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GRANT'S EMERGANCE AS A STRATEGIC LEADER

JULY, 1863, TO MARCH, 1864

by

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Preface

This paper was years in the making and sprang from two questions. The first has to do with the relationship between Grant and Lincoln and how it developed. I have long thought that the teaming of Abraham Lincoln and Ulysses S. Grant was one of the keys to success in the American Civil War. Until this year I had not spent any time researching and thinking about how that relationship happened.

The second question had to do with how Grant became the great strategic thinker that he was at the end of the war. Did he have a solid grasp of strategy as a brigadier general? I had a feeling that he developed his strategic skills but, again, had not been able to devote any serious study to it.

Researching and thinking about this subject has been a joy. I have found Grant to be a commander of heroic proportion and confirmed my opinion that Lincoln was one of the greatest leaders to be produced by the nation. If the value of historical biography is to gain inspiration for the present and future from the perseverance of others in the face of insurmountable odds, I need look no further for my inspiration.

I wish to thank Dr. Howard Hensel for his patient guidance and inspirational course on the strategies of the Civil War. I would also like to thank my parents for awakening an interest in the Civil War in me and for taking me to all those battlefields.. And finally, thanks to Sally, Andrew, and Rob for your patience in listening to all those anecdotes about Grant. You've been good sports.

Abstract

This paper looks at Ulysses S. Grant's development as a strategic leader with emphasis on the time period July, 1863, to March, 1864. It has a dual focus. The first is an examination of Grant's growth as a strategic thinker. The second is on the opening of opportunity for Grant to become a leader at the strategic level. The paper is written chronologically, with both subjects interwoven.

Bruce Catton, Lloyd Lewis, Carl Sandburg, and T. Harry Williams wrote the primary sources used in research and provided a good balance of "Grant-centric" and "Lincoln-centric" views. Whenever possible, *The Official Records of the Rebellion* were used. Care was taken to use source material written during the Civil War. Sherman's war time views of Grant's abilities carry more weight in this paper than what he wrote after the war. Similarly, Grant's *Memoirs* were read with a jaundiced eye.

The findings of the research are laid out in the body of the paper. Grant's career is reviewed in order to show a steady progression of ability. There is also a noticeable maturation in Grant's strategic thinking that can be seen in the period highlighted. Finally, incidents are examined in which Grant proved himself to President Lincoln to be a perceptive, adept actor in the politics of high level command, earning Lincoln's trust and confidence.

The conclusion of the paper is that just when the nation called for him, Grant had developed the essential skills for the job of general-in-chief.

Chapter 1

Introduction

Grant is the first general I have had. You know how it has been with all the rest. As soon as I put a man in command of the army, he'd come to me with a plan of campaign and about as much to say, "Now, I don't believe I can do it, but if you say so, I'll try it on," and so put the responsibility of success or failure on me. They all wanted me to be the General. Now it isn't so with Grant. He hasn't told me what his plans are. I don't know and I don't want to know. I am glad to find a man that can go ahead without me.

Abraham Lincoln

The American Civil War provides an abundance of examples of the rising of men to face seemingly insurmountable challenges. One of the most intriguing stories of that war is the search by President Abraham Lincoln for a military commander who could develop and execute a war-winning strategy. Several generals of promise tried and failed. The man who emerged as the supreme military strategist of the war was certainly not one that anyone would have predicted at the beginning of the war. The story of his development during the crucial period of July, 1863, to March, 1864, is the subject of this paper.

Military strategy is a subset of national, or grand strategy. Grand strategy has the goal of mobilizing and applying the national resources to attain the national objectives. The national military strategy is blended with other non-military strategies to accomplish the grand strategy. It is conducted at the national level.

During the Civil War, the role of chief military strategist was embodied in the position of general-in-chief. At the beginning of the war, venerable Winfield Scott was the general-in-chief. Scott was an American hero in the War of 1812 and the War with Mexico. He developed and articulated the Union's strategy for the beginning of the war in the form of the Anaconda Plan. The demands of the job were too much for the aged, corpulent hero of the past, and he asked to be relieved in the Fall of 1861.

George B. McClellan was Lincoln's next choice to be the general-in-chief. He combined the position with that of commander of the Army of the Potomac and, for various reasons, failed to execute both jobs. Lincoln saw that he needed a full time general-in-chief, relieved McClellan, and for four months served as the commander-in-chief and de facto general-in-chief. Eventually he brought a successful general from the western theater, Henry Halleck, to be the new general-in-chief. Halleck filled the role from July, 1862, until Grant became general-in-chief in March, 1864. Thus, by the time Grant became the general-in-chief, there had been three previous ones, and Lincoln had even tried to do without one.

