
The purpose of this thesis is to analyze the command and control of Union forces in Virginia at the outset of the 1864 campaign. Lieutenant General Ulysses S. Grant's decision to establish his headquarters in the field with Major General George G. Meade and the Army of the Potomac created an unusual command structure. As an independent army commander, Meade was responsible for planning and conducting the operations of his army, yet the proximity of his superior officer--Grant--reduced Meade to a subordinate position inconsistent with the typical functions of an army commander.

The methodology for this analysis is the command and control (C²) study. Command and control refers to a wide range of quantitative and qualitative matters that influence military leadership. Some issues are as individualistic as a commander's personality; others consider impersonal factors such as the creation and management of organizations. To understand Grant and Meade as military leaders and as members of a complex organization, this study focuses on their personalities, training, experience, and strategic thinking as well as the political, logistical, and practical constraints imposed on their operations.

The first test of this command structure, and of the Army of the Potomac under Grant's personal supervision, was the 5-6 May 1864 battle of the Wilderness. Paying particular
attention to planning, objectives, and the decision to attack on the morning of 5 May, this analysis argues that Federal participation in a general engagement within the confines of the Virginia Wilderness satisfied Grant's primary objective for the Army of the Potomac.
COMMAND AND CONTROL OF THE UNION ARMY IN THE EAST,
SPRING 1864: ULYSSES S. GRANT, GEORGE G. MEADE,
THE ARMY OF THE POTOMAC,
AND THE 5 MAY ENCOUNTER BATTLE IN THE VIRGINIA WILDERNESS

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<td>Assistant Adjutant-General</td>
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<td>Command and Control</td>
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<tr>
<td>CG</td>
<td>Congressional Globe</td>
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<tr>
<td>HSP</td>
<td>Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia</td>
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<td>PMHSM</td>
<td>Papers of the Military Historical Society of Massachusetts.</td>
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INTRODUCTION

From March 1864 through the Appomattox campaign, Lieutenant General Ulysses S. Grant, General-in-Chief of the Armies of the United States, and Major General George G. Meade, Commander of the Army of the Potomac, created and operated an unusual command structure. Neither Grant’s elevation to supreme military command nor Meade’s assignment as an army commander made their intimate, year-long association inevitable. Grant’s decision to place his headquarters in the field with the principal Union army in the east, and to retain Meade in his current position, produced the dual command structure that led the Army of the Potomac through the final year of the American Civil War. Historians have attempted to unravel and explain this command structure with varying degrees of success.

This work offers a fresh perspective on the operation of the Union command structure in the east during the spring of 1864. Focusing on the Army of the Potomac, preparations for the spring campaign, and the 5 May encounter battle in the Virginia Wilderness (the initial test of the new arrangement), this analysis will explore the intertwined roles of Grant and Meade.

The methodology for this analysis is the command and control (C2) study. A recent addition to military history, command and control studies are somewhat amorphous; the term rarely appears in indexes as does transportation, armament,
or, increasingly, logistics. This analysis uses the official United States Department of Defense definition:

The exercise of authority and direction by a properly designated commander over assigned forces in the accomplishment of the mission. Command and control functions are performed through an arrangement of personnel, equipment, communications, facilities, and procedures employed by a commander in planning, directing, coordinating, and controlling forces and operations in the accomplishment of the mission.¹

Command and control consists of a wide range of quantitative and qualitative matters, such as organization, communication, and clear identification of attainable objectives, as well as the education, experience, and personality of the military leader.²

More traditional studies on the Army of the Potomac in 1864--biographies, memoirs, campaign studies--attempted to describe the dual command structure, and three broad "schools" encompassed the various interpretations of the Grant-Meade relationship. One interpretation, influential in the immediate postwar period and possessed of remarkable resiliency, attributed all command functions to Grant. A second view, championed by members of Meade's staff or by

² Martin Van Creveld, Command in War (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 1. Van Creveld’s analysis, particularly the first four chapters, is an important source for the command and control issues discussed in this work.

soldiers long affiliated with the Army of the Potomac, portrayed Meade as an army commander who vigorously prosecuted the war against the Army of Northern Virginia and exercised the prerogatives of his position. A third interpretation held that Grant's proximity to the combat zone in Virginia produced a complex, occasionally inefficient, but ultimately successful command structure.

Books on the war began to appear even before Appomattox, and publication accelerated in the immediate postwar period. In 1866, *New York Times* war correspondent William Swinton published his *Campaigns of the Army of the Potomac.* 3 Valuable and often insightful, despite a recurrent verbosity, Swinton's book was an outstanding example of what I would term "The School of Meade's Invisibility." After a balanced account of Meade's leadership from Gettysburg through the abortive Mine Run campaign (26 Nov.-1 Dec. 1863), Swinton related the promotion of Grant to lieutenant general on 9 March 1864. From that point forward, Swinton scarcely mentioned Meade. To the uninitiated, Swinton's narrative implied that Meade had left the army.

Books of this variety, combined with a plethora of

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hagiographic works on Grant and campaign studies that customarily focused on drums and bugles, left Meade's role in the planning and execution of the campaign largely unexplored or, perhaps worse, uncritically portrayed as insignificant or detrimental. Adam Badeau's *Military History of Ulysses S. Grant*, from April 1861, to April, 1865 contributed to this view. Badeau, Grant's military secretary and aide, neither exhibited hostility toward nor ignored Meade. Yet Badeau's infatuation with and sympathy for Grant led him to assert that Meade, although capable and dedicated, often impeded the smooth functioning of army command. An invaluable account, owing to Badeau's intimate association with headquarters personnel, this interpretation reflected his bias. In his judgment, explicit and implied, Grant was the de facto commander of the Army of the Potomac, and Meade's position was an unfortunate redundancy.

Discussion of Badeau's work introduces a typical problem associated with Civil War military history. Despite the

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value of the *Official Records*, questions concerning the origin of a plan of operations or the authority directly responsible for a battlefield decision demand reference to eyewitness accounts, particularly those of staff officers serving with Grant or Meade. These accounts are rich sources, yet their use is problematic. Often, combatants wrote many years after the war, and while some works drew on contemporaneous journal or diary entries, others did not. Even these entries are somewhat suspect, for although this study ends with the 5 May 1864 encounter battle in the Wilderness, the fighting did not, and several participants did not record their impressions of events until mid-May rains necessitated a brief suspension of operations. Even reports in the *Official Records* were generally not written until the summer or fall of 1864. Finally and unfortunately, although in full conformity with human nature, works by members of one staff tended to amplify the wisdom and value of their respective chief.

In 1883 Andrew A. Humphreys, Meade’s chief of staff from 9 June 1863 to 25 November 1964, produced two books on operations of the Army of the Potomac, *From Gettysburg to the*

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Rapidan and The Virginia Campaign of '64 and '65. Both reflected his respect for objective analysis, yet in the latter work he took exception with Badeau, and despite Humphreys's attempt to write an accurate and impartial study, it is difficult to discount a degree of partisanship demanded by loyalty to, and affection for, his former commander. If as resolute a soldier-scholar as Humphreys fell prey to such temptations, it is easier to understand the ruminations of other men who, in an era of intense partisanship and self-promotion, either saw no reason to attempt objectivity or were constitutionally unable to recognize it.

Perhaps not surprisingly, a British historian wrote one of the first dispassionate works on the series of engagements in May-June 1864 that advanced the Army of the Potomac from the north bank of the Rapidan to the south side of the James.


7 C. F. Atkinson, Grant's Campaigns of 1864 and 1865: The Wilderness and Cold Harbor, May 3-June 3, 1864 (London: Hugh Rees, ltd., 1908), 64. Atkinson noted that Humphreys's Virginia Campaign was "a defense of Meade and the Army of the Potomac against undiscriminating eulogists of Grant, Badeau for example." As Humphreys struggled to produce his book on the 1864 campaign, he wrote: "As for Badeau he was writing for a purpose and every thing is written for that end. Truth only was not his principle." Humphreys to General [John Watts?] de Peyster, 12 November 1882, Andrew A. Humphreys Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, 34:83. 57 bound volumes. Hereafter cited as Humphreys Papers, HSP.
In many ways Charles F. Atkinson's *Grant's Campaigns of 1864 and 1865*, published in 1908, inaugurated a more sophisticated view of the Grant-Mead relationship. Although a campaign study that ranged far beyond the Battle of the Wilderness, Atkinson's book offered a critical appraisal of the dual command structure.

As nineteenth-century warriors and commentators gave way to twentieth-century students, copious works on the Civil War began to occupy library space, a trend that continues unabated. Valuable studies by Lloyd Lewis, Bruce Catton, J. F. C. Fuller, Kenneth P. Williams, T. Harry Williams, and many others added immeasurably to our understanding of Grant, the Army of the Potomac, and the 1864 war in the east. Other works, unfortunately, served only to confuse the issues and add to the student's burden.8

Yet for all this investigation and scholarship, no single volume exists that specifically addressed the Grant-Mead relationship and the dual command structure. Works that focused on a battle, an individual, an organization, or a soldier's memories noted the relationship but concentrated on other issues. This analysis will focus these accounts on the command structure Grant and Meade created and the

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8 Beyond his role at, and immediately after, Gettysburg, Meade has attracted scant attention and few biographers. Concerning the Grant-Mead relationship, see William E. Brooks, *Grant of Appomattox: A Study of the Man* (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1942; Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1971), 257-261, for a truly dismal effort. Brooks seemed most anxious to convince southern readers that a magnanimous officer had defeated their cause. Using a handful of letters from Meade to his wife, in which Meade expressed frustration with his uncomfortable position, Brooks sanctified Grant by exposing Meade's supposed baseness. (Page citations refer to reprint edition.)
relationship they forged.

The first chapter is a joint examination of Grant and Meade as military commanders. Each man brought specific ideas and experiences to the task of command. Several factors influenced their development: luck, personality, professional military training, experiences as combat officers during two-and-one-half years of civil war, and their strategic concepts. These personal issues and the exercise of military command are inseparable; leading armies and adopting viable measures to obtain objectives require more than the ability to read maps and issue orders. Despite the hierarchical structure of armies, men ultimately respond to other men, and thus it is impossible to consider the commander without considering the man.

The second chapter traces the events of December 1863-April 1864. Because the period between Gettysburg and the Wilderness witnessed no large-scale battle in Virginia, some historians concluded that nothing particularly important occurred in the east.\(^9\) This view was simplistic at best. President Abraham Lincoln brought Grant east to win the war, and to win it quickly. Lincoln, leading a coalition war with a politically divided citizenry weary of sacrifice, could not have felt sanguine had he known that Confederate General Robert E. Lee would not surrender until April 1865. Lincoln feared the North lacked sufficient political capital to continue a protracted struggle. Time constraints affected

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measures taken to prepare for the spring campaign: not only the operational plan, but the myriad decisions affecting the recruitment, reassignment, and reorganization of troops, discarding and promoting officers, and other seemingly "uneventful" matters.

The third chapter investigates the Grant-Meade relationship at the outset of the 1864 campaign. An analysis of Federal planning preceding the battle of the Wilderness, and the reaction of Grant and Meade to the appearance of Confederate infantry in the Wilderness early on the morning of 5 May, reveals the subordinate status of Meade's position, Grant's ultimate responsibility for and direction of the Union forces, and his primary objective for the Army of the Potomac in the 1864 campaign. A conclusion assesses the Grant-Meade relationship and the decision to fight the Army of Northern Virginia within the Wilderness.

This analysis recognizes the confusion encountered in attempts to understand the Army of the Potomac command structure after Grant's arrival. Almost 130 years ago, a historian wrote that once the Battle of the Wilderness began, the actions of Grant and Meade were indistinguishable, and

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that the only person who could clarify the command structure was Meade.\textsuperscript{11} Meade died in 1872 without doing so. This study attempts to reveal that such an assessment was overly pessimistic.

\textsuperscript{11} Headley, \textit{Grant and Sherman}, 358.
GRANT, MEADE, AND ARMY COMMAND

Despite similarities in training, prewar military experience, professional outlook, and even familial devotion, Grant and Meade were different kinds of men. The facts of Grant’s hard-scrabble, unsuccessful civilian life before the war are well known and, when combined with his controversial presidency, suggest that he flourished only under the peculiar circumstances of war. Meade’s antebellum life was more prosperous. A member of an old Philadelphia family and an accomplished engineer, he would likely have continued to enjoy a successful career without exposure to the opportunities and dangers of domestic insurrection.

A number of factors molded Grant and Meade as generals and as men. Luck and personality, training and experience, and their individual, ongoing education as general officers and strategists influenced the relationship they forged, the command structure they created, and the subsequent formation and execution of their plans.

If luck seems an unlikely or inappropriate subject with which to begin such an examination, it is worth noting that the first requirement of high command is survival. Civil War combat was a dangerous affair and officers at company, regimental, and brigade level suffered high casualty rates. Volunteer soldiers expected their officers to lead from the front. Doing so demonstrated courage, inspired confidence, and provided an excellent opportunity to get killed or maimed. Grant and Meade were brigadier generals by the fall
of 1861, and each rose through the upper ranks to army command.

