*, 562, 571.

infantry. Studying two specific maneuvers that he ordered will show that the general possessed more strategic sense than he is often given credit for. When the Army of the Potomac was moving from the Wilderness to Spotsylvania on May 9, Grant ordered the army's cavalry commander, General Philip Sheridan, to embark on a raid into Lee's rear. The cavalry raid was meant to, as Grant later put it, "annoy the enemy by cutting his line of supplies[,]...destroy... supplies in store in the rear and coming up [and] draw the enemy's cavalry after him, and thus better protect our flanks, rear and trains."⁴⁶ Sheridan's raid reveals that Grant knew that to win the war he had to think outside of the narrow frame of exclusively using combat to weaken Lee and therefore targeted resources, and that he was sensitive to the Confederate pressure on the army and took measures to decrease it. The second instance of Grant using clever strategy came on May 19, as the army began to march south from Spotsylvania. In a maneuver designed to lure Lee out of his trenches, Grant had Hancock's corps march far ahead of the rest of the army. "I believed that if one corps... was exposed on the road to Richmond," Grant later wrote, "and at a distance from the main army, Lee would endeavor to attack the exposed corps before reinforcements could come up; in which case the main army could follow Lee up and attack him before he had time to intrench."⁴⁷ Lee did leave his intrenchments at Spotsylvania, but declined to take the bait, thinking it better to fall back to a position behind the North Anna River in order to stay between the Federals and Richmond. Nonetheless, the episode shows that Grant did not rely solely upon assaulting Confederate defenses.

Over the next eleven days the Armies of the Potomac and Northern Virginia waltzed among the rivers that crisscrossed the Virginia Tidewater region. At one point Grant's troops crossed the North Anna River in Lee's front, but the two wings of the army became divided by

⁴⁶ *PMUSG*, Ch. XLVIII.

⁴⁷ *PMUSG*, Ch. LIII.

the river. Lee could have delivered a major blow to either wing, but to Grant's surprise did not, because of a bout of dysentery that had rendered him "able to attend to nothing except what was absolutely necessary for him to know and act upon."⁴⁸ The Union troops quickly withdrew and entrenched, and Grant interpreted the inaction by the Confederates as a sign that the rebels were tiring. Days later at Cold Harbor, Grant would order an assault on Lee's line based on this incorrect assumption.

Along the North Anna, the Army of the Potomac had managed to take some Confederate prisoners, among which were members of George Pickett's division, sent from Petersburg. By now Grant had learned that Butler's army had been stymied, but upon realizing that it was not keeping reinforcements from Lee, he knew that it could be put to better use if sent to the Army of the Potomac. He stated to Halleck, "[t]he force under Genl Butler is not detaining ten thousand (10,000) men in Richmond, and are not even keeping the road south of the city cut—Under these circumstances I think it advisable to have all the of it here except enough to keep a foothold at City Point[.]"⁴⁹ Halleck agreed and sent two inspectors to the Army of the James to determine how many men could be sent to Grant. In the meantime he kept forwarding reinforcements from Washington and the Northern states. Sigel's defeat in the Shenandoah Valley allowed Lee to be reinforced by John C. Breckinridge's troops, as well. Grant's original plan for the Overland Campaign had officially fallen apart. Butler and Sigel had not accomplished the goals of their operations and were letting the enemy concentrate against the Army of the Potomac.

After he was forced back across the North Anna, Grant sidled along the river's north bank, moving south and east toward the Virginia coast, where he had established a new base of supplies at White House. Lee kept his army between Grant and Richmond all the while. On May

⁴⁸ Rafuse, *Robert E. Lee and the Fall of the Confederacy*, 158.

⁴⁹ Grant to Halleck, May 22, 1864, *PUSG*, 10:477.

29, the two armies skirmished at Totopotomoy Creek, but Grant decided to continue to move southeast. Two days later, Lee reaped further rewards from Butler's failure, as he gained reinforcements under Confederate general Robert F. Hoke from Richmond. The Army of the Potomac and the Army of Northern Virginia approached the crossroads of Cold Harbor. Lee wanted to seize the junction in order to block Grant from marching further, and Grant wanted to take it in order to get closer to Richmond and Butler's army (which he still hoped to join, as his original campaign plan had called for), so the two armies raced to the town. Lee's men got there first, but were driven off by Sheridan's cavalry on May 31. Grant told Sheridan to dig in and hurried reinforcements to the scene. The Sixth corps of the Army of the Potomac arrived the next morning, and the soldiers that Grant had requested from Butler's army appeared after that. The Battle of Cold Harbor had begun.