The selection of Grant as general-in-chief marked a turning point in the war. The war would continue for more than a year, but it would be a year of steady activity by Union forces. More importantly, it would be activity that was controlled by a central military strategy that was effectively tied to the national strategy. For the first time Union soldiers in Georgia, Virginia, and Louisiana were moving in concert with a master plan, and those soldiers could feel that their exertions were part of something bigger than they could see. The military strategy that directed them was a product of the

development of Grant as a strategic leader, particularly during the period July, 1863, to March, 1864.

This paper will chronicle that development following two threads. The first is that of Grant's developing his abilities to be a strategic leader. It will be seen that Grant grew as a leader and that his understanding of strategy grew as he fought his way down the Tennessee and Mississippi Rivers and up Missionary Ridge. The second thread is the opening of the opportunity for Grant to become general-in-chief in order to use his strategic leadership abilities. That opportunity was long in the making and involved numerous personalities. Both threads intertwine during the period from July, 1863, to March, 1864, with the result of Grant's being given the opportunity to be the Union's strategic military leader just as he had developed the abilities that the role required.

Chapter 2

The Foundation Is Laid

The art of war is simple enough. Find out where your enemy is. Get at him as soon as you can. Strike at him as hard as you can and as often as you can, and keep moving on.

—Ulysses Simpson Grant

Hiram Ulysses Grant was born in 1822 to modest parents and was raised in Ohio. He attended West Point, not so much in quest of a military career, but as an alternative to following his father in the tanning business. He graduated in 1843 and was assigned to the 4th Infantry Regiment. It was at West Point, partly because of army bureaucracy, that he became Ulysses Simpson Grant. This was not the inconvenience that it might seem, because he went by “Ulysses” at home and became “Sam” to his friends at West Point. Regardless, it was an early indication that Grant could overlook things that did not matter in the long run.

The War with Mexico provided Sam Grant with tough but valuable experience. He was selected by his commander to be the regimental quartermaster and eventually filled that position and also those of commissary and adjutant. There was not much glory in those jobs, but young Lieutenant Grant learned early in his career the requirements that logistics place on a military unit. After the war he was posted to the West Coast and had trouble adjusting to the boredom of garrison life and separation from his wife and children. He resigned his commission in 1854 amid rumors of alcoholism.

Grant's failure as a civilian businessman has become part of his legend. When the Civil War began he had resorted to being a clerk in his father's store in Galena, Illinois. He helped raise Galena's company of volunteers to answer Lincoln's first call for volunteers. While raising that company he first met his congressman, Elihu B. Washburne.¹ Grant took the company to Springfield, Illinois, and stayed there as an aid to Governor Yates, helping to mobilize the state's volunteer units.

Grant offered his services to the army's adjutant general and to Major General (MG) George B. McClellan but his offers went unheeded. Governor Yates commissioned him as a colonel in the Ohio Volunteers and gave him command of the 21st Ohio Infantry Regiment. After Grant turned the regiment from an undisciplined mob into a credible unit, Congressman Washburne sponsored him for promotion to brigadier general (BG). While Grant had done a fine job as a colonel, the promotion came as a result of Republican congressmen's dividing up the number of BG positions as political spoils. Washburne received one BG commission and determined Grant to be the most deserving candidate from his district.²

Assigned to MG John C. Fremont's Department of the Missouri, BG Grant assumed command of Union forces at Cairo, Illinois. That was in September of 1861 and Kentucky had declared neutrality in the conflict. Grant understood the political implications of not being the first side to breach Kentucky's neutrality. He also understood the military significance of Paducah, Kentucky, at the mouth of the Tennessee River. When he received credible intelligence that a Confederate force was about to take the city, he quickly seized and fortified it. This was done without prior approval from his superiors and brought him the criticism of both Fremont and the governor of Kentucky.

Fremont soon saw the wisdom of his move, and the Kentucky legislature approved his action.³ He was clearly an officer who did not shrink from taking responsibility and independent action to advance the cause.

Using Paducah as a base, Grant began a campaign in February, 1862, to take Fort Henry on the Tennessee River. He received permission to undertake the mission from his new commander, MG Henry W. Halleck. He was supported from Paducah by an officer new to the department, BG William Tecumseh Sherman.⁴ This was the first of many operations these three would work on together, and the relationship that developed from it served the nation well.