The twists and turns of chance in Ulysses S. Grant's military career began before it was well started. His dissatisfaction at the United States Military Academy led him to hope that Congress, then debating the future of the institution, would abolish it so he could escape his commitment. When secession resulted in civil war in 1861, Grant traveled to the headquarters of Major General George B. McClellan, commander of the Department of the Ohio, in an effort to obtain a staff position. Unsuccessful in this endeavor, he later received a field command as colonel of the 21st Illinois.¹

When Grant demanded and obtained the unconditional surrender of Fort Donelson, closing the 6-16 February 1862 Henry and Donelson campaign and piercing the Confederate line in the west, northerners lauded their new hero; his very initials seemed to reveal his uncompromising approach to war. Starved of battlefield success, the North's reaction was enthusiastic and sincere, but in a war where public appraisal could have immediate and consequential effects on campaigns and careers, the coincidence that transformed Hiram Ulysses Grant into "Unconditional Surrender" Grant only added to his acclaim. It was one of history's quirky little ironies that an 1839 error in his West Point application by Illinois congressman Thomas Hamer laid the groundwork for Ulysses

Simpson Grant’s new sobriquet.²

After the 6-7 April 1862 battle of Shiloh, Grant’s good fortune changed, and he seriously considered leaving the department that, in just over a year, witnessed the planning and execution of his successful Vicksburg campaign. Soon after his Army of the Tennessee, in conjunction with Major General Don Carlos Buell’s Army of the Ohio, drove the enemy from the field on the second day of battle, Grant’s commander, Major General Henry W. Halleck, arrived to personally lead the advance on the Confederate rail center at Corinth, Mississippi. Halleck named Grant second-in-command. This apparent promotion, however, effectively removed him from the direct command of troops and left Grant few responsibilities. With light duty and too much time on his hands, Grant began to brood over his prospects and considered submitting a transfer request, or even his resignation. His friend and subordinate, Major General William T. Sherman, counseled patience and convinced Grant to await future developments.³ By mid-July, Halleck was on his way to Washington to become the new general-in-chief, and Grant regained field command and an opportunity to wage war on the Confederacy.


Years before Grant crossed the Mississippi below Vicksburg, events had conspired to help him attend the Academy, avoid a staff assignment (with unknowable consequences), and match his skill against the Vicksburg fortress and its defending army. Fortune frowned in early September 1863 when Grant, thrown from a horse, suffered a painful leg injury that essentially shelved him for weeks. Whether the incompetence or shortcomings of either opposing commanders or brother officers is a matter of luck or not depends on one's view of competition; there is no reason to belabor the point. But did not fortune smile on him when Major General William S. Rosecrans lost the 19-20 September 1863 battle of Chickamauga, and soon thereafter the government's confidence that he could hold Chattanooga, providing Grant a new opportunity?

At any rate, when Grant needed and was prepared for a new challenge or opportunity, one became available. Perhaps his greatest stroke of pure luck occurred a few days after his 18 October 1863 assignment to command the Military Division of the Mississippi, part of the Union leadership's response to their precarious position in Chattanooga. Conducting a personal reconnaissance of the enemy's position, Grant found himself well within range of Confederate pickets across the Tennessee River. Instead of shooting him, they saluted. By this time he possessed great prestige, and informal arrangements between opposing picket lines were not

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4 Grant, Memoirs, 2:41-43; McFeely, Grant, 146.
uncommon, yet Grant was lucky that those armed enemy soldiers refrained from shooting him.

George G. Meade was lucky to survive brigade command. While Grant campaigned on the western rivers, Meade and roughly 100,000 other men struggled to become an army. McClellan’s organizational genius molded the Army of the Potomac from the armed mob encamped about Washington, and in the spring of 1862 he finally launched his Peninsula campaign. During the 25 June–1 July 1862 Seven Days’ battles, Meade suffered two wounds when shot in the arm and back at the 30 June battle of Glendale. When he returned to Philadelphia to convalesce, his family physician concluded that a rib had deflected the ball through the body, thus sparing the general’s life, although the ricocheting lead missed his spine by only an inch or so. Meade was a rough inch from a desk job, if not the grave.

After leading his brigade at the 29–30 August 1862 battle of Second Bull Run, Meade exercised divisional command in combat for the first time at South Mountain on 14 September. Three days later, the same combat attrition of the officer class that had sent him to a field hospital, only eleven weeks earlier, presented Meade an opportunity. His First Corps commander, Major General Joseph Hooker, was shot in the foot during the early fighting at Antietam, and Meade

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5 For an example, see Bruce Catton, A Stillness at Appomattox (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1953), 53-54.

briefly exercised corps command. After leading his division at the 13 December battle of Fredericksburg, he became commander of Fifth Corps on 25 December.

Meade was capable and conscientious, but events and chance conspired to elevate him to army command on the eve of the 1-3 July 1863 battle of Gettysburg. After Lee defeated Hooker in the 1-4 May battle of Chancellorsville, Lincoln resolved to maintain his commander, but numerous military and political difficulties plagued the relationship between Hooker and Lincoln, and between Hooker and Halleck. As Lee’s army marched through Maryland and Pennsylvania, the president and the general-in-chief became increasingly dissatisfied with Hooker. They offered the command to Major General John F. Reynolds, who declined; Meade thus achieved army command through a kind of default. When Halleck’s staff officer, Colonel James A. Hardee, awoke Meade at 3:00 a.m. on 28 June, Meade wondered if perhaps he was under arrest.\(^7\) Instead, he learned he was the new commander of the Army of the Potomac.

Events are often beyond an individual’s control, and in most respects, so is an individual’s personality, but this work makes no attempt to psychoanalyze Grant or Meade. To state that an officer had a terrible temper might describe his general disposition or refer more specifically to his military temperament. Such distinctions are best revealed in full biographies; this analysis addresses personality traits revealed by the exercise of military command.

Ulysses S. Grant was optimistic, self-confident, and energetic, and he possessed what Sherman described as a "simple faith in success . . . which I can liken to nothing else than the faith a Christian has in a Savior."\(^8\) He was loyal to friends and to civilian control of the military, and his determination and strength of character revealed a moral courage that enabled him to risk the gamble of battle. Grant was a quiet man who kept his own counsel but was approachable by superior and subordinate alike. His humility, or perhaps more precisely his patience, his willingness to allow achievements to garner the fruits of success, stood in marked contrast to the attitude of some of his brother officers and smoothed his relations with harried superiors.\(^9\)

Grant believed in the power and efficacy of the written word. His ability to communicate through orders and reports allowed his command to avoid much of the confusion that plagued other officers' operations. He was flexible and able to learn, particularly from experience. Neither quick to anger nor profane, he could elicit cooperation and a sense of common purpose that helped produce proficient performances by subordinates, and he had an uncanny ability to recognize the strengths and weaknesses of his subordinates and place them in positions where their attributes could help produce


success. An idiosyncrasy that had a pronounced impact on Grant's execution of command was his utter unwillingness to backtrack or retrace his steps. Evident in his childhood and a component in his strategic approach, this trait occasionally caused difficulty, and on the march to Spotsylvania Courthouse, it threatened to endanger his personal safety.

Despite the praise of his contemporaries (and subsequent students), Grant's personality and character remained enigmatic. Described as "a man who could be silent in several languages," Grant remained something of a mystery, even to his intimates. Sherman admitted that he could not fathom the source of his friend's greatness. Perhaps Grant's particular strength was the supple power of his imagination. Often possessing the same information as others, Grant could visualize the ultimate goal, separating the vital from the trivial. Then he applied other strengths—determination, optimism, aggressiveness, common sense,

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11 Grant, Memoirs, 1:49-50; Porter, Campaigning with Grant, 80-81.


13 Marszalek, Sherman, 385; Catton, Grant Takes Command, 160. Catton described Grant as "a man infinitely more complex than most people could realize." Stillness at Appomattox, 41.
flexibility—to move relentlessly toward his objective.

His success in war made his weaknesses less prominent, and his subsequent political career revealed that what worked in camp and on the battlefield did not necessarily succeed in postwar Washington. Yet friends and critics alike noted Grant’s frailties—frailties that affected his performance in military command.

Perhaps Grant’s most prominent weakness, or at least the most famous, was alcohol. His battlefield success shielded him from damage on this count as much as anything else, eventually leading Lincoln to comment that if Grant drank, Lincoln wanted to send some of this fighting general’s brand to his other generals.\(^\text{14}\) The glowing reports sent to Washington by Charles A. Dana, essentially a spy sent to Grant’s headquarters by Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton during the Vicksburg campaign, also did much to assuage the administration’s doubts about Grant.\(^\text{15}\) Although rumors of abuse repeatedly damaged Grant’s position, from the spring of 1863 to the spring of 1864 his star ascended so relentlessly that it appeared his “problem” was unimportant.

While slow to anger, once aroused Grant was willing and able to bear a tremendous grudge. His loyalty to many


brother officers, so often repaid by competence and success, occasionally drew criticism, even from members of his own staff. Finally, Grant's tactical performance was uneven. While never the plodding, unimaginative butcher some critics decried, his great contribution was strategic. His ability to recognize competence in subordinates (or his good fortune in being surrounded by competent subordinates) allowed him to mark out a line of operations, delegating methods and details. If Grant's shortcomings seem few, one may conclude that much of Grant's success was the combination of his approach and the circumstances of the war.

George G. Meade shared many of Grant's strengths. Like Grant, Meade was honest, and loyal to brother officers and to civilian control of the military. Determined and humble, he understood that his duty as a soldier of the Republic was to obey. Meade followed orders at variance with his personal views and learned from his experience. Professional and dedicated, he too was a conscientious defender of the Union.

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16 After the battle of the Wilderness members of Grant's staff argued that Meade was an impediment, and what they saw as Grant's obstinate adherence to that officer frustrated them. Badeau, Military History of U.S. Grant, 2:186-192; Porter, Campaigning with Grant, 114-15. For a reasoned assessment of Grant's strengths and weaknesses, see Allan Nevins, The War for the Union (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1959-71), 4:13-18.

17 Cleaves, Meade of Gettysburg, 20, 32; Grant, Memoirs, 2:538-39; Coddington, The Gettysburg Campaign, 209-14. Coddington noted Charles A. Dana's harsh description of Meade. Dana, Recollections, 226-27. To describe Grant and Meade as humble is not synonymous with a lack of ambition. Both were ambitious, but in comparison to the machinations of some brother officers, Grant and Meade at times appeared downright disinterested in issues beyond the destruction of Confederate military power.
Meade was more polished than Grant. Critics of Meade who dubbed him a patrician generally ignored the death of his father, when George was thirteen, and the financial retrenchment this forced on the family during George's adolescence. Meade's mother, like Grant's father, recognized that a West Point education was, among other things, inexpensive. Though Meade was more comfortable in new social situations than was Grant, especially in the presence of women, both were introverted as youths. Both met and married women they deeply loved, and their letters to their wives expressed longing to return home and resume their duties as husbands and fathers.

Undoubtedly Meade's most damaging personality trait was his legendary temper. Grant commented:

He was unfortunately of a temper that would get beyond his control, at times, and make him speak to officers of high rank in the most offensive manner. No one saw this fault more clearly that he himself, and no one regretted it more. This made it unpleasant at times, even in battle, for those around him to approach him even with information.

References to Meade's temper are ubiquitous. Virtually all first-person accounts of Meade the military commander referred to his volcanic emotional eruptions; on at least one occasion this estimation led to the charge that he was a

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18 Cleaves, *Meade of Gettysburg*, 7-10; McFeely, *Grant*, 12.


martinet. Actually, Meade was an impatient disciplinarian, and his impatience often overcame him. Many of his outbursts resulted from what he considered unprofessionalism in others. Nonetheless, his blustery temperament often had a chilling effect on associates and limited Meade's effectiveness.

Another charge, less easily substantiated, was that Meade was timid. If this accurately described his tenure as Army of the Potomac commander, it was not a function of his personality. Rather than timidity, Meade occasionally succumbed to other weaknesses in a military commander; he could discount information that did not fit his preconceived notions, or postpone operations in light of incomplete information. Impatience with subordinates and occasional inflexibility were Meade's greatest weaknesses.

Over half of the highest ranked Civil War generals were both graduates of the United States Military Academy and veterans of the Mexican War, including Grant (USMA '43) and Meade (USMA '35). This similarity in training and prewar military experience resulted in the general competence displayed during the war by military commanders North and

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21 Meade, Life and Letters, 2:342.

South. Yet even this commonality allowed for tremendous variation among individual officers, as one would expect considering the distinct backgrounds, capabilities, and personalities involved. What strikes the student, however, are similarities in the development of Grant and Meade at West Point and in Mexico, and how fortune denied Meade an experience that might have aided his military development as much as it did Grant's.

The United States Military Academy did not prepare officers to lead mass armies or to contemplate the attendant strategic choices of continental warfare—such future requirements were unimaginable. The Academy had difficulty enough justifying its mission and modest budget to an often hostile Congress that questioned the use of public funds to create an officer class.

The West Point curriculum paid scant attention to strategic studies. Only during the last days of the military engineering class, taken by the Fourth Class (seniors), did Professor Dennis Hart Mahan (USMA '26) introduce strategic concepts. Mahan's experience and intellect made him perhaps the foremost American interpreter of European strategic

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24 For information on the Academy in the 1830s and 1840s, see chapters 11-12 in ErnestDupuy, Where They Have Trod: The West Point Tradition in American Life (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1940); chapters 6-7 in Stephen E. Ambrose, Duty, Honor, Country: A History of West Point (Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins Press, 1966); chapters 12-14 in George S. Pappas, To The Point: The United States Military Academy, 1802-1902 (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1993).
thought, and he taught Grant and Meade. Yet the course of instruction was so brief that it seemed to have little practical effect. Halleck (USMA '46), who possessed an excellent mind, continued his studies based on the introduction provided by Mahan, as did a few others, but Grant and Meade were undistinguished students.\textsuperscript{25}

The Academy strongly affected cadets in other ways. The isolation of the post and seemingly endless repetition of drill bored Grant as it had earlier bored Meade, but the curriculum and faculty offered them what might be described as a liberal arts education. Their subsequent development seems to indicate that the Academy taught them how to think. It also allowed them to form strong bonds of friendship and loyalty with their fellow cadets. Critics assailed the clannishness of West Pointers during the war, and the intense sense of loyalty later evinced by Grant and Meade started there.\textsuperscript{26}

The Mexican War gave Academy alumni an opportunity for valuable post-graduate training. Grant's varied experience in Texas and Mexico was an excellent course of instruction for a future army commander. Quartermaster and commissary officer of the Fourth United States Infantry Regiment, Grant learned the logistical requirements of a military unit at

\textsuperscript{25} Hattaway and Jones, \textit{How the North Won}, 11-13; Grant, \textit{Memoirs}, 1:32-44; Cleaves, \textit{Meade of Gettysburg}, 11-12. Meade graduated nineteenth in a class of fifty-six; Grant graduated twenty-first in a class of thirty-nine.