Cold Harbor is a favorite subject for people who maintain that Grant was an unskilled and inhumane general. They state that it was the most one-sided Union repulse since Fredericksburg (which it was), and quote Gideon Willes, secretary of the Union navy, who after the battle wrote in his diary that "[w]e have had severe slaughter" and that "[b]rave men have been killed and maimed most fearfully."⁵⁰ Even Grant himself stated in his memoirs twenty-one years later that "I have always regretted that the last assault at Cold Harbor was ever made."⁵¹ However, while it is true that the battle resulted in a Union defeat, and that Grant is partly to blame (as he was the one who ordered the infamous June 3 assault), a review of more information will stop us from concluding that Grant was a "butcher" at Cold Harbor.

Grant went into the battle believing that the Confederates were too exhausted to put up a fight. He had seen Lee decline to attack Hancock's corps when it had been vulnerable after

⁵⁰ Simpson, *Ulysses S. Grant: Triumph Over Adversity*, 331.

⁵¹ *PMUSG*, Ch LV.

Spotsylvania, and remembered that Lee had passed up an opportunity to deliver a major blow to the Army of the Potomac when Grant had mistakenly divided it across the North Anna. "Lee's Army is really whipped," he had written Halleck on May 26:

The prisoners we now take show it, and the actions of his Army shows it unmistakably. A battle with them outside of intrenchments, cannot be had. Our men feel that they have gained morale over the enemy and attack with confidence. I may be mistaken but I feel that our success over Lee's Army is already insured.⁵²

It turned out, however, that the Confederates still had fight left in them, but Grant missed the signs pointing to this being the case (the significance of Lee's men having the will to make repeated counter attacks during a Union assault on June 1, for example, was lost on him). At least some of the blame for the losses at the Battle of Cold Harbor, however, must also be put on Meade, who was in charge of planning the major offensive scheduled for June 3. While one could argue that Grant was careless in giving Meade total responsibility for the offensive, Meade was remiss in his preparations. He "issued no overall attack order, leaving his corps commanders to plan their advance and reconnoiter the ground," Brooks Simpson writes. "Inevitably this resulted in a failure to coordinate assault columns... Corps commanders failed to conduct adequate reconnaissance, leaving the enemy position terra incognita."⁵³ A final qualification that must be mentioned when discussing the battle is that on the morning of the June 3 Union assault on Confederate fortifications, Grant explicitly told Meade that "[t]he moment it becomes certain that an assault cannot succeed suspend the offensive." "But," he added, "when one does succeed push it vigorously & if necessary pile in the troops at the successful point."⁵⁴ This sentence nicely sums up Grant's strategy during the Overland Campaign, as well as his way of waging war. He was characteristically aggressive, and did not hesitate to attack the enemy (unlike some

⁵² Grant to Halleck, May 26, 1864, *PUSG*, 10:491.

⁵³ Simpson, *Ulysses S. Grant: Triumph Over Adversity*, 324.

⁵⁴ Grant to Meade, June 3, 1864, *PUSG*, 11:14.

other commanders, who were overly cautious, like McClellan). He knew that fighting and dying had to occur for a war to be won, but would only condone it when it got results--if an offensive did not succeed he would call it off. If his strategy was one of attrition, Grant would not necessarily pull his troops out if they were unable to break through enemy lines, because he would be trying to simply kill Confederates, and if the casualty rate among both sides was tolerable he would keep his men engaged. Grant's order to Meade conveys that he did not base the assault on June 3 on attrition.

Yet even so, the assault was notoriously bloody. It began at 4:30 A.M., but Grant ordered Meade to call it off at 12:30 P.M. as it became clear that the Army of the Potomac could not succeed. Meade's army suffered 7,000 casualties--the Confederates, who fought from behind earthworks, fewer than 1,500. The repulse caused the Army of the Potomac to lose its will to make any more attacks, something historian James McPherson terms "Cold Harbor syndrome" (it would later undermine Grant's attempt to capture Petersburg by causing the Union troops to advance halfheartedly). "I think Grant has had his eyes opened, and is willing to admit now that Virginia and Lee's army is not Tennessee and Bragg's army," Meade wrote after Cold Harbor. The battle would forever be an undeserved black mark on Grant's legacy.

Grant had so far been unable to defeat Lee, and had gotten within ten miles of Richmond only with hard fighting and high casualties. This did not have to be the case, however. If events had turned out differently at several points during the campaign, he might have been able to rout Lee's army, enabling him to get his army as close to Richmond as it was now without so much carnage. If Meade had not ordered the Army of the Potomac to wait in the Wilderness for the wagons to catch up, if the Federals had not gotten slowed by a traffic jam and had beaten Lee to

Spotsylvania, if the May 10 of May 12 Union assaults at Spotsylvania had been successful--then maybe Grant could have ended the war earlier and not have a controversial reputation.