Originally the campaign was to be of limited objective; but once Grant took Fort Henry, he notified Halleck that he was continuing to press the beaten foe and would take Fort Donelson on the Cumberland River.⁵ After the fall of Fort Donelson, Grant saw the opportunity to continue to push to Nashville and sent the troops that captured it. He did that without Halleck's knowledge and without knowing what Halleck wanted him to do.⁶ This example of Grant's ability to recognize operational possibilities and his willingness to modify plans to meet the situation on the ground got him in trouble with his superior.

His actions in taking Nashville were not only out of line with Halleck's intentions but the entire campaign was too quick for the high command's comfort.⁷ That and some faulty communications caused Grant to be temporarily relieved of his combat command. Eventually the situation was cleared up and Grant was restored to command; but the incident left painful memories. Grant was never a prolific message writer, but after this he became more concerned with informing his superiors of his situation.

Ironically, as Grant was the subject of great criticism by Halleck, McClellan and MG Don Carlos Buell, he was promoted. After the fall of Fort Donelson, (and in the glow of the public relations gold mine of his “unconditional surrender” message), Grant’s name was submitted by Lincoln to the Senate for promotion to Major General of Volunteers. The Senate quickly approved it.⁸ It had been an eventful three weeks: Grant had won two battles, captured the capital of a Confederate state, been relieved of command and been promoted.

Reinstated to his command, Grant moved up the Tennessee deep into Confederate territory. At the Battle of Shiloh his army was totally surprised and nearly routed. Then Grant’s troops drove the Confederate Army of Mississippi out of Tennessee. Grant came under scathing criticism for his having been surprised and the high casualties the Army of the Tennessee suffered. Halleck joined the army in the field, took command and made Grant his second in command. This effectively removed Grant from command, the second time in two months, and caused him to consider leaving the army.

Fortunately, Grant had at least two supporters who came to his aid. Sherman heard he was leaving and promptly rushed to convince him to stay. Grant agreed to stay⁹ and Halleck’s promotion to general-in-chief in July gave Grant his command back. Lincoln was getting a lot of advice to dump Grant. After Shiloh the President was told that several top Republicans were convinced that Grant had lost the confidence of the public and was damaging Lincoln’s leadership. Lincoln dismissed their proposal to fire Grant with a curt “I can’t spare this man – he fights.”¹⁰

Vicksburg, Grant’s next big campaign, was his finest, but it was not without controversy. He originally attempted a two-pronged attack with Sherman’s command

going down the Mississippi River, while he went overland to invest Vicksburg from the east. The overland movement failed because Confederate General Earl Van Dorn captured Grant's supply base at Holly Springs, and Confederate Cavalry General Nathan Bedford Forrest cut his line of communications in West Tennessee.¹¹ That, coupled with Sherman's bloody repulse outside Vicksburg, again had Lincoln fielding demands for Grant's dismissal. A common reason given for Grant's removal was that he was a drunkard, and his drinking affected his behavior on the battlefield. Lincoln heard this complaint often and developed an answer of "If I knew what brand of whiskey he drinks I would send a barrel or so to some other generals."¹²

Grant reorganized and consolidated his army. He also made major changes to his operational plans. The presence of MG John A. McClernand, senior to Sherman, and his bad experience with a split command caused him to attack along a single line of approach. He abandoned the overland route and concentrated his forces on the Mississippi River route to Vicksburg. He had learned from his previous effort and never again felt comfortable relying on a rail line for his sole line of communications. He also realized from his experience that an army on the move could live off the land in parts of the Confederacy.¹³

Finally, after months of seemingly fruitless activity, Grant began the campaign that was to shock the world. On 16 April, 1863, he had the navy run past the guns of Vicksburg and then shifted his army south of Vicksburg. Living off the land and using superbly coordinated maneuver, he kept the Confederates off-balance, isolated the garrison of Vicksburg from Confederate General Joseph E. Johnston's relief force, and

laid siege to Vicksburg. On 4 July, the day after the Battle of Gettysburg ended, Vicksburg and the Confederate army in it surrendered.

After the fall of Vicksburg, Grant stood in the ranks of the great operational level warriors. He had developed great skill in coordinating the forces under his command to achieve his theater level objectives. He had also shown a fierce drive to press the enemy on all fronts and to overcome adversity until victory was achieved. But being able to do this at the operational level does not always equate to being able to function successfully at the strategic level. Fortunately, unlike other Union generals, Grant had the humility that allowed him to develop still more. It was after Vicksburg that he began to think strategically.