\textsuperscript{26} Mary E. Sargent, "Classmates Divided," \textit{American Heritage} 9 (February 1958), 34-35; T. Harry Williams, "The Attack Upon West Point During the Civil War," \textit{Mississippi Valley Historical Review} 25 (1939), 491-504.
war. This was not a combat assignment, but he nonetheless managed to find his way to the firing line, and he obtained valuable, and occasionally hair-raising, combat experience.27

Grant's regiment, originally serving with Major General Zachary Taylor's forces in northern Mexico, later joined Major General Winfield Scott's command. Grant served on Scott's staff, and thus observed operations at army headquarters. He entered Mexico City with Scott's victorious army, and the campaign offered the young officer much food for thought. Scott took risks, regularly maneuvered for the Mexicans' flanks, and adopted unconventional methods. Grant's assignments allowed him to compare the different styles of two American commanders. Taylor's style appealed to the straightforward Grant, and he seemed to pattern many of his subsequent military habits after Taylor's example. Indeed, in the spring of 1864, Meade wrote to his wife that Grant reminded him of Taylor.28 "Old Fuss and Feathers" Scott was less appealing, and Grant disapproved of Scott's pompous manner but recognized the brilliance of his campaign. Grant also noted that a more proficient enemy might have made Scott pay dearly for his strategic decisions, and Grant deplored the sledgehammer tactics employed to enter Mexican City.29

27 Grant, Memoirs, 1:97-98; McFeely, Grant, 34; Bruce Catton, U. S. Grant and the American Military Tradition (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1954), 35.

28 Meade, Life and Letters, 2:191; Grant, Memoirs, 1:100.

Meade also began the war with Taylor's forces, and he also managed to obtain combat experience, although like Grant, not as a line officer. Meade served with the relatively new Topographical Corps, and despite his junior rank, attrition among his immediate superiors gave him the opportunity to render valuable service drawing maps, laying out camps, and, on a more personal level, to develop an eye for terrain. 30 He also reported to Scott for duty in the operation against Mexico City, but bad luck denied Meade the opportunity to participate. Scarcely employed in the initial assault on Veracruz, Meade complained, hoping for active service and expecting attachment to the Engineer Corps. To his chagrin, the Engineer Corps, which viewed the "topogs" as unwanted rivals, informed him that they possessed their full complement of engineers. Before Meade well knew what had happened, he was on a ship bound for Washington and out of the war, a casualty of intra-army organizational jealousy. 31

Scores of officers passed through the twin trials of West Point and the Mexican War, and despite different backgrounds, assignments, and levels of success they emerged with the outlook of the mid-nineteenth-century professional officer. Walter Millis wrote that "honor, initiative, physical courage, the ability to obey orders, to take care of one's men and to get up the ammunition and the rations" were the "supreme virtues of the professional soldier" trained by

30 Meade, Life and Letters, 1:51, 78-82; Cleaves, Meade of Gettysburg, 25-37.

31 Meade, Life and Letters, 1:192-95; Cleaves, Meade of Gettysburg, 43.
the Academy, Taylor, and Scott. Mahan's influence on individual officers' strategic thinking was often weak, but his advocacy of celerity in military movements, the necessity of field fortifications, and the power of the tactical defense permeated the professional officer corps as well. Thus the North and the South entered the Civil War with similar tactical and strategic doctrines.

Mahan's influence was not, however, monolithic. West Point served a dual mission, to create a competent officer corps to lead citizen soldiers in war and to produce engineers for military and civilian purposes. The elite Engineer Corps attracted top graduates, and Mahan generally influenced this group more powerfully than he did cavalry or infantry officers. During the war, critics charged that Academy-trained officers were incapable of conducting offensive operations—West Point instilled a defensive-minded doctrine that resulted in excessive caution and undue respect for the power of defensive tactics. Though this brush often tarred all Academy graduates, the principal target was the Engineer Corps.

Certainly luck, personality, and different objectives North and South explain much of the variation in officers' performance during the war. By the spring of 1864, however,

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command experience and the evolution of an officer's strategic thinking were the most important ingredients in an army commander's development.

The tenacity of southern resistance presented the North with the choice of quitting the contest or waging a war of conquest. Despite the recognition on both sides of the power of defensive tactics as augmented by the rifled musket, the North could not simply create and man fortifications in the hope that southerners would aggressively and foolishly beat themselves senseless. Even if a certain military logic argued that seizing points the South would attack to recover was strategically sound, employing the advantages of fortifications and defensive operations as Professor Mahan advocated, such an approach completely ignored political realities. Most observers, some more clearly than others, recognized the North's advantage in men and material, and the northern population expected its army to whip the insurgents now instead of later.

Impatience and the political objective of reunion, coupled with the advantages technology and articulation bestowed on defensive operations, outlined the strategic choices available to the North. General-in-Chief Scott devised a strategic approach that, with modifications, became the Union blueprint for victory, yet it could not incorporate or harness northern impatience. The Anaconda Plan suffered

34 For a remarkable refutation of the consensus regarding the relationship between weapons and tactics during the Civil War, see Paddy Griffith, Battle Tactics of the Civil War (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989).
widespread derision. Political leaders and the press cried for bold, audacious, offensive warfare. The 21 July 1861 battle of First Bull Run, and Wilson's Creek (10 August) in Missouri, revealed the difficulties in conducting offensive operations with untrained troops. Against this backdrop, Grant and Meade began their education as Civil War general officers.

In August, Ulysses S. Grant led his 21st Illinois in an advance on a Confederate camp near Florida, Missouri. The operation was remarkable only for the effect it had on the Union commander. Grant later described his mental state as he approached the brow of a hill that overlooked the camp:

... my heart kept getting higher and higher until it felt to me as though it was in my throat. I would have given anything then to have been back in Illinois, but I had not the moral courage to halt and consider what to do; I kept right on. When we reached a point from which the valley below was in full view I halted. The place where [Confederate Colonel Thomas] Harris had been encamped a few days before was still there ... but the troops were gone. My heart resumed its place. It occurred to me at once that Harris had been as much afraid of me as I had been of him. This was a view of the question I had never taken before; but it was one I never forgot afterwards. From that event to the close of the war, I never experienced trepidation upon confronting an enemy, though I always felt more or less anxiety. I never forgot that he had as much reason to fear my forces as I had his. The lesson was valuable.35

Grant's first substantial battlefield experience revealed his ability to grow as a commander, reinforced his optimism, and rewarded his decision, or in this case possibly his lack of decision, to "keep right on." Had Confederate authorities

35 Grant, Memoirs, 1:249-50.
known how formative an experience the march on Florida would
prove for the future lieutenant general, they would have
ordered Harris to hold his camp at all hazards.

On 7 November Grant led a larger force, roughly the same
size as the one Taylor led into Mexico fifteen years before,
on a combat mission that resulted in the battle of Belmont.
Ferried across the Mississippi to aid Union operations in
Missouri, Grant's force became disorganized when the
temptation to loot the enemy camp overcame his men after
their successful assault. Grant saw enemy reinforcements
crossing the river and withdrew his command to the waiting
transports, again lucky not to get shot as he rode to the
landing.36 Belmont was a small but informative affair. He
refused to panic, extricated his command from danger, and
learned the necessity of Army-Navy cooperation in riverine
operations.

After the march on Florida, Grant decided to conduct
battalion drills with the three regiments subject to his
orders as a sub-district commander. Admitting he had given
tactics little thought since cadet days, Grant acquired a
copy of William J. Hardee's Rifle and Light Infantry Tactics
and attempted to educate himself and his command
simultaneously. He soon discerned, however, that Hardee's
tactics were "nothing more than common sense and the progress
of the age applied to (Winfield) Scott's system," which Grant

36 Ibid., 1:269-281; Foote, The Civil War, 1:149-52.
learned in the Mexican War.\textsuperscript{37}

In light of the scale of subsequent operations, Grant's 1861 experience seems minimal, but such a view discounts the cumulative effect of his introduction to Civil War command.\textsuperscript{38} Good fortune and competence vindicated his natural optimism, steady demeanor, and faith in his own common sense. Meanwhile, Meade was beginning his career in the east.

Initially, Meade feared he would miss the war, just as he had missed much of the action in Mexico. Meade was in the army when the war began, conducting surveys of the Great Lakes, and he experienced frustrating delays in obtaining a command. He was a victim of his own competence; his superiors were reluctant to release him. Before First Bull Run, conventional wisdom predicted a short war, believing a single, climactic battle would end the conflict. Almost frantic to escape the survey and on the verge of accepting a colonelcy from the governor of Michigan, Meade became a brigadier general on 31 August 1861. He had never commanded more than a company.\textsuperscript{39}

Unlike Grant’s small but instructive operations in the west, Meade’s initial combat experience was minimal. After

\textsuperscript{37} Grant, \textit{Memoirs}, 1:252-54. Grant implied that he immediately discontinued any reliance on Hardee’s manual.


\textsuperscript{39} Meade, \textit{Life and Letters}, 1:216-17; Cleaves, \textit{Meade of Gettysburg}, 54-56. The civilian secretary of the Smithsonian Institute, Professor Joseph Henry, attempted to persuade both Meade and his wife that Meade should stay out of the war and concentrate on his promising scientific career.
First Bull Run, a long period of preparation and watchful waiting along the Potomac River engaged both sides, punctuated by repeated false alarms and small operations that did not engage Meade's command in combat. Meade took command of his brigade in September, but the unit had little to do, save train and drill; McClellan was reluctant to advance with his green, half-formed army. Meade's most pressing duties involved training troops and performing administrative details. The day Grant led his small force against Belmont, Meade wrote that he was learning much as well; he was studying to act as president of a court-martial.\textsuperscript{40} Other than marching and counter-marching, his brigade did not participate in an active campaign until the spring of 1862.

Long before Meade led his brigade in combat, Grant provided the North with concrete strategic results in the west, and personally obtained a better understanding of the nature of his adversaries and the war. Grant commanded fifteen thousand men at the outset of the Henry and Donelson Campaign. Initial confusion on the 6 February march on Fort Henry revealed that, despite Grant's growing expertise, larger forces were more difficult to control. Bad roads and a slow start delayed the army, but the fort fell to the navy and Flag Officer Andrew Hull Foote. Grant then determined to advance across the neck of land between the rivers to attack Fort Donelson. His forces invested Donelson on 12 February and three days later thwarted a Confederate effort to cut their way out (with essential assistance from the hesitant

\textsuperscript{40} Meade, \textit{Life and Letters}, 1:226.
and divided enemy command). The next day, most of Donelson’s defenders surrendered to Grant’s unconditional demand.

The successful operations at Forts Henry and Donelson flanked the Confederates out of most of Kentucky and central Tennessee, confirmed the power of army-navy cooperation in riverine operations, and continued Grant’s military education. Without specific orders to attack Donelson, he recognized the opportunity and aggressively “kept right on.” Away from the front during the 15 February Confederate breakout attempt, Grant hurried to the field and determined to stand fast, shifting troops to his threatened right and increasing the pressure on the enemy. Victory confirmed that his aggressiveness was not rashness, his pugnacity was not foolhardy, and his optimism was well founded.

Following orders from Halleck in March to advance up the Tennessee River, Grant’s forces approached the northern border of Mississippi in early April. Ordered to entrench and not to engage the enemy until Buell’s army arrived, Grant chose to obey only the latter and suffered surprise at

41 For an excellent analysis of the Henry and Donelson campaign, and its significance, see Benjamin Franklin Cooling, Forts Henry and Donelson: The Key to the Confederate Heartland (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1987).

42 Ibid., 166-99.

43 The Confederate attack surprised Grant, despite knowledge that the enemy was in the vicinity. The night before the attack he reported to Halleck: “I have scarcely the faintest idea of an attack being made upon us.” Grant to Halleck, 5 April 1862, OR, 10, pt. 1, 89; Williams, Lincoln and His Generals, 85; Grant, Memoirs, 1:332-39.
Shiloh. Shiloh confirmed Grant's pugnacity and resiliency, although a common sense realization that he possessed insufficient transports to evacuate his forces to the east bank of the Tennessee River might have influenced his decision to attack on 7 April.\(^44\) Shiloh also indicated the desperate nature of southern resistance; after the battle Grant recognized the necessity of a war of conquest, and his attitude toward the enemy, and the civilian population that supported their armed forces, hardened. His attention increasingly focused on the destruction of the resources and logistics that supported Confederate armies.\(^45\)

Grant's instruction in combat command slowed until the end of the year, largely the result of forces beyond his control. After Halleck's departure for Washington in July, Grant obeyed orders that dispersed Union forces in the west to garrison the huge territorial acquisition that resulted from operations on the Mississippi River and the strategic victory at Shiloh.\(^46\) The lack of unified command in the west made coordination virtually impossible, reminiscent of the

\(^{44}\) Any attempt to withdraw the Army of the Tennessee to the east bank of the Tennessee River on 7 April would have proven extremely dangerous. For the controversy that arose between Grant and Buell concerning the battle, and remarks concerning withdrawal in particular, see Ulysses S. Grant, "The Battle of Shiloh," in Robert U. Johnson and Clarence C. Buel, ed., Battles and Leaders of the Civil War (New York: Century Company, 1884-89; Secaucus, NJ: Castle, n.d.), 1:465-86; Don Carlos Buell, "Shiloh Reviewed," ibid., 1:487-536 (page citations refer to the reprint edition).