In the days following the June 3 assault, the two armies remained at Cold Harbor, shelling each others' positions with artillery. While the Confederates made one or two unsuccessful forays, the Union troops stayed in their trenches. Grant, realizing that Lee was committed to fighting on the defensive from behind earthworks, decided to stop trying to maneuver Lee into an open field or defeat him in battle. As he wrote 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 [*sic*] on the offensive immediately in front of them and where, in case of repulse, they can instantly retire behind them. Without a greater sacrifice of human life than I am willing to make all cannot be accomplished that I had designed outside of the City.⁵⁵

Since he could not defeat Lee, Grant now planned to transfer the Army of the Potomac to the south side of the James River and launch a surprise attack on Petersburg. The river crossing on June 14- 15 went off without a hitch and has been dubbed "a military masterpiece," yet Meade was unable to take Petersburg due to mistakes by his corps commanders (especially Hancock), Cold Harbor syndrome among his men, and the solid effort of the city's defenders.⁵⁶ Lee's army soon arrived to strengthen the garrison and Grant called off the Union offensive, ordering the Army of the Potomac to dig in for a siege. The Overland Campaign was over.

* * *

Ulysses S. Grant did not base his spring 1864 Virginia offensive on a strategy of attrition. The January Plan shows that he wanted to operate against Lee indirectly by maneuvering against Confederate logistics. However, the headquarters doctrine imposed by Lincoln and Stanton made

⁵⁵ Grant to Halleck, June 5, 1864, *PUSG*, 11:19

⁵⁶ Simpson, *Ulysses S. Grant, Triumph Over Adversity*, 337.

this plan impracticable. Instead, Grant and the Army of the Potomac would have to advance overland beginning in northern Virginia, and fight Lee directly. The line that Grant was forced to operate on favored the Confederates because Grant had to detach men to guard the Orange & Alexandria Railroad and if Lee chose to take a defensive approach and declined to leave the cover of entrenchments, Grant would have to assault him, which would result in casualties.

Grant designed a campaign plan that tried to neutralize the drawbacks of the overland route. Butler's simultaneous advance on Richmond would hopefully cause Lee to retreat and allow the Army of the Potomac to march to Richmond uncontested, and Sigel's movements in western Virginia would cut Lee off from crucial supplies. Both advances would also serve to keep the Confederates from concentrating against the Army of the Potomac. The plan was not attritional, but aimed to overwhelm and exhaust the Army of Northern Virginia by attacking the army itself, its logistics, and its capital city all at the same time. Unfortunately, Butler and Sigel were incompetent political generals and bungled their parts of the plan. Butler was defeated in the Battle of Drewry's Bluff and his army was pinned in place and rendered impotent, while Sigel was routed in the Battle of New Market, which caused the Union operations Department of West Virginia to flounder for weeks. As a result of these setbacks, Confederates from the Shenandoah Valley, Richmond, and Petersburg reinforced Lee's army, and Lee was able to wage a protracted fight with Grant since Richmond was no longer in danger.

Grant was unable to defeat Lee in the Wilderness because the dense forest nullified Grant's numerical superiority. Meade's control over the tactical side of the campaign led to consequential decisions--like stopping to let the supply wagons catch up--and sometimes resulted in Grant's orders not being executed well. At Spotsylvania, the Army of the Potomac was stymied by the bungling of its corps commanders, as well as by Lee's entrenchments. Grant only

pressed the attack as long as he did because he thought he could break through and to make sure that Lee did not detach men to counter Butler. When Grant realized that he could not defeat Lee at Spotsylvania, though, he maneuvered his army in the hopes of luring Lee into the open. The June 3 Cold Harbor assault was based on Grant's assumption that the Army of Northern Virginia was "whipped" and ready to break when attacked. Although it was a poor decision on Grant's part to call for a charge on Confederate entrenchments, Meade's failure to make sufficient preparations ensured the assault was doomed. To his credit, though, Grant did not make further attempts to defeat Lee in battle, as it would have required a greater sacrifice in human life than he was willing to make.

Grant was one of the most skilled generals of the Civil War. Throughout the first three years of fighting, he earned a reputation as an offensive-minded general who was adept at maneuver and got results. The Overland Campaign tainted his reputation, however, and created an image of Grant as a butcher who deliberately sacrificed tens of thousands of Union soldiers in an effort to bleed Lee into submission. Studying Grant's plans and the course of the campaign shows that this popular impression is incorrect and undeserved.

The Overland Campaign also had far-reaching effects. During Reconstruction, Northern politicians cited the heavy loss of life in the Civil War to press for concrete changes to American society that would make sure the war was not fought in vain. The notion that Grant based the campaign on a strategy of attrition helped give rise to the Lost Cause ideology, which maintains that the North was able to win only because its superior manpower overwhelmed the Confederacy. It is therefore important that historians work to represent Grant in the most accurate way possible, because the way he is portrayed can make the average person draw conclusions that affect the way they see the entire war. Two conclusions that can be gathered

from an analysis of Grant's strategy are that in a democratic society war is influenced by politics--as evinced by the impact that political generals and the headquarters doctrine had on the Overland Campaign--and that the attrition in Virginia in 1864 was not planned, but was instead the result of plans going awry.

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