During this developmental period several traits of Grant's became evident. The first was his workmanship style of command. He worked with little fanfare or pomposity, just relentless effort toward the objective. Secondly, he was able to learn from his mistakes and from his successes. J.F.C. Fuller argued that for Grant "every engagement was a lesson, not merely a victory or a defeat – he built up his art of war."¹⁴ Lastly, Grant's manner made people believe in him. Sherman quickly fell under his spell and was a true disciple. More importantly, Lincoln believed in him. Few soldiers would be able to survive being known to the president in terms such as "drunkard" and "butcher." Grant overcame that because Lincoln appreciated that whatever errors Grant made were made as he was trying to get on with the business of winning the war.

Far from wanting to relieve him, Lincoln was intrigued by Grant. What other general did he have who was so reluctant to immediately claim credit for the biggest

victory of the war? Lincoln's appreciation was evident in his 18 July, 1863, telegram to Grant:

I never had any faith, except a general hope that you knew better than I, that the Yazoo Pass expedition, and the like, could succeed. When you got below, and took Port Gibson,..., I thought you should go down the river and join Gen. Banks, and when you turned Northward East of the Big Black, I feared it was a mistake. I now wish to make the personal acknowledgment that you were right, and I was wrong.¹⁵

Notes

¹ Ulysses Simpson Grant, *Personal Memoirs of U.S. Grant*, One Volume Edition (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1885), 143.

² John Y. Simon, "Grant, Lincoln, and Unconditional Surrender," In *Lincoln's Generals*, edited by Gabor S. Boritt (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 171.

³ Grant, 157-159.

⁴ Bruce Catton, *Grant Moves South*, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1960), 149.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 132-133.

⁶ *War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, Ser. 1, VII, 667. Hereafter cited as O.R., all citations are to Ser. 1.

⁷ Catton, *Grant Moves South*, 186.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 188 and Carl Sandburg, *Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years and the War Years*, One Volume Edition (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1954), 285-286.

⁹ Lloyd Lewis, *Sherman: Fighting Prophet*, (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1932), 235-236.

¹⁰ Sandburg, 289.

¹¹ Grant, 256-259.

¹² Sandburg, 369.

¹³ J.F.C. Fuller, *Grant and Lee: A Study in Personality and Generalship*, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1957), 179.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 82.

¹⁵ Sandburg, 413-414.

Chapter 3

Uncharted Waters

General Grant is a copious worker, and fighter, but a very meagre writer or telegrapher.

—Abraham Lincoln

On 5 July, 1863, Grant's closest associate, Sherman, wrote his wife "Thank God we are free men from Washington and that we have in Grant not a 'great man' or a 'hero' but a good, plain, sensible kind-hearted fellow."¹ If Sherman thought that Grant was simple or naïve, he was about to be proven wrong. The challenges Grant would face in the next five months were of substance to challenge even the most experienced leader. Grant's handling of those challenges proved him not only to be more skilled at political maneuvering than he was given credit for, but also signaled to Lincoln that this commander in the West had skills essential for a general-in-chief.

In the midst of the Vicksburg campaign, Grant received into his headquarters staff a unique individual, Charles A. Dana. Dana's credentials stated that he was a special commissioner of the War Department. Eventually he would be titled Assistant Secretary of War. In reality he was a spy sent by Secretary of War Stanton to report on Grant's progress and performance. Grant realized that, but welcomed Dana for two very practical reasons. First, he had nothing to hide, and therefore had no fear that Dana would find great controversies to report. Secondly, with Dana's making daily reports to Stanton,

Grant would not have to make reports as frequently as he had been.² Soon Dana fell under Grant's spell and became a trusted member of his unofficial military family.

Dana's importance in helping the administration to understand the situation on the Mississippi cannot be overstated. During this period of the war much of Lincoln's and Stanton's correspondence with commanders in the field indicated a frustration with perceptions of inactivity, lack of support for the national military strategy, and lack of information being sent to Washington. Such was not the case with Grant, largely because Dana kept Stanton informed and was able to describe Grant's actions and plans in terms that Stanton understood. The spy from higher headquarters turned into a valuable ally.

Two examples of Grant's use of Dana are illustrative. Soon after Gettysburg and Vicksburg, Halleck and Stanton began to float the idea of Grant's assuming command of the Army of the Potomac. They were unhappy with MG George G. Meade's lack of vigor in pursuit of the Army of Northern Virginia and thought Grant could do a better job in command of the Union forces in the East. Grant did not want this, but realized it would be presumptuous to decline or argue against a command that he had not been offered. However, he did not want the distraction that would come from rumors and the maneuvering that was bound to occur if the topic was not put to rest. Dana proved to be the perfect instrument for him to do that. Grant expressed his desires to Dana, who, as a member of Stanton's staff, helped convince Stanton not to make the proposed command change. It was handled discretely, with no embarrassment to any party.³

The second example of Grant's use of Dana was much more complicated. It involved Grant's handling of his senior corps commander during the siege of Vicksburg, MG John A. McClernand. McClernand was a Douglas Democrat from Illinois who was

important to the administration because of his ability to raise troops and his assistance in making the war a national effort rather than a Republican effort. Grant had already snubbed McClellan's earlier attempt to take command of the effort to take Vicksburg, and he knew that McClellan had a special status with Lincoln. Grant considered him a commander who was a poor soldier and disruptive to the harmony of his command. His problem was whether he could afford to relieve McClellan in light of his status with Lincoln.