\(^{45}\) Grant, Memoirs, 1:368-69, 397-98; Grant, "Battle of Shiloh," Battles and Leaders, 1:485-86; Halleck to Grant, 2 August 1862, OR, 17, pt. 2, 150.

\(^{46}\) Hattaway and Jones, How the North Won, 169-70.
operations of Halleck and Buell before the fall of Donelson.

Other than the battles of Iuka (19-20 September) and Corinth (3-4 October), and the frustrating attempts to stop Confederate raids, Grant devoted much of his attention to logistics and administration. Iuka and Corinth again demonstrated the restrictions logistics imposed on operations. The limitations of field transport helped frustrate efforts to pursue a retreating Confederate army, as it had after Shiloh.\textsuperscript{47} Geography in the western theater provided opportunities and limitations for Union forces. The Mississippi, Tennessee, and Cumberland Rivers, and the north-south railroads, provided avenues of invasion into the Confederate interior and, just as important, supply lines for advancing armies. The Union Navy rendered river routes secure and, unlike the railroads, the rivers were indestructible. Yet any Union advance that left a river or railroad became dependent on horses and the ubiquitous (at least in the west) army mule. Grant’s appreciation of the impact logistics had on strategic operations matured further in December when his first campaign against Vicksburg ended after Confederate raids crippled his railroad communications.

The 1862 campaigns revealed significant differences in the nature of Union operations in the western and eastern theaters. The geographical expanse and configuration of the west, coupled with Union naval superiority and the often ineffective Confederate response to Federal initiatives,

\textsuperscript{47} Hagerman, \textit{American Civil War}, 187-88; Hattaway and Jones, \textit{How the North Won}, 262.
provided army commanders with lines of approach and the stimulation to contemplate broad questions of strategy and logistics. These considerations operated differently in the east, where the geography, size, and Confederate defense of the region resulted in a proportionately restricted view. Western armies were small and dispersed compared to the Army of the Potomac, and subordinate western commanders had the opportunity to exercise greater discretion in a command structure decentralized by geography and intermittent communications. Geography and McClellan’s highly centralized command structure meant that subordinate eastern officers exercised far less discretionary authority. The severe battles of 1862 provided plenty of combat experience, but with the next brigade, division, or corps in such close proximity, subordinate officers in the Army of the Potomac developed their operational and strategic concepts on their own time, for broader considerations were not part of their direct responsibility. Subordinate officers in both theaters could observe and discuss the plans and performances of their superiors, but eastern officers enjoyed fewer opportunities to obtain practical experience in exercising discretionary authority.

While the Union Army fought its western campaigns in a vast theater, comparatively it fought its Virginia campaigns in a closet. Even if McClellan had wanted to create a more decentralized command structure, the overriding requirement of insuring the safety of Washington demanded that the commander of the Army of the Potomac maintain tight control
over his army. The proximity of Richmond guaranteed stiff Confederate resistance in northern Virginia; no comparable political prize existed in the west. While the Union effort in the west began to attack the enemy’s productive capacity as well as its armies, the constricted eastern theater and the capabilities of the Army of Northern Virginia presented the North with a strategic conundrum. Strategic maneuver risked allowing Lee to seize the initiative and threaten Washington, but direct tactical assaults were costly and indecisive, for the enemy could withdraw from a tactical defeat and occupy the fortifications of Richmond. One of the great ironies of the war was the shared desire, North and South, to avoid a siege of Richmond. For their part, Lincoln and Halleck feared a siege would prove costly, protracted, and unsuccessful before the North’s political will expired. Thus the dilemma was how to injure the Army of Northern Virginia without driving it into Richmond and without conducting an envelopment that allowed Lee to carry the war toward, or into, the North.

Lincoln and Halleck never solved this dilemma, but they did incorporate it into their strategic design. Late in 1862, the strategic plan in Virginia recognized that Lee’s army was the objective;\(^{48}\) no Confederate army in the west received such a designation until 1864. The North would win the war in the west, and the Army of the Potomac would endeavor to harm the Army of Northern Virginia as best it could in the confined eastern theater.

As a brigade commander, however, Meade's view was more circumspect. From the 26 June battle of Mechanicsville through Fredericksburg in December, Meade commanded troops in every major action in the east save Malvern Hill (1 July), and became Fifth Corps commander on 25 December. At this time, a description of Meade could apply to a number of other brigade and divisional commanders in the Army of the Potomac: a fighting general with minimal influence beyond his own command. Six months later, after a single operation in which his corps marched more than it fought, the entire army was his responsibility.

Meade's rise to army command was more a function of competence and public political discretion than strategic insight or tactical brilliance, and even his combat experience was a mixed blessing. Meade acquired his experience of army operations, as opposed to his education as a subordinate, through osmosis from brother officers as much as through direct command, and the lessons of 1862 in the east hardly supported optimism. Strategic defeats at the Seven Days', Second Bull Run, and Fredericksburg, and even the costly strategic victory at Antietam depressed morale and made implementation of the strategic plan to deal with the dangerous Army of Northern Virginia a Union priority in 1863.

49 Cleave's, Meade of Gettysburg, 85. This excluded operations in the Shenandoah Valley.

When Major General John Pope addressed the newly constituted Army of Virginia in the summer of 1862, his assertion that in the west "we have always seen the backs of our enemies" was generally true, if impolitic.

In many respects, Grant's experience in 1863 was an example of more of the same. His responsibility and area of operations expanded and his strategic approach continued to mature, but this analysis of operations in 1863 will focus on Meade and the Virginia theater; Meade was unable to break the strategic stalemate, and the problem remained unsolved when Grant arrived in the east in 1864.

The successful 29 March-4 July Vicksburg campaign exhibited most of the components that explained Grant's previous success. Stymied by geography and the inability to reconfigure the Mississippi River, he resorted to an unconventional approach, as had Scott in Mexico. After the navy ran transports past the Vicksburg batteries, Grant marched his army down the west bank of the river and crossed the Mississippi at Bruinsburg on 30 April. Finally on dry ground south and east of the city, Grant conducted his finest operation of the war, and added a strategic element that became increasingly important in subsequent operations.52

After ten days of successful operations northeast of Bruinsburg, Grant faced a decision on 11 May. Vicksburg's

51 Address "To The Officers and Soldiers of the Army of Virginia," OR, 12, pt. 3, 473-74.

52 For an entertaining account of Federal operations against Vicksburg, see Earl Schenck Miers, The Web of Victory: Grant at Vicksburg (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1955).
railroad communications, which ran east to Jackson, the capital of Mississippi and an important Confederate depot, was his immediate objective. If Grant could sever communications between these points and drive away the forces congregating in and around Jackson, he could fight the Confederate army covering Vicksburg and perhaps defeat it in the field, or at least drive it into the river fortress and lay siege. Further operations to the north and east, however, would lengthen and perhaps expose his tenuous communications from Grand Gulf. Resupplied with ammunition and gleaning his subsistence requirements from the countryside, Grant briefly abandoned his improvised communications. He was confident he could quickly reestablish them on the Mississippi after breaking Confederate rail communications by interposing his army between the enemy forces and defeating them in detail. By 19 May, he had driven one enemy force north of Jackson and the other into Vicksburg.

This was the brilliance of Grant at Vicksburg. Grant later claimed that he had always planned to cross the river south of the fortress, and perhaps he did, but in any event, the failure of the inland approach in December and of the four engineering projects north and west of the city made his final attempt all but inevitable. He hoped to avoid siege operations and saw two tactical assaults, launched to avoid such an eventuality, repulsed on 19 and 22 May. With few engineering officers or troops, his army improvised the

53 Grant, Memoirs, 1:437-62.
siege, but considering Grant's determination and Confederate difficulties, the fall of Vicksburg was probable. The marching and fighting of 1-19 May revealed Grant at his best. He recognized an opportunity, briefly reduced his communications to an improvised expedient, supplied his army from the countryside, and moved quickly to defeat Confederate forces in detail. Lincoln justly described Vicksburg as one of the brilliant campaigns in history.\(^{54}\)

Chattanooga posed a different challenge. Grant had spent months searching for and implementing the approach that resulted in victory at Vicksburg. At Chattanooga, Grant found a Union army besieged and imperiled by tortuous logistics. Decisiveness and flexibility marked his response. He quickly implemented a plan, developed before his arrival,\(^{55}\) to secure his communications and avoid the most pressing threat, starvation. As conditions in Chattanooga improved and reinforcements arrived from the Army of the Tennessee and the Army of the Potomac, he turned his attention to offensive operations.

Grant's plan called for an initial holding action by Major General George H. Thomas's Army of the Cumberland in front of Missionary Ridge, while Hooker's eastern troops got astride the ridge to the south at Rossville and Sherman's veterans did likewise near Tunnel Hill to the north. The

\(^{54}\) Williams, *Lincoln and His Generals*, 230.

Federals would then crush the enemy by pressing their flanks and front. Both Sherman and Hooker fell behind schedule, however, and Thomas's troops broke the Confederate line with their improbable frontal assault on Missionary Ridge. Grant's amalgamated army was fortunate that the Confederate deployment was faulty, but his flexible response to initial disappointments, and hard fighting, drove the Confederates into northern Georgia. As Sherman's force marched northeast to aid Burnside at Knoxville, Grant contemplated future operations. Chattanooga confirmed Grant as the preeminent Union general.

Grant began 1863 frustrated by the geography of the Mississippi River. As the year drew to a close, he delivered strategic victory at Chattanooga. Meade's 1863 experience also began with frustration; alas, it ended in frustration as well.

Meade obtained little combat experience as a corps commander. Two operations gave Meade the opportunity to lead his corps in the field. The 20-23 January 1863 "Mud March," Burnside's second attempt to cross the Rappahannock River, sank in the mire of Virginia's bottomless roads after a two-day rainstorm. Morale in the Army of the Potomac plummeted, and Major General Joseph Hooker replaced the luckless Burnside. As Hooker, a confident and able administrator, labored for three months to prepare the army for a spring campaign, Meade had an opportunity to adapt to his larger command. Meade handled his corps well in the subsequent

56 OR, 31, pt. 2, 33; Rawlins to Sherman, 24 November, ibid., 43-44.
offensive--the Chancellorsville campaign.

Meade’s Fifth Corps saw limited combat at the battle of Chancellorsville, but his role as a corps commander gave him the opportunity to influence, or attempt to influence, operations. On the night of 4 May, Hooker met with his corps commanders to discuss the army’s options. Meade wanted to attack,\textsuperscript{57} but Hooker decided to withdraw to the north bank of the Rappahannock. The withdrawal from Chancellorsville frustrated Meade. He viewed the Confederate position, which occupied a longer arc and held fewer troops than did the Federal line, as a target worth striking. If Hooker recalled his assaults against Marye’s Heights at Fredericksburg as reason to avoid a tactical assault, Meade’s memory of the same battle suggested a different conclusion. His division had achieved a brief lodgement against less-imposing Confederate positions. Meade was willing to conduct tactical offensives if he saw some prospect for success, and this was his view at Chancellorsville.\textsuperscript{58}

Participants, contemporaries, and historians have long debated the various controversies of Gettysburg, many involving Meade’s role. This work argues that Meade’s Gettysburg performance was active and effective. He rapidly concentrated his widely dispersed army, determined to fight on good ground (although selected by others, including the enemy), and conducted skillful tactical dispositions.


\textsuperscript{58} Meade, \textit{Life and Letters}, 1:370-73.
Virtually before the smoke drifted away from the shattered Pickett-Pettigrew-Trimble assault on 3 July, however, Meade's reputation as an army commander began to unravel. His failure to counterattack on 3 or 4 July, his cautious pursuit of Lee, and his failure to attack the enemy before they recrossed the Potomac at Williamsport proved to his critics that another West Point engineer lacked the spirit to wage audacious war.\(^ {59}\)

Fair or not, Meade's standing as an army commander was largely made and lost in Pennsylvania and Maryland during those first two weeks in July. Meade was proud of his officers and men and felt that they, and he, had done their best, but a number of observers, the president foremost among them,\(^ {60}\) felt Meade had squandered a golden opportunity to destroy the Army of Northern Virginia. When he issued a proclamation thanking his troops for their exertions and promising that continued efforts would "drive from our soil every vestige of the presence of the invader," Meade

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exasperated Lincoln,\textsuperscript{61} who always believed that, if properly attended to, the Army of Northern Virginia could not cross the Potomac and safely return. McClellan had disappointed him the previous September, and then Meade appeared equally disinterested in destroying the enemy army.\textsuperscript{62}

Part of the blame, however, rested with Lincoln.\textsuperscript{63} The necessity of protecting Washington might have transfixed Meade, but Lincoln's indecision over Hooker thrust Meade into command little more than seventy-two hours before he learned that his army was fighting on the Cashtown road. Given no time to adjust to army command, Meade spent most of the battle in a reactive mode, despite his attempts to find a defensible line in northern Maryland and a suitable position from which to launch a tactical offensive on the morning of 2 July. With limited combat experience as a corps commander and no opportunity to grow into army command, Meade was arguably unqualified for the position. The intense anxiety he felt those two weeks, with the safety of the capital and perhaps the cause itself shielded only by his unfamiliar subordinates and their troops, made his unwillingness to


\textsuperscript{62} Basler, Collected Works of Lincoln, 5:501, 6:341.

\textsuperscript{63} Nevins, War For the Union, 3:115-16.
court disaster, if not correct, understandable.64

After Antietam, McClellan allowed the enemy to spend the fall of 1862 amidst the bounty of the Shenandoah Valley, but after Williamsport Meade promptly moved his army and, but for the failure of Third Corps commander Major General William H. French, might have treated the Confederates roughly in late July.65 Lee led his army up the valley, and on 29 July, Lincoln ordered Meade to halt his pursuit.66 Meade’s first month in army command was hardly an unqualified success. His failure to attack at Williamsport severely damaged his credibility with Lincoln and the War Department. Granted greater discretion on the eve of Gettysburg, Meade returned after Williamsport to a more typical relationship between an Army of the Potomac commander and his superiors in Washington. Any operational plan had to satisfy Lincoln, Stanton, and Halleck that Washington was secure.

Students of the war in the east often treated the period from Williamsport to the Wilderness, or at least until Grant’s arrival, as unimportant or uneventful, and Meade as timid, afraid, or imprisoned by his overestimation of the

64 Meade, Life and Letters, 2: 132-33,139-41. Hattaway and Jones concluded that despite the long odds against tactical success at Williamsport, the strategic rewards demanded the attempt. How the North Won, 425. Also see A. Wilson Green, “Meade’s Pursuit of Lee: From Gettysburg to Falling Waters,” in Gary W. Gallagher, ed., The Third Day at Gettysburg and Beyond (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 161-201.

65 Major General Gouverneur K. Warren to Humphreys, no date (early December, 1863), Humphreys Papers, HSP, 18:108.

Virginia. At the end of November, Meade appeared to have found a solution in the Mine Run campaign. Well conceived, the Mine Run offensive operated within the strategic design and initially offered the Army of the Potomac an opportunity to punish its adversary, but French again bungled his assignment. Faced with a direct tactical assault, Meade withdrew and avoided a second Chancellorsville as Lee worked to turn the Union left. Unable to avoid direct tactical assaults and unwilling to conduct them, Meade went into winter quarters, expecting Lincoln to relieve him.

By December 1863, Grant and Meade were experienced army commanders apparently headed in different directions. Experience forged the strategic concepts Grant and Meade employed. Numerous authors have attempted to place Civil War strategy within the context of nineteenth-century European strategic thought as revealed by Baron Henri Jomini and Carl von Clausewitz. These studies are valuable attempts to understand the nature of the war, but these strategic ideas did not shape the generalship of Grant and Meade, especially at the late date of December 1863. If it was ever true “that many a Civil War general went into battle with a sword in one

69 Meade disliked the Orange and Alexandria as a line of operations as early as April 1862. Meade, Life and Letters, 1:259-60; Meade to Halleck, 2 November and 21 October, OR, 29, pt. 2, 409-10, 361-62.

70 Warren to Humphreys, no date (early December, 1863), Humphreys Papers, HSP, 18:108, 111; Francis A. Walker, History of the Second Army Corps in the Army of the Potomac (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1886), 370-73; Thomas W. Hyde, Following the Greek Cross: or, Memories of the Sixth Corps (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1894), 174-75.
hand and Jomini's *Summary of the Art of War* in the other,"  
It was during the early operations of the war. If Grant and  
Meade still figuratively carried this text into battle at the  
end of 1863, it was tucked away in their saddlebags, or  
perhaps buried somewhere in the headquarters wagons. Neither  
man left any evidence that these theoretical considerations  
interfered with his efforts to apply his experiences of Civil  
War combat to the development of a strategy for solving the  
problem at hand—destruction of the armed forces of the  
Confederacy.  

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71 J. D. Hittle quoted in David Donald, *Lincoln Reconsidered* (New York:  
Alfred A. Knopf, 1956; Vintage Books, 1961), 90 (page citations refer to  
reprint edition).

72 Bernard Brodie, "In Quest of the Unknown Clausewitz," *International  
A WINTER OF POLITICS, PREPARATION, AND PLANNING

As 1863 drew to a close, Ulysses S. Grant and George G. Meade were army commanders apparently headed in different directions. On 2 December, Meade wrote a long letter to his wife. He felt he had ample time for correspondence; he assumed that his failure to attack the Army of Northern Virginia at Mine Run had cost him his command. Later that week, Grant wrote General Halleck to propose using part of the forces in East Tennessee for a winter campaign against Mobile, Alabama; Grant was unwilling, or wished to avoid, "keeping so large a force idle, for months . . ."¹ Despite this divergence in fortunes, three months later Grant informed Meade that his job was secure.

Political and military developments during the winter of 1863-64 eventually resulted in the dual command structure of the Army of the Potomac and shaped the initial operations of the 1864 campaign. Issues that influenced the campaign included winter operations, the reorganization of the Army of the Potomac, the strategic and operational plans for the spring campaign in the east, and the addition of Grant and his staff to the war in Virginia. Politics, personnel choices, intra-army jealousy, and manpower requirements also played key roles.

Logistics, enemy resistance, and the rugged terrain of northern Georgia frustrated Grant's pursuit efforts after Chattanooga, but more pressing was the situation in

northeastern Tennessee. Confederate Lieutenant General James Longstreet’s two divisions besieged Burnside’s army at Knoxville in mid-November, and Grant was anxious for the safety of East Tennessee. On 29 November he ordered Sherman to march a relief column to Knoxville, and Sherman’s approach in early December convinced Longstreet to withdraw.² Knoxville was secure, but Longstreet, instead of attempting to rejoin Bragg in Georgia, withdrew eastward along the Virginia and Tennessee Railroad.

The presence of Longstreet’s force in East Tennessee had a significant impact on subsequent Union operations. Grant’s 7 December letter to Halleck suggested a winter campaign against Mobile, Alabama. Recognizing that the same logistical considerations that precluded his army from offensive operations affected the Confederates as well, Grant wanted to reduce his forces in Tennessee and move the surplus troops through New Orleans for a joint army-navy assault on Mobile. This would maintain pressure on the enemy and possibly result in a campaign up the Alabama River against Confederate resources and the rear of their army in northern Georgia.

This was a typical Grant plan— an aggressive continuation of operations to deny the Confederates time to recoup and refit, destroy their resources, and sever their rail communications—and it was a good one. On 17 and 21 December, however, Halleck telegraphed Grant and informed him

² Grant to Sherman, OR, 31, pt. 2, 49-50; Grant to Burnside, ibid., pt. 3, 273; Grant to Halleck, 29 November, ibid., 270; Simon, FUSG, 9:506; Sherman, Memoirs, 1:365-68.
that this proposal must await the "cleaning out" of East and West Tennessee. Operations against Mobile had to wait, and for several reasons the Federals never adopted the plan, but the primary restriction at this time was Longstreet's presence in East Tennessee. Lincoln felt particular concern for East Tennessee throughout the war and refused to sanction any plan that might allow the Confederates to regain control over the region and its pro-Union population.

Longstreet remained in East Tennessee until April 1864, and his presence initially forced Grant to spend considerable time and effort devising measures to at least drive the Confederates away. By mid-February, however, Grant changed his mind about the menace posed by his old friend Longstreet. East Tennessee was a logistician's nightmare; supply and transportation difficulties curtailed the size of any force Grant could send into the region. He eventually decided that East Tennessee was a fine place for Longstreet's army to spend the winter. They would suffer in the subsistence-poor region and cause no mischief elsewhere.

The East Tennessee situation is important to this study for three reasons. First, Grant and Meade began to

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3 Halleck to Grant, 17 and 21 December, OR, 31, pt. 3, 454 and 458.

4 Halleck to Grant, 26 December, OR, 31, pt. 3, 496–97; Brooks, Grant of Appomattox, 260. Dana recalled that Halleck made East Tennessee's security the top priority, but this was in full accord with Lincoln's views. Dana, Recollections, 156.

communicate, generally through Halleck, for Meade's army in Virginia was far to the rear of Longstreet. Second, Grant again demonstrated his understanding of the constraints logistics imposed on operations. Third, Grant's response to Lincoln's veto of the Mobile plan demonstrated his flexibility as a commander and his appreciation of the political dimensions of the war.

Communications between Grant and Meade concerning the situation in East Tennessee occurred against a political backdrop that affected operations and the Grant-Meade relationship. In mid-December, Grant's political patron, Congressman Elihu B. Washburne, introduced a bill to revive the grade of lieutenant general.\(^6\) Congressional fears that the measure would remove Grant from field command, or even worse, pose a threat to civilian control of the military by creating an American Cromwell, defeated the measure.\(^7\) Plans to revive the grade were not dead, but Congress hesitated, recognizing that the issues involved required deliberation. Nevertheless, neither Grant nor Meade could have misunderstood the gist of the debate. When Congress revived

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the grade, Grant was the officer they had in mind.

As Grant struggled to solve the East Tennessee problem, he learned that Halleck had ordered Meade to cut the railroad at Lynchburg, Virginia, to separate Longstreet from Virginia and, Halleck assumed, to force an enemy withdrawal from East Tennessee, but that as yet “nothing has been done.” The inability or unwillingness of the eastern army to offer active assistance could not have pleased Grant, who was unable to supply a force large enough to overwhelm Longstreet. Without making assumptions about the fate of the lieutenant generalcy bill, Grant concluded that perhaps a new commander for the Army of the Potomac would assist in army coordination, and Grant’s choice was Sherman or Brigadier General William F. Smith.

Meade, who received no confirmation of his continuance in command until 12 December, ordered his army into winter quarters and worked to provide intelligence on enemy dispositions. He expected official Washington to relieve him, and he certainly knew of the congressional debate aimed at Grant’s promotion, an eventuality that might also result in his removal. With recognition of his tenuous status as army commander and the example of Burnside’s “Mud March” the previous winter, large-scale operations against the Army of

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8 Halleck to Grant, 3 December, OR, 31, pt 3, 315; Simon, PUSG, 9:512-14. Also see Halleck to Grant, 14 December, OR, 31, pt. 3, 396.

9 Simon, PUSG, 9:502.

10 Meade, Life and Letters, 2:161; Bruce Catton, Grant Takes Command, 102-03.
Northern Virginia were impossible.

To conclude the discussion of East Tennessee, it is worth noting that the administration’s refusal to allow Grant to move against Mobile gave him an opportunity to contemplate a situation analogous to that confronting a commander of the Army of the Potomac. Despite the military advantages of the Mobile plan, the necessity of protecting an important political (as well as military) center prevented implementation.\textsuperscript{11} In this analogy, Chattanooga, and the rest of Union-held East Tennessee, became Washington; any operation that failed to provide absolute security for the political position was unacceptable. Unlike McClellan, and to a lesser degree Meade,\textsuperscript{12} Grant did not complain about political “interference” in military matters or accuse the government of a failure to support him, but adjusted his plans.

As 1863 drew to a close, Grant’s Chattanooga victory led dissatisfied politicians to consider Grant as a presidential candidate. Lincoln knew this and sought to discover the extent of Grant’s ambition. A consummate politician who quickly recognized potential rivals and deftly maneuvered to neutralize them, often by bringing them into the

\textsuperscript{11} Shelby Foote made essentially the same point. Foote, \textit{The Civil War}, 2:920.

\textsuperscript{12} Stephen W. Sears, \textit{George B. McClellan: The Young Napoleon} (New York: Ticknor and Fields, 1988), 175-76, 190-91, 213-15, 236. For Meade’s frustrations with the political leadership, see Hattaway and Jones, \textit{How the North Won}, 466. Unlike McClellan’s Harrison’s Landing letter, Meade’s complaints never reached the grotesque, but his private correspondence reflected a distrust of civilians.
administration, Lincoln feared Grant’s head had been turned by acclaim and visions of the presidency. In the face of this final barrier to the top command, Grant provided friends and supporters with assurances, and permission to share them with the president, that his only concern was crushing the rebellion. Grant, thus freed from the nasty business of politics, continued his efforts to suppress the South.

Lincoln’s war machine faced a threat more immediate than Grant’s potential political aspirations. The enlistments of tens of thousands of troops who volunteered in 1861 would expire during the spring and summer, and army commanders, Lincoln, and the War Department all feared losing these veterans. Conscription, and its boost to volunteerism, could produce new troops, but without a solid corps of veterans, the Union Army would conceivably melt away during the coming year. On 30 November, the War Department had addressed this frightening prospect by issuing General Orders, No. 367. Modified and expanded during the winter,

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14 Simon, FUSG, 9:541-44; Simpson, Let Us Have Peace, 50-53. For a more cynical view of Grant’s disavowal, see McFeely, Grant, 162-63.

15 Nicholay and Hay, Abraham Lincoln, 7:46-47; Nevins, War for the Union, 3:7-8. For a less sanguine view of the human material this process brought into the army, see Catton, Stillness at Appomattox, 22-32.

16 Catton, Stillness at Appomattox, 33-36; Thomas and Hyman, Stanton, 298. Approximately 136,000 veterans reenlisted.
this allowed reenlisting veterans to receive a thirty-day furlough, a $400 federal bounty, and a badge of honor designating them "veteran volunteers." As the winter progressed, the soldiers' encouraging response eased fears of training another green army, but most of the troop movements during this period were soldiers taking or returning from leave. This internal shuffling, occurring at different times in the various armies, obviously hampered operations.

On 19 January 1864, in response to an invitation from Halleck, Grant submitted his first strategic plan for the eastern theater. Grant's plan would land sixty thousand troops at Suffolk, Virginia, take Raleigh, North Carolina, and cut rail communications between Richmond and the lower South. As Herman Hattaway and Archer Jones argued, this plan revealed Grant's increasingly sophisticated strategic thinking. Recognizing the desperate Confederate defense of northern Virginia, he sought to turn the Army of Northern Virginia out of the region, and perhaps out of Virginia, by forcing them to move south to recover their communications. If Lee's army refused to attack to recover the southern supply lines through North Carolina, the Union force could exhaust southern resources and significantly interdict Richmond's communications.

17 Halleck to Grant, 8 January 1864, OR, 32, pt. 2, 40-2; Grant to Halleck, ibid., 33, 394-95; Cyrus B. Comstock, The Diary of Cyrus B. Comstock, ed. Merlin E. Sumner (Dayton, OH: Morningside, 1987), 252; also see Simon, PUSG, 10:39-40.