Grant turned to Dana for the answer. Dana had seen how Grant handled a diverse group of generals – from professionals like Sherman and James B. McPherson to political appointees like Frank Blair and John A. Logan. All were welcome in Grant's military family as long as they displayed competence and worked as a team. Dana presented the case for Grant and against McClellan to Stanton and received the reply that Grant wanted. Stanton wrote that Grant was totally responsible for the commanders in his department, should take whatever actions were necessary for the efficiency of the department, and would be held accountable if he did not.⁴ That was all Grant needed; and, after a particularly bloody repulse caused by less than honest reporting by McClellan, Grant relieved McClellan. Dana's ability to provide insider information to Stanton and to give Grant the true position of the administration were particularly valuable in this case.

Even with the work by Dana, Grant felt that he needed to do some fence mending with the administration after Vicksburg. While he worked on what the Army of the Tennessee should do next, he sent his assistant adjutant general, John A. Rawlins, to Washington with dispatches describing the victory and to provide explanation for

whatever the administration cared to ask about. Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles saw the real purpose of Rawlins' visit to be explaining why McClernand had been relieved and wrote that he succeeded brilliantly.⁵

While he was maneuvering through these political currents, Grant was still able to focus on his role in ending the rebellion. As he looked within his department to see what needed to be done, he could find no objectives that would further the national military strategy. Instead he saw that the forces he had could best be used to assist MG Nathaniel Banks, commander of the Department of the Gulf, in taking Mobile. Grant was not merely looking beyond his own operational area of responsibility, but for the first time he was recommending to others what should be done.⁶

Grant's reasons for wanting Mobile to be the next big objective in the West were sound from a strategic sense. The Mississippi was now open and taking Mobile would close an important seaport, thus denying resources to the Confederacy. Grant knew that an overland approach from Vicksburg would not be feasible and recommended that the campaign originate in New Orleans. Lincoln and Halleck agreed in principle to Grant's recommendation, but events in Mexico caused the president to order a push into Texas. In a telegram to Grant, Lincoln explained that this would require enough troops to preclude the Mobile expedition.⁷

Grant's acceptance of his commander-in-chief's decision seems common-place today, but it must have warmed Lincoln's heart. Here was a triumphant general, riding a wave of popularity, who had a sound military operation canceled for political reasons but heard the president out and then endorsed Lincoln's plan. That had certainly not been the response Lincoln was used to in similar situations from commanders such as McClellan,

Rosecrans, and Buell. Lincoln noticed other differences about Grant that he liked. He commented to another officer that Grant “doesn’t worry and bother me. He isn’t shrieking for reinforcements all the time. He takes what troops we can safely give him...and does the best he can with what he has got.”⁸ He was also impressed with Grant’s ready acceptance of the administration’s policies on emancipation and the recruitment of African-American troops.

If the President and his Cabinet were satisfied with Grant, there was another body to be dealt with that could have kept Grant from realizing his potential. Various groups in Congress became interested in the unknown hero from the West. Grant’s public image was that of “Unconditional Surrender Grant”; the cigar-smoking, no nonsense professional who got the job done with little fanfare. That was not enough to be a leader at the strategic level. By 1863, any general who would move to national prominence had to take a stand on slavery. McClellan was an example of a general who had suffered at the hands of Congress partly because of his reluctance to bring the issue of slavery into the war. Grant made his position clear in a letter to Washburne after Vicksburg:

The people of the North need not quarrel over the institution of slavery. What Vice President Stephens acknowledges the Corner Stone of the Confederacy is already knocked out. Slavery is already dead and cannot be resurrected. It would take a standing army to maintain slavery in the South if we were to make peace today, guaranteeing to the South all their former Constitutional privileges. I never was an abolitionist, not even what could be called anti-slavery, but I try to judge fairly and honestly and it became patent to my mind early in the rebellion that the North and South could never live at peace with each other except as one Nation, and that without slavery. As anxious as I am to see peace reestablished I would not therefore be willing to see any settlement until this question is forever settled.⁹

This lacked the eloquence of Lincoln, but the simple logic was pure Grant. It left no doubt where he stood on the issue and, yet, Republicans and Democrats would both claim “he is one of us.”