Speaking for Lincoln, Halleck rejected this approach but encouraged Grant to try again. Halleck, and subsequent historians, felt the plan aimed at the wrong objective.\(^{19}\) Since late 1862, Lincoln and Halleck saw Lee's army, not Richmond, as the proper objective in the east, and Grant's plan appeared to focus on the latter, perhaps allowing the Army of Northern Virginia to seize the initiative and again raid the North. Despite Halleck's military reasons for rejection, the fundamental criticism was political. The safety of Washington and the Maryland and Pennsylvania countryside was paramount, and at this point the administration formally introduced Grant to the strategic constraints of the Virginia theater. Strategic maneuver and war against enemy resources worked in the west, but after the failure of McClellan's Peninsula campaign, eastern strategy demanded the direct approach, and the Army of the Potomac would remain between Lee's army and Washington at all times.

This exchange did not involve Meade, and apparently he produced no written strategic proposal. Perhaps Meade made suggestions in direct conversation with Lincoln and Halleck, or perhaps Meade's understanding of the congressional debate led him to hold his tongue. He may have felt that, considering the reception his suggestions received the previous fall, the effort was pointless. Whatever his views, Meade took leave and left for Philadelphia in mid-January.

He promptly caught a cold that developed into pneumonia, and his recovery delayed his return to the Army of the Potomac until 15 February.\textsuperscript{20}

Yet Meade's 21 October 1863 proposal to withdraw the Army of the Potomac closer to Washington, to operate on the defensive, and to send thousands of troops to a "more favorable" line of operations, coupled with Grant's plan and the administration's rejection of both, revealed the North's utter frustration in the east. In a 19 September 1863 letter to Halleck, Lincoln produced a masterpiece of strategic thinking and deductive logic.\textsuperscript{21} Lincoln noted that Meade's army outnumbered Lee's three to two, but that Meade felt this superiority was insufficient to safely attack, for even if he achieved a tactical success, Lee could simply withdraw to another defensive position, either the next river line or into the fortifications of Richmond.\textsuperscript{22} Lincoln argued that if this was true, why not reduce the Army of the Potomac to a similar inferiority and stand on the defensive, "leaving us fifty thousand to put to some other use?"\textsuperscript{23}

\textsuperscript{20} After escaping his sickbed, Meade engaged in spontaneous recruiting and told an audience at Independence Hall: "The war can be closed only by desperate and bloody fighting. What we want is fighting men to destroy the military power of the Rebels." Cleaves, \textit{Meade of Gettysburg}, 219-20.


\textsuperscript{23} \textit{OR}, 29, pt. 2, 208
Lincoln's logic was impeccable, but logic and rationality only reduce uncertainty in war. When the real test of this theory came in January, with Grant's North Carolina plan, the administration understandably balked. Lincoln would not risk the short-term political damage of another Confederate raid of the North in exchange for long-term strategic advantages. Meade's critics, who have used Lincoln's letter to bash Meade's generalship in the fall of 1863, rarely considered this. Lincoln knew why his mathematics did not apply equally to both antagonists; the North could not run the political risks. Lincoln's letter reflected his frustration; when given an opportunity to act on this line of reasoning, he put his mathematics aside.

January did witness planning for two significant operations. As Meade's health deteriorated and Union veterans contemplated reenlistment, Grant approved a plan by Sherman that resulted in the 3 February-5 March Meridian campaign. In many respects, this campaign presaged Sherman's 15 November-21 December 1864 March to the Sea. Grant wanted to maintain pressure against the Confederates. Sherman's objective was the destruction of enemy resources and rail communications, and despite the failure of a Union cavalry force sent to cooperate with his infantry, the operation was a success. Since the fall of 1862, Grant and Sherman had waged war against enemy resources with increasing

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vigor, and on an increasingly larger scale. Sherman’s ability to supply roughly twenty thousand troops off the countryside, destroying resources the Union Army could not use, influenced Grant’s planning for the spring campaign in the west.

Beyond Grant’s department, and direct control, Major General Nathaniel P. Banks planned his Red River campaign (10 March–22 May 1864). The campaign’s significance to this study was twofold. First, ten thousand of Sherman’s troops participated, and Grant instructed Banks that these men had to be returned to Sherman in time for the spring campaign. 26 Grant still desired a campaign against Mobile, in conjunction with operations against the Confederate army in northern Georgia. The unsuccessful and prolonged Red River campaign ultimately forced Grant to abandon his designs on Mobile and the Alabama River. Second, Grant soon discovered that even the power and authority of a general-in-chief had limitations, for although he was never enthusiastic about the project, he was unable to prevent it from detracting from his spring campaign.

As Congress returned to the lieutenant generalcy bill in February, limited operations took place in the east. Sixth Corps commander Major General John Sedgwick commanded the Army of the Potomac in Meade’s absence. The War Department ordered Sedgwick to send troops across the Rapidan and demonstrate as a diversion to support an offensive proposed by Major General Benjamin F. Butler, based at Fort Monroe,

26 Simon, PUSG, 10:200-01.
Virginia. Sedgwick reluctantly complied and crossed elements of Second Corps at Morton's Ford; Butler's operation accomplished little. The 6-7 February fighting at Morton's Ford revealed how proximity to Washington affected Army of the Potomac commanders.  

Sedgwick, minding the store in Meade's absence, felt the movement would only serve to show the Confederate's where to strengthen their defenses, and would "spoil the chances for the future." This infuriated Stanton, who through Halleck demanded to know just what these future chances might be.

Meade arrived in Washington on 12 February on his way back to the army, and his discussions with Stanton over the next two days had a significant impact on subsequent operations. According to Freeman Cleaves, Meade's biographer, Stanton suggested reorganization of the Army of the Potomac. The validity of this interpretation is

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27 Orders from Washington forced Sedgwick to advance with little time for preparation. Warren, whose troops participated, wrote to Humphreys on the afternoon of 6 February: "I did not understand until now that a demonstration was intended." Humphreys Papers, HSP, 18:22. Also see Charles H. Porter, "Opening of the Campaign of 1864," in Papers of the Military Historical Society of Massachusetts, vol. 4: The Wilderness Campaign: May-June 1864 (Boston: Military Historical Society of Massachusetts, 1905), 4-5. Hereafter cited as MHSMM.

28 This episode appears in OR, 33, 113-43 (reports), 502-35, 552-54; see also Cleaves, Meade of Gettysburg, 220-21. The other significant operation before Grant's arrival was Kilpatrick's Richmond raid. Cleaves referred to these operations, which Meade, Sedgwick, and Humphreys viewed skeptically, (although there was limited early enthusiasm for the raid), as "the lunatic fringe of Butler and Kilpatrick." ibid., 223; Lyman, Meade's Headquarters, 68-71, 76-80; Catton, Stillness at Appomattox, 3-18.
difficult to assess.\textsuperscript{29} Less than three weeks after these meetings, however, Meade submitted a reorganization plan that, with modifications regarding brigade and divisional assignments, became official on 23 March.\textsuperscript{30} Reorganization disbanded First and Third Corps, impaired by heavy losses at Gettysburg, and assigned their units to the remaining Second, Fifth, and Sixth Corps.

In some respects, reorganization was as simple and straightforward as the published order suggested. The condition of First and Third Corps, War Department policy allowing states to raise new regiments before bringing existing regiments up to strength, and uncertainty over reenlistment made the reduction in the number of corps appear rational. Reorganization reduced paperwork and other redundancies. Yet seldom were matters this simple for the Army of the Potomac. Who reorganized the army, and why? Even a tentative answer to these questions sheds light on the initial phase of the Grant–Meade relationship.

There is no evidence that Grant was responsible for reorganization. The concurrence of official reorganization orders and Grant’s 24 March arrival at Culpeper to establish his headquarters was coincidental. Grant was not

\textsuperscript{29} Cleaves, \textit{Meade of Gettysburg}, 220. Information regarding these meetings is not readily available. Neither Stanton’s nor Meade’s biographers offered substantial documentation regarding reorganization, and Stanton’s papers in the Library of Congress scarcely mentioned the subject.

\textsuperscript{30} For Meade’s initial plan, War Department General Orders, No. 115, and Headquarters Army of the Potomac General Orders, No. 10, see \textit{OR}, 33, 638–39, 717–18, 722–23.
disinterested; with his personal prestige now tied to the difficult situation in Virginia and the authority to effect necessary changes, he would not have accepted what he viewed as a faulty organization.  

It is unclear, however, if Meade or Stanton was primarily responsible for the reorganization. At least two officers documented reorganization rumors, undoubtably swirling through the Army of the Potomac, as early as the second week of January.  

Scores of officers traveled to and from Washington during the suspension of large-scale operations, and the information loop between the leadership in the capital and the officer corps in Virginia was highly permeable. Most army secrets were more or less open. If Stanton surprised Meade by asserting that particular corps commanders were a positive detriment to successful operations, the subject of reorganization in general could not have surprised him, even considering his extended leave. Meade had missed two of his most trusted corps commanders—Major Generals Winfield S. Hancock and John F. Reynolds—since Gettysburg, and French's performance had

31 Badeau, Military History of U. S. Grant, 2:41. Badeau described Grant as authorizing and sanctioning the reorganization. For the persistence of the idea that Grant reorganized the Army of the Potomac, see Pratt, Stanton: Lincoln's Secretary of War, 352.

32 Major General Winfield S. Hancock to Brigadier General Seth Williams, Assistant Adjutant-General (AA-G), Army of the Potomac, 10 January, OR, 33, 369; Wainwright, A Diary of Battle, 314.

33 Cleaves, Meade of Gettysburg, 220.

34 Meade Life and Letters, 2:136.
been particularly disappointing. Whether the impetus to reorganize the army originated with Meade or Stanton, Meade viewed the discussions with Stanton as an opportunity to rid his army of ineffective subordinates. Yet Meade’s reorganization order explicitly stated that the new arrangement was temporary, and that he was simply carrying out a War Department order. Meade knew that displaced officers would grumble, and he appeared determined to indicate that ultimate authority for the measure rested with the War Department. Still unsure of his command, (the lieutenant generalcy bill passed six days before he sent his plan to Washington), Meade most likely would not have made such a sweeping arrangement without Stanton’s explicit approval.

Meade commanded the Army of the Potomac, but by March 1864 the question was, who commanded Meade? During the previous fall, and despite his clear assessment of the strategic stalemate in Virginia, Meade often asked the government for “authority” or a clarification of his command prerogatives. Unsure of his objective and the government’s

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35 Ibid., 2:164-66; Porter, “Campaign of 1864,” PMHS, 4:6. Both Meade and Stanton entertained the idea of some sort of reorganization during the latter half of 1863. In late July, Meade had requested permission to break up Eleventh Corps. Meade to Halleck, Halleck to Meade, 29 July 1863, OR, 27, pt. 1, 105-06. In November, Stanton had received an extraordinary, and evidently unsolicited, reorganization plan from Ohio Governor William Dennison. Dennison to Stanton, 4 November 1863, Container 19, Papers of Edwin M. Stanton, Library of Congress, Microfilm Reel 7. Stanton’s response to this proposal and its effect on his attitude toward reorganization is not known.

expectations, and prepared, perhaps even longing, for his own removal, Meade could only have grown less assertive after Mine Run and the increasingly obvious approach of Grant as superior officer. Meade reorganized the Army of the Potomac under Stanton’s protective authority, for without recognizing Stanton’s role, it is difficult to imagine Meade undertaking such a contentious structural alteration of an army he might or might not lead into its next battle. The discussion of the relationship between Grant and Meade in the Wilderness will return to this example of Meade’s willingness to act decisively under another man’s authority.

Numerous sources recounted the adoption of the lieutenant generalcy bill and Grant’s arrival in Washington to receive the honor and responsibility of commanding all the Union armies in the field. Grant accepted his commission on 9 March, and the next day he took the train down the Orange and Alexandria to visit Meade and the Army of the Potomac. Meade offered to step down and serve in a diminished capacity if Grant felt such a move was in the best interest of the service and the country. Grant responded that this unselfish attitude impressed him, and he informed Meade that “I [Grant] had no thought of substituting any one for him [Meade].”


Any approach to the Grant-Meade relationship that begins with Grant's memoirs and Meade's published letters must accept Grant's recollection, but actually Meade was closer to losing his command than he realized, or than Grant implied twenty years after the fact. A closer examination of Grant's decision to retain Meade illuminates both Grant's strategic thinking and the subsequent dual command structure in the east.

When Charles A. Dana returned to Washington from Knoxville in mid-December 1863, he conferred with Lincoln, Stanton, and Halleck. Despite Dana's official position as an assistant secretary of war, he functioned as an unofficial member of Grant's staff, serving as a conduit for Grant to inform the administration of his plans and wishes. Grant wanted to replace Meade with either Sherman or Smith, who would effectively coordinate the efforts of the eastern army with operations in the west, and according to Dana this suggestion met no opposition, other than Halleck's observation that Smith might prove a difficult subordinate. Yet Smith had impressed Grant at Chattanooga, and apparently he foresaw no such difficulties.

Soon, however, Smith's name disappeared from the exchanges between Grant and Halleck. Aware of the ongoing congressional debate, Grant apparently decided to defer any requests for changes in the eastern command until the future determined his command status. If he became general-in-

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40 Simon, PUSG, 9:502; Bate, Meade and Jones, How the North Won, 512. For Dana's view of his role, see Dana to Stanton, 12 December 1863, OR, 31, pt. 2, 73.
chief, he would possess the authority to dispose of the matter as he saw fit.41

These conditions had not materially changed as Grant traveled to Washington in early March. He had informed the administration that he would not accept any promotion that required him to reside in Washington, and this condition having been met, he intended to return to the western theater for the 1864 campaign.42 During his discussions with Lincoln, Stanton, and Halleck on 8-9 March, however, Grant learned of the administration’s view concerning Meade and the coming campaign. Grant believed the administration desired a change in the Army of the Potomac command,43 and he glimpsed the political pressure routinely brought to bear on any commander of that army. When the administration informed him that they desired no such change, or were at least willing to leave the matter in Grant’s hands, he began to view the situation in Virginia differently, for these discussions also made it clear that Grant’s headquarters for the coming campaign belonged in the eastern theater.44

Grant understood this requirement. Washington was the nerve center of the Union military effort, and as general-in-chief, he needed to facilitate communications with Lincoln,

41 Hattaway and Jones, How the North Won, 511.

42 Simon, PUSG, 10:166-67, 186-87.

43 Badeau, Military History of U. S. Grant, 2:16; Catton, Grant Takes Command, 128.

44 Grant, Memoirs, 2:116; McFeely, Grant, 156; Thomas and Hyman, Stanton, 297.
the War Department, and the bureau chiefs. A second reason was psychological. Lee and the Army of Northern Virginia had acquired such an exalted status in the northern mind that Grant, the northern hero, could hardly avoid a direct confrontation. This might have significantly contributed to the earlier rejection of Grant's North Carolina plan. Not only did it look suspiciously like a plan McClellan might have proposed, but it avoided direct contact with Lee in Northern Virginia. Grant informed Meade on 10 March that the general-in-chief's headquarters would be in the field with the Army of the Potomac. Common sense dictated this choice. The only significant and sensible location in the east for Grant's headquarters, outside Washington, was with Meade's command.

When Grant wrote in 1885 that he had no intention of replacing Meade, he probably recalled his thought process as he rode the southbound train for Culpeper. He did not reveal that, only a day or two earlier, he probably planned to remove Meade. Once Grant decided to remain in the east, it was no longer necessary to replace Meade with a western general who would coordinate the movements of the eastern and western armies. Grant would personally ensure that the Army of the Potomac played its assigned role. Meade had heard the rumors that Grant backed Smith for the Army of the Potomac command, and that Grant believed the reason that army had not achieved greater success was the poor performance of its top

Grant satisfied Meade by maintaining him, or at least by defining his status, and Meade satisfied Grant by offering to step aside and placing the good of the cause above personal ambition.

It is unfortunate that more is not known about the initial discussions between Grant and Meade. Persistent rains made it impossible for Grant to review the army, and he and Meade took the train for Washington the next day to attend to very different matters. Yet they obviously reached an understanding and believed they could work together. Their joint venture, with Meade relieved of ultimate authority and responsibility, endured through the balance of the war.

Grant quickly returned to the west. He saw to the promotion of Sherman and McPherson, his two most trusted subordinates, and learned of Sherman’s fears about the baneful effect Washington had on military men; Sherman felt the capital had ruined his friend Halleck. Grant relieved Sherman’s mind by relating his decision to establish headquarters in the field, and they discussed plans and preparations for the spring campaign. Grant was back in Culpeper on 24 March.

46 Patrick, Inside Lincoln’s Army, 330; Meade, Life and Letters, 2:176.

47 According to Comstock, however, as late as 17 March Meade still believed he would lose his command to Smith. Comstock, Diary of Comstock, 261.

48 General Orders No. 98, 12 March, OR, 32, pt. 3, 58; Sherman to Grant, 10 April, ibid., 313; Simon, PUSG, 10:186-88; Grant, Memoirs, 117-19; Sherman, Memoirs, 2:5-6.
As Grant prepared to fight what he hoped would be the last campaign of the war, Meade fought what he later dubbed "The Second Battle of Gettysburg." On 4 March, Meade happened to be in Washington attending to details of the proposed reorganization of the Army of the Potomac when he learned of the proceedings before the Joint Congressional Committee on the Conduct of the War. Rumors that Meade did not want to fight at Gettysburg, wished to retreat on the night of 2 July, and handled his troops poorly had surfaced soon after the battle, but testimony from 26 February to 4 March led the committee, "in behalf of the army and the country," to demand Meade's removal. The committee wanted Joe Hooker for the command, but Lincoln thought it unfair to damn Meade without allowing him an opportunity to testify. Lincoln also had no intention of allowing the committee to push Hooker into the command; Lincoln had tried Hooker and found him wanting.

Meade testified with little preparation. Over the next few weeks his additional testimony, and that of other officers present at Gettysburg, defused the attack. These hearings had some effect on Meade's performance and revealed something of his character. Lincoln had just signed the


50 Ibid., 2:170-76. This account, written by Meade's son, was obviously biased in Meade's favor. For a more scholarly account, see T. Harry Williams, Lincoln and the Radicals (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1941), 303-05, 337-41.

51 Cleaves, Meade of Gettysburg, 225-27; Williams, Lincoln and the Radicals, 338.
lieutenant generalcy bill into law, and Meade recognized that the radicals, his most bitter enemies, had adopted Grant as one of their own and now appeared determined to remove the commander of the Army of the Potomac, freeing Grant to place Hooker, one of their favorites, in command.\textsuperscript{52} With reenlistment, recruiting, reorganization, and material preparation for the spring campaign ongoing, neither Meade nor the army needed the distractions and ill-will the controversy generated.

Meade maintained a high moral tone publicly, but the controversy inevitably became intertwined with other army matters, particularly reorganization. Rumors flew that Meade disbanded First and Third Corps in a fit of pique over the testimony of officers from those organizations, or for some other political reason.\textsuperscript{53} Meade issued no public rejoinders that could only have further damaged morale, yet the controversy vexed him, for he was overly sensitive to direct or implied criticism, and at times appeared more concerned with protecting his reputation than maintaining his job.\textsuperscript{54} It is ironic he survived in his uncomfortable position as an army commander whose contributions were often lost in the public's regard for Grant.


\textsuperscript{53} Meade, \textit{Life and Letters}, 2:320-21; Wainwright, \textit{A Diary of Battle}, 315.

\textsuperscript{54} Cleaves, \textit{Meade of Gettysburg}, 226.
Meade weathered this political storm, but his credibility suffered. His initial testimony revealed a remarkable memory and clear conceptualization of the lengthy and intricate battle, for had Meade not been a highly capable man, he could never have offered such testimony off the cuff. The corroboration of numerous officers within his army, and their attitude toward Meade and the committee, indicated that although Meade had failed to solve the strategic dilemma in Virginia, he still enjoyed the support and respect of most of the officer corps.\textsuperscript{55} Justly or not, Meade had often felt that he did not possess the appropriate and necessary authority to plan and execute operations in the fall of 1863. Coupled with the Gettysburg controversy, Grant’s arrival in Virginia relieved Meade of what he considered his “false position” as an army commander held responsible for achieving results but unable to conduct operations as he saw fit.\textsuperscript{56}

Grant possessed enormous prestige, fearsome responsibility, and great authority. It is a mistake, however, to view Grant as untrammeled or autonomous. Lincoln maintained his position as commander-in-chief and reserved to himself the most fundamental questions of strategy. The oft-quoted exchange between Grant and Lincoln, when Lincoln said that he did not want to know Grant’s plan and Grant obliged,\textsuperscript{57} did not describe the limits of Grant’s authority. During the


\textsuperscript{56} Meade, \textit{Life and Letters}, 2:189.

\textsuperscript{57} Grant, \textit{Memoirs}, 2:122-23; Williams, \textit{Lincoln and His Generals}, 304-06.
six weeks between the establishment of his headquarters and the crossing of the Rapidan, Grant reached into the far recesses of the huge Union Army to place as many troops as possible on the firing line, reorganized and rationalized the army’s departmental structure, developed his strategic plans for concerted effort by all the armies in the field, and made personnel decisions that the government generally supported. But the Army of the Potomac did not detach large numbers of troops to other fields, and it remained between Lee’s army and Washington. Lincoln drew the broad strategic outline, and Grant, typically, worked within the framework. Lincoln trusted Grant as he had no other general since the early days of McClellan, and both Lincoln and Halleck, worn by their attempts to direct the army, welcomed Grant’s arrival and his willingness to take responsibility and act.

Grant’s job was tremendous in weight and scope, and he needed a commander for the Army of the Potomac. He also needed Halleck. Halleck had voluntarily resigned on Grant’s arrival, but essentially he continued to perform the same duties he had since his arrival in the east, or at least since the battle of Second Bull Run. With the various army


59 Dana, Recollections, 186-87; Badeau, Military History of U. S. Grant, 2:18; Hattaway and Jones, How the North Won, 482; Noah Andre Trudeau, Bloody Roads South: The Wilderness to Cold Harbor, May-June 1864 (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1989), 10-11. For the constraints Lincoln and the political situation placed on Grant, see Simpson, Let Us Have Peace, 54-57.

60 General Orders, No. 98, OR, 33, 669; Ambrose, Halleck, 161-64.
and departmental commanders responsible to Grant, and with Halleck in Washington to channel and facilitate communications between the general-in-chief in the field and his far-flung subordinates, the North achieved the finest command system in the western world.61 By twentieth-century standards it still creaked and groaned at times, but telegraphic communications, faith in his primary subordinate Sherman, and Halleck's ability to carry much of the administrative burden allowed Grant practical control over the Union military effort.

Grant also required time to think. Supplying the wants and needs of an hundred-thousand man army, stockpiling supplies, preparing the support systems required during active operations, and overseeing day-to-day army administration was a daunting task; even if Grant had wanted this added burden, he did not have time for it. Meade often wrote to his wife during these weeks that Grant was scarcely involved in the affairs of the Army of the Potomac,62 and it was no wonder. As Grant sought to weld the previously disjointed Union military effort into a single, if still rather loose-jointed, organization, Meade commanded the Army of the Potomac.

In April, as Meade prepared his army and Grant perfected his strategic plan for the spring campaign, the controversy surrounding Meade's role at Gettysburg and the reorganization

61 Williams, Lincoln and His Generals, 302-03.

of the Army of the Potomac abated. Reorganization displaced several general officers, and although Grant had no role in relieving corps commanders, he did make personnel choices for the cavalry. Grant felt that Union cavalry had thus far performed ineffectively, and he brought two western generals into the Army of the Potomac Cavalry Corps, Major General Philip H. Sheridan as corps commander and Brigadier General James H. Wilson as a divisional commander. The addition of Grant, his staff, and the new cavalry officers to the camps around Culpeper provided an undercurrent to the preparations in Virginia--rivalry and jealousy between the eastern and western components of the Union Army.

Despite Grant's postwar claim that cooperation and mutual assistance marked the integration of western and eastern elements of the Union Army, east-west tension was a factor in the merger of western officers into the principal eastern army. During the Chattanooga campaign, tension arose between Hooker's command, formerly Eleventh and Twelfth Corps of the Army of the Potomac, and western troops. While the western armies conquered the Mississippi Valley and drove the Confederates into the Deep South, the Army of the Potomac had suffered grievous casualties and still found itself roughly fifty miles from the camps it left on the march to First Bull Run.

63 Grant to Halleck, 6 April, OR, 33, 809; War Department General Orders, No. 154 and Headquarters Armies of the United States Special Orders, No. 10, ibid., 816; Grant, Memoirs, 2:133-34.

64 Grant, Memoirs, 2:84-85; Foote, The Civil War, 2:842-43. Also see Catton, Stillness at Appomattox, 21-22, 43.
Lincoln and Grant appreciated this difficulty. Lincoln even asked Grant to say something "complimentary" toward the Army of the Potomac when he accepted the lieutenant generalcy, and Grant considered the sensibilities of the eastern officer corps when he contemplated replacing Meade with a western general. 65 Once in Virginia, the integration of Grant's staff into the eastern command structure was relatively smooth, primarily because of Grant's tact and his determination to allow Meade most of the prerogatives of his position, although the undercurrent of rivalry continued. 66

Any difficulties caused by rivalry or jealousy were less significant than certain political realities that affected the selection of army commanders. The 1864 employment of Banks in Louisiana, Major General Franz Sigel in the Shenandoah Valley, and Butler on the Virginia peninsula resulted from Lincoln's use of military appointments to cement the northern political coalition. 67 Grant chose none of these men, again indicating the limits of his authority as general-in-chief, but typically he accepted the situation and attempted to integrate their presence into his plans. Banks

65 Basler, Works of Lincoln, 7:234; Catton, Grant Takes Command, 130-32.
66 Badeau, Military History of U. S. Grant, 2:87-88. Provost Marshall General Patrick disliked Colonel Cyrus B. Comstock, of Grant's staff, "on account of his being too big for his breeches." Patrick, Inside Lincoln's Army, 350. The easterners found the westerners brash and cocky and often informed them, "You have not yet met Bobby Lee." Grant, Memoirs, 2:292; Catton, Grant Takes Command, 170.
67 Lincoln placed Sigel in command of the Department of West Virginia, although Meade briefly feared he would lose Sedgwick to the post. General Orders, No. 8, OR, 33, 664; Basler, Works of Lincoln, 7:129, 199, 244n; Cleaves, Meade of Gettysburg, 221.
frustrated Grant, and his strategic design, when the lengthy and unsuccessful Red River campaign delivered the death blow to Grant's long cherished plan for a campaign against Mobile.

Grant expected only limited strategic results from Sigel's command, but Grant believed Sigel could at least protect the lower valley and damage Confederate logistics. He instructed Sigel to protect the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad by advancing against the enemy instead of maintaining garrisons, and to interdict Confederate communications by striking the Virginia and Tennessee Railroad. From map study, Grant suggested lines of operations for the two columns in Sigel's department, but when Sigel raised objections based on rugged terrain and poor roads, Grant informed him that he had no intention of dictating the campaign; Sigel was free to modify planning, but the objectives remained. 68 Breaking enemy communications, and protecting his own, were the keys to Grant's plan for Sigel, but that unfortunate general stumbled into, and lost, the 15 May battle of New Market. Sigel withdrew down the valley, and the western prong of Grant's Virginia offensive failed. Grant accepted Banks and Sigel, men he would not have chosen; subsequent military failure led to their removal.