Events in Tennessee and Georgia provided an opportunity for Grant to assume even greater responsibility and display his readiness for more. In September, Confederate General Braxton Bragg’s Army of Tennessee surprised and defeated Rosecrans’ Army of the Cumberland at Chickamauga. Rosecrans retreated to Chattanooga and was trapped there by Bragg. Rosecrans’ inactivity and the pessimistic reports of Charles A. Dana, sent to Chattanooga to report on the conditions there¹⁰, caused Lincoln to rearrange the command structure in the West. Grant was placed in command of the Military Division of the Mississippi effective 16 October, 1863.¹¹ This gave him command of all Union forces in the theater of war west of the Appalachian Mountains except for Banks’ command. He now commanded more soldiers and area than any other Union field commander.

Ordered to Louisville to assume command, Grant met Stanton en route. This was the first time they had met, but Grant wrote in his memoirs that he already felt that he knew him. They had spent many hours telegraphing each other at night when Stanton would order the lines to be left clear so he could signal Grant.¹² Stanton brought word that Grant was to take charge of the situation in Chattanooga. In particular, Grant was to immediately decide whether to leave Rosecrans in command or to relieve him. Grant was not taken by surprise by this because he had thought the problem of Chattanooga through. He chose to relieve Rosecrans and placed MG George H. Thomas in command

of the Army of the Cumberland. This decisiveness pleased Lincoln,¹³ but not nearly as much as the swift turn of events in Chattanooga would.

The Battle of Chattanooga was tailor-made for the stage to bring Grant to the world's attention. The drama of a beaten, starving army's picking itself up and charging up Lookout Mountain and Missionary Ridge was matched only by the amphitheater-like view that reporters had of the battle. Ironically, Grant got his best press from the battle on which he had the least influence. Dana wrote to Stanton of "the miracle of Chattanooga"¹⁴ and the Northern press was full of praise for Grant.

Lincoln was glad for the victory, but he had to be even more satisfied with Grant's actions and desires after the enemy was routed. While Lincoln felt that he was constantly prodding Meade to do something against Lee's army, he had no such problems with Grant. Mere days after the victory at Chattanooga, Grant had plans for his theater. He wanted to give the Confederacy no respite, to hold Bragg's and Longstreet's forces with a small force while taking Mobile from New Orleans. He also wanted to mount large raids into Alabama and Georgia.¹⁵

These raids are instructive as to how far Grant's development as a strategic thinker had come. Their purpose was not to take and hold ground or to fight. They were to avoid fighting and to burn supply depots, destroy railroads, and take good horses. In short, the raids were to take away the war-making ability of the Confederacy's heartland.¹⁶ He also wrote Halleck that these moves would force Lee to either send reinforcements, thus weakening the forces in front of Meade, or to lose Mississippi, Georgia, and Alabama.¹⁷ At last Lincoln had a commander who was thinking about

operations that would tie in to other theaters and produce something other than local effects.

As December, 1863, began, Grant was the war hero of the North. He was in good relations with Congress, partly because he had had few dealings with them, but also because of his record and his simply stated stand on slavery. Most importantly, the commander-in-chief had confidence in him and had taken notice of his adeptness in handling tricky political situations and his decisiveness. Forces were in motion to see if there was a better way for the nation to use this general from the West who did not say much but won great victories.

Notes

¹ Lewis, 292.

² Catton, *Grant Moves South*, 388-390.

³ T. Harry Williams, *Lincoln and His Generals*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1952), 275 and Bruce Catton, *Grant Takes Command*, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1968), 7.

⁴ Catton, *Grant Moves South*, 442 and O.R., XXIV, part 1, 84.

⁵ Catton, *Grant Takes Command*, 3-6.

⁶ Williams, 274.

⁷ Catton, *Grant Takes Command*, 14.

⁸ David Herbert Donald, *Lincoln*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), 497.

⁹ Catton, *Grant Takes Command*, 8.

¹⁰ Catton, *Grant Moves South*, 392 and Williams, 284.

¹¹ O.R., XXX, part 4, 404.

¹² Grant, 347.

¹³ Williams, 285.

¹⁴ Catton, *Grant Takes Command*, 84.

¹⁵ O.R., XXXI, part 3, 349-350.

¹⁶ Catton, *Grant Takes Command*, 93-95.

¹⁷ O.R., XXXI, part 3, 349-350.

Chapter 4

The Die Is Cast

.I would rather have you in command than anyone else for you are fair, honest, and have at heart the same purpose that should animate all.

Sherman to Grant

The next three months did not see much military action, but there was plenty of action on at least three other fronts. Popularity brought with it calls for Grant to run for office, and he had to deal with that and the jealousies that ensued. Grant also continued his development as a strategist and began to develop the military strategy that would bring the war to a successful conclusion. Amid this, congressional dissatisfaction with the way the war was being run led to consideration of Grant's being put in charge of the military effort of the Union. Grant's handling of the first two issues and Congress' decision on the third were to be crucial.

Grant's newfound fame and relative obscurity to eastern newspaper editors and political parties made him an interesting choice to run for president. The influential *New York Herald* saw Grant as a former Douglas Democrat and began a "Grant, The People's Candidate" campaign.¹ Grant received numerous questions about his availability for public office but flatly turned them all down. The consistency of his refusal was important, but not nearly as important as the fortunate timing of a letter he wrote on the subject to his friend J. Russell Jones, a United States Marshall in Chicago.

Lincoln was concerned about his rising star's political ambitions. Experience told him that he had good reason to be. In December of 1863 he was facing an intra-party fight with former general John C. Fremont for the Republican nomination in 1864. The winner would in all probability face former general-in-chief George B. McClellan, the likely Democratic candidate. Lincoln asked Washburne for information on Grant. Washburne said that he did not know Grant well and suggested that Lincoln send for Grant's friend J. Russell Jones.

Jones was summoned; and as he left Chicago he picked up his mail, which happened to contain a letter from Grant. Jones had written to caution Grant about the dangers of the *Herald's* presidential talk. In his reply, Grant said:

I am receiving a great deal of that kind of literature, but it soon finds its way into the waste basket. I already have a pretty big job on my hands, and my only ambition is to see this rebellion suppressed. Nothing could induce me to think of being a presidential candidate, particularly so long as there is a possibility of having Mr. Lincoln reelected.²

During his interview with the president, Jones realized that Lincoln was concerned about Grant's political aspirations. He suggested that Lincoln read the letter he had just received and gave it to Lincoln. Jones recorded that Lincoln read with much relief and said:

My son, you will never know how gratifying that is to me. No man knows, when that Presidential grub gets to gnawing at him, just how deep it will get before he has tried it; and I didn't know but what there was one gnawing at Grant.³

Again, Grant's basic honesty and uncommon good sense had served him well. Without Lincoln's or Grant's having to be embarrassed by direct confrontation, both knew where they stood with each other. Lincoln probably would not have kept Grant

from becoming general-in-chief for desiring to be president, but this news allowed him to form a close working relationship with Grant based on mutual respect and understanding.

Grant's first attempt at grand strategy came as a result of Halleck's asking for his ideas. The result was a strategy that was well thought out for the West but a seemingly knee-jerk reaction for the East. If this were a subtle job interview for the position of general-in-chief, Lincoln must have been very disappointed.⁴

Grant's 19 January, 1864, message to Halleck, outlining his thoughts on what the strategy should be, built on his earlier messages on the western theater strategy. In the West, the army would work along a line running from Chattanooga to Atlanta to Montgomery to Mobile. It relied on Longstreet's being driven out of East Tennessee and an advance on Northern Georgia.⁵ Neither had been a key to Grant's plan presented in December to Halleck, but both had been pointed out as shortfalls by the administration.⁶ This was an improvement on his earlier plan and showed promise.

The role of the forces in the East is what must have caused Lincoln to wonder if Grant was the man for the job. Grant's proposal was to take 60,000 troops and to land them at New Berne, North Carolina. From there they would operate against the railroad links to Richmond from the Deep South. The desired effect was to cause the Confederates to abandon Richmond in order to protect their lines of communication.⁷ Halleck knew that this plan would not please the President and told Grant so. The main problems were that it would leave Washington open to attack because of the requisite weakening of the Army of the Potomac, and it made Richmond the object of the campaign instead of the Confederate army. Fortunately, Grant had shown that he could

accept criticism and modify his plans to meet the President's concerns. He would need to because, as Halleck told him, the decision on strategy was soon to be his.⁸

Halleck's reference was to the move in Congress to revive the rank of lieutenant general and the understanding that it would be conferred upon Grant. George Washington was the only American to permanently hold the rank, although Winfield Scott had been a brevet lieutenant general. Whoever held the newly revived rank would outrank everyone else in the army and thus would have to become the general-in-chief. As early as 9 December, 1863, there was movement in Congress to revive the rank. Washburne introduced the bill, and, after some debate, it passed on 26 February, 1864. Grant's reply to Washburne on hearing of the movement was to write him on 12 December that he neither desired nor deserved promotion and was only trying to get the job done.⁹

Whether Grant felt deserving or not, Lincoln nominated him to the Senate for promotion to lieutenant general; and on 2 March, 1864, he was confirmed. In a gracious telegram that congratulated his former subordinate, Halleck notified Grant on 6 March that his commission had been signed by Lincoln.¹⁰ One last detail remained. On 10 March Halleck stepped down as general-in-chief, and Grant was appointed to the job.¹¹ There were many details to be worked out, but Lincoln had found his man.

Notes

¹ Sandburg, 459.

² Catton, *Grant Takes Command*, 111.

³ *Ibid.*, 112.

⁴ Williams, 295-296.

⁵ O.R., XXXII, part 2, 99-101 and 143.

⁶ O.R., XXXI, part 3, 458 and O.R., XXXII, part 2, 40-42 and 126-127.

⁷ O.R., XXXII, part 2, 143 and O.R., XXXIII, 394-395.

⁸ O.R., XXXII, part 2, 411-413.

Notes

⁹ Catton, *Grant Takes Command*, 103.

¹⁰ O.R., XXXII, part 3, 26.

¹¹ O.R., XXXIII, 663.

Chapter 5

Conclusions

I knew wherever I was that you thought of me, and if I got in a tight place, you would come if alive. My only points of doubt were in your knowledge of grand strategy and of books of science and history, but I confess your common-sense seems to have supplied all these.

—Sherman to Grant

When Grant became general-in-chief, he did not have the war-winning strategy in mind. Just as he had done throughout the war, he modified his proposed strategy of January to meet the situation. Conversations with Lincoln, Stanton, Halleck, Sherman, and Meade added to his thought process. In early May, Grant achieved the seemingly impossible - the movement of Union forces on all fronts under a coordinated plan. It was not to be a success on all fronts; MGs Sigel, Butler, and Banks were to fall short of their objectives. But it was a start, and for the next twelve months the Confederacy would see a constant pressure as the Union armies followed Grant's plan.

As it finally developed, Grant's strategy was as bold as it was simple. He realized that it was nearly impossible to annihilate an enemy army. He had used maneuver at Donelson and Vicksburg to place two Confederate armies in untenable situations, and he felt he could do it again.¹ He also knew from experience that taking more enemy territory only drained the Union of the troops required to hold it. Taking these facts into account, he based his strategy on resource denial, counting on the naval blockade and

large-scale raids into the interior of the South to destroy its war-making resources and logistical infrastructure. The remainder of the army would place unrelenting pressure on Confederate forces, pinning, or possibly destroying them. Either the Confederate forces would be destroyed in the field, or they could not be supplied as a concentrated force.²

Parts of this strategy Grant had tried or suggested before. The large-scale raids were reminiscent of Grierson's raid in the Vicksburg campaign and his suggestions in December, 1863. The absence of a New Berne type operation and the Army of the Potomac's direction that "Lee's army will be your objective" show that Grant could modify a plan to conform to a better idea or political reality. His achievement of concentration in time by movement of disparate Union forces with unity of effort, long sought by Lincoln, may have been his greatest contribution to the war effort.

Lincoln deserves great credit in Grant's development. When public outcry for Grant's relief arose, Lincoln stood by the general that he had never met. When Halleck and McClellan seemed bent on relieving Grant, Lincoln promoted him. He also left Grant alone, unlike the various commanders of the Army of the Potomac. (A convincing argument can be made that Grant did not require as much guidance.) Ironically, Lincoln seemed to have been content with Halleck as his general-in-chief. He said as late as 7 December, 1863, that he needed Grant to be in command of the Western theater of war and not in the East.³ But he did not hesitate to promote Grant when Congress gave him the opportunity, and there is no evidence that he did so reluctantly. Perhaps he had taken the measure of the man by March, 1864, and found Grant to be the commander for whom he had been searching.

July, 1863, to March, 1864, saw an almost providential alignment of opportunity and ability. Grant's steady progress as a strategist and his demonstrations of the political skills necessary to operate at the strategic level have been outlined. Lincoln's growing trust in his abilities and character, his popularity after Chattanooga, and Congressional actions to make him general-in-chief have also been seen. All of these factors came together in the right proportion when the nation called on Grant to assume the reins of strategic leadership of the Union Army. He was ready because all of his life, particularly during this period, he had grown toward it.

Notes

¹ Howard M. Hensel, *The Sword of the Union: Federal Objectives and Strategies During the American Civil War* (Maxwell AFB, AL: Government Printing Office, 1989), 277.

² *Ibid.*, 282.

³ Williams, 290.

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