68 Although many documents appear in both the Official Records and The Papers of U. S. Grant, the latter, which includes information not found in the OR and groups that information thematically, is in many instances a superior source, at least for Grant. For the communications between Grant and Sigel that resulted in the deployment of Sigel's two columns, and Grant's moderate expectations, see Simon, PUBG, 10:252, 257-59, 264-66, 282-83, 286-87, 310-15.
The general-in-chief expected more from Butler. His objective was Richmond, and Grant hoped that an advance up the south bank of the James River by Butler's Army of the James would force Lee to hasten southward to protect the city and its vital rail communications. Grant was guardedly optimistic that Butler, reinforced by Smith and ten thousand troops under Major General Quincy A. Gilmore, would succeed in pressing Richmond so aggressively that Lee would abandon the Rapidan line. 69 Grant visited Butler to discuss his role in the campaign; a staff officer consulted with Sigel.

Butler's assignment made it imperative that the Army of the Potomac engage the enemy as soon as possible. If Lee decided to fight on the Rapidan line, engagement would prevent him from falling on Butler's smaller army, maintaining the opportunity to seize Richmond. If Lee withdrew to Richmond to oppose Butler's advance, the Army of the Potomac could strike the enemy as it marched south. Whether Lee stood or withdrew, the Union Army had an opportunity to either seize Lee's best defensive position or to attack him on the march in open country. Unfortunately for Grant's design, the enemy blunted Butler's initial advance and confined the Army of the James at Bermuda Hundred. The eastern prong of the Virginia plan thus failed as well.

A third strategic component of Grant's plan for the eastern theater, beyond the role assigned to the Army of the Potomac, was Ambrose Burnside's Ninth Corps. Despite his

difficulties in Virginia in 1862, Burnside had rendered good service at Knoxville, and he spent the winter on a successful recruiting mission that swelled Ninth Corps to approximately twenty thousand men. Burnside outranked Meade, and when Ninth Corps eventually joined Grant's concentration in Virginia, Grant maintained direct command over the corps as a separate entity.\textsuperscript{70} In the meantime, he used Burnside's command as a strategic diversion. Grant's decision to travel with the Army of the Potomac intimated that the main Union effort in 1864 would fall in Virginia.\textsuperscript{71} To counteract the predictable Confederate counter-concentration opposite Meade's army, Grant attempted to encourage continued Confederate dispersion by concealing the ultimate deployment of Burnside's corps as long as possible.\textsuperscript{72} Rumors suggested that Burnside would land on the North Carolina coast, and

\textsuperscript{70} Stanton to Burnside, 29 January, \textit{OR}, 33, 443-44; Grant, \textit{Memoirs}, 2:193. Grant attached Ninth Corps to Meade's command on 24 May. \textit{OR}, 36, pt. 3, 169. Burnside informed Meade in March that he would serve under his former subordinate. Perhaps Grant was unaware of this; the reason generally given for Burnside's independent status was an attempt to soothe his feelings. Cleaves, \textit{Meade of Gettysburg}, 234-35; Badeau, \textit{Military History of U. S. Grant}, 2:88-89. Grant might, however, have wanted direct access to a striking force independent of Meade's orders.

\textsuperscript{71} Meade and Lee both interpreted Grant's presence in this light. Meade, \textit{Life and Letters}, 2:181; Lee to Confederate President Jefferson Davis, 30 March, \textit{OR}, 33, 1244; Hattaway and Jones, \textit{How the North Won}, 538.

\textsuperscript{72} On 4 April Grant informed Sherman, and at least by 9 April so informed Meade, that Ninth Corps would join the Army of the Potomac. Apparently Grant informed Burnside of his destination by 23 April. Humphreys to Warren, 24 April, Humphreys Papers, HSP, 39:121; Simon, \textit{PUSG}, 10:252, 261-63, 275; Stanton to Burnside, 5 April, \textit{OR}, 33, 807-08; Grant, \textit{Memoirs}, 2:128; Badeau, \textit{Military History of U. S. Grant}, 2:43, 88.
Grant strove to shroud Burnside's actual destination in secrecy.

The strategic and operational objectives of the Army of the Potomac were simple and straightforward, at least in theory. Grant instructed Meade that Lee's army was the strategic objective, that "wherever Lee goes there you will go also." Each Union army outnumbered its Confederate counterpart, and if the North, by advancing on all fronts, could prevent the South from executing the type of strategic redeployment that shifted Longstreet's two divisions to the western theater in time to participate in the battle of Chickamauga, the South could not achieve even numerical parity on any front. Grant and Sherman assured each other that they would operate aggressively to forestall such a move, and if the South attempted redeployment anyway, they would immediately inform each other and operate to exploit the weakened southern army that sent troops to another front.  

The operational objective for the Army of the Potomac was to reach the James River. The problem, which confounded Meade the previous fall, was how to get there without

73 Grant to Meade, 9 April, OR, 33, 828.

74 Sherman to Grant, 4 April, ibid., 32, pt. 3, 314; Catton, Grant Takes Command, 170-74; Sherman, Memoirs, 2:25-26. Grant and Sherman were determined to prevent the enemy from executing a strategic redeployment. Grant's desire to engage Lee's army as soon as possible indicated his determination to prevent an operational redeployment within the Virginia theater.

75 Simon, PUSG, 10:274, 327; Grant to Halleck, 29 April, OR, 33, 1017-18; Badeau, Military History of U. S. Grant, 2:45.
presenting Lee with an opportunity to regain the strategic initiative and raid the North. Grant determined that Meade’s army would fight its way to the James if Lee offered battle. The decision to fight on the Rapidan, if necessary, led to the more problematic tactical choices. Grant fully agreed with Meade that a frontal assault on Lee’s strong position on the south bank of the Rapidan was unattractive. Thus the question was, turn Lee’s left or his right?

The reasons for the decision to turn Lee’s right—crossing the Rapidan below Lee’s position—were clear, unlike the manner in which the decision was made. Turning Lee’s left above his position offered both greater potential rewards and greater risks. Open country to the west and southwest would allow exploitation of numerical superiority, although Confederate possession of Clark Mountain would also allow Lee to observe the Federal maneuver. The immediate reward was the opportunity to threaten Lee’s communications and preempt any attempt on his part to move north. The immediate problem was that, by marching away from their communications, the Army of the Potomac would have to accomplish its goals while supplies carried in the wagon train lasted.76 Grant, who had taken great risks the previous May in the Mississippi interior, opted for the safer route.

Perhaps Grant would have led the Army of the Tennessee on such a maneuver; perhaps his lack of experience with the capabilities of the Army of the Potomac led him to doubt the wisdom of taking such a risk. Yet Grant’s appreciation of

the political situation explains the decision to turn Lee's
right at least as well as does his logistical assessment.
The North was guardedly optimistic in the spring of 1864, but
any disaster that befell an army in the field could quickly
change that view. Grant believed that not only did the North
have to win the war in the 1864 campaign, but that the
political situation demanded immediate results. By crossing
below the Army of Northern Virginia, Grant was confident that
Lee would either retire to Richmond or offer battle, and the
naturally optimistic Grant was eager to fight Lee's army. 77

Nonetheless, turning Lee's right presented difficulties
as well. In 1863 the Army of the Potomac had suffered defeat
and disappointment amidst the second-growth timber and
entangling underbrush of the Virginia Wilderness, the region
through which the army must pass when crossing the Rapidan
below Lee's position. With the anniversary of the
Chancellorsville campaign approaching, particularly Jackson's
2 May flank attack, and memories of the Mine Run campaign
fresh, veterans of the Army of the Potomac understood the
undesirability of fighting in the region. Chancellorsville
had demonstrated how the Wilderness offset numerical
superiority and screened enemy movements; Mine Run indicated
the difficulty of rapid maneuver and effective control along
narrow roads with restricted fields of vision. Meade
certainly shared these conclusions with Grant, and Grant did

77 Badeau, Military History of U. S. Grant, 2:96-97. Badeau labored to
prove that Grant wanted to fight Lee so badly that the warfare in the
Wilderness completely fulfilled Grant's requirements. This was an
overstatement which this analysis assesses in the conclusion.
not intend to fight in the Wilderness.

By 29 April, Grant decided to turn Lee’s right, but recognizing that circumstances could alter his plans, he seemed to delay informing Meade.78 On 2 May Humphreys wrote the order that started the Army of the Potomac southward in the early hours of 4 May, but what influence, if any, Meade and Humphreys and the other veterans of the Wilderness had on the decision is difficult to discern.

It is inconceivable (and untrue) that, after instructing Meade to aim for the James, Grant retired to his tent. It is equally inconceivable that Meade and other brother officers failed to warn Grant about the nature of the ground the army would march through. Yet when Humphreys wrote the order, Grant and Meade both seemed to recede into the background, leading historians to wonder how much latitude Humphreys exercised in choosing particular geographic objectives for the various corps when they crossed the river. Perhaps the clues to these decisions evaporated into the Virginia sky as Grant, Meade, their staff officers, and the general officers of the Army of the Potomac discussed the coming campaign.79 If not lost to history, important information on this subject is not readily available. What is certain is that the ever active Grant not only instructed Meade on the Army of the

78 Meade’s Report, 1 November 1864, OR, 36, pt. 1, 189; Grant to Halleck, 29 April, ibid., 33, 1017.

79 As Humphreys, a vital participant who, with Grant and Meade, probably knew as much about these events as anyone, began to gather material for his book on the campaign, he complained: “I have been literally wandering in the Wilderness. . . .” Humphreys to de Peyster, 24 December 1881, Humphreys Papers, HSP, 29:37.
Potomac's line of operations, but that he also involved himself in decisions he generally delegated to subordinate commanders. Grant's prestige and career were now tied to the troublesome Virginia theater, and this proximity led him to become involved in the command of the Army of the Potomac before it ever crossed the Rapidan.

Grant cut his communications more decisively when he advanced into the Wilderness than he had below Vicksburg. The Army of the Potomac's wagon train carried fifteen-day's supplies, for the advance detached the army from the Orange and Alexandria Railroad. Until the army reestablished communications on one of the Virginia rivers, this huge wagon train was the source of all available supplies,\(^{80}\) and indeed the possibility of establishing secure, water-borne communications recommended the eastern route around Lee's army.

To concentrate the Army of the Potomac for the advance, Fifth Corps, commanded by Major General Gouverneur K. Warren, required relief from duty guarding the railroad. Burnside's Ninth Corps was at Annapolis, Maryland, where perhaps it would embark on transports and assail the Confederate coast. Grant allowed this uncertainty to continue as long as possible and then ordered Burnside to relieve Fifth Corps on the railroad.\(^{81}\) As Burnside's men arrived, Warren marched his troops to rejoin Sedgwick's Sixth Corps and Second Corps,

\(^{80}\) Grant to Halleck, 29 April, OR, 33, 1017.

\(^{81}\) Simon, \textit{PUSG}, 10:342-44.
again commanded by Hancock who had partially recovered from his Gettysburg wound. Grant hoped that, should Lee stand and fight on the Rapidan, Burnside would arrive on the battlefield before Confederate units detained elsewhere by his mysterious destination could reinforce Lee.

The 1864 campaign in the east began when the Army of the Potomac crossed the Rapidan: Fifth Corps followed by Sixth Corps at Germanna Ford, and Second Corps followed by the wagon train at Ely’s Ford, about five miles to the east.\(^2\) As the campaign progressed, Grant’s telegraphic communications with Washington allowed him to direct the Union’s far-flung armies, and for the first time in the war the Union Army moved with a single, integrated purpose. For the next few days, however, Grant might as well have been on the moon, for as Lincoln remarked, with an equanimity that reflected both his confidence in Grant and his relief at finding a man to run the army, “You see, Grant has gone into the Wilderness, crawled in, drawn up the ladder, and pulled in the hole after him, and I guess we’ll have to wait till he comes out before we know just what he’s up to.”\(^3\)

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\(^2\) To facilitate the advance of the trains, roughly half crossed the river at Ely’s Ford, the other half crossing at Culpeper Mine Ford, approximately two miles to the west.

BATTLE IN THE VIRGINIA WILDERNESS

Of all the major Civil War engagements in the east, perhaps none confronted commanders with greater command and control challenges than the battle of the Wilderness. Topography and terrain limited the effectiveness of commanding officers at every level, from army command down to the regimental and even company levels. The chaotic struggle in the Wilderness hardly represented the optimal conditions under which Grant and Meade could test their dual command structure.

Neither man "intended or wished" a general engagement in the Virginia Wilderness between the Army of Northern Virginia and the Army of the Potomac, augmented by Burnside's Ninth Corps. Officers and soldiers who had marched and fought in the 1863 Chancellorsville and Mine Run campaigns recognized the limitations the region imposed on operations, a fact that led some historians to view the engagement as a result of Federal miscalculation. But while Grant and Meade, consistent with their command experiences and strategic

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1. Major Henry R. Dalton, Report, OR, 36, pt. 1, 660. Dalton's report on the operations of First Division, Sixth Corps, on the morning of 5 May noted that "the thick and tangled underbrush" seriously impeded the advance of the skirmish line, the most loose-ordered formation in the infantry. Also see William W. Swan, "Battle of the Wilderness," PMHS, 4:130; Catton, Grant Takes Command, 83; Catton, Stillness at Appomattox, 72-73.

2. Humphreys, Virginia Campaign, 56; Rhea, Battle of the Wilderness, 93.

approaches, hoped to avoid battle within the Wilderness, they viewed the prospect as a possibility that fit within the strategic design for the 1864 campaign in Virginia and the objectives assigned to the Army of the Potomac.

The Wilderness—stretching roughly twelve miles from the vicinity of Chancellorsville on the east to Mine Run on the west, and on average six miles north to south from the Rapidan southward—was a jungle of second growth oak and pine, latticed with underbrush so thick that visibility on a sunny day was often measured in yards. Tangled belts of undergrowth and trees separated the few clearings.

A visit to the present-day battlefield is misleading. One can move off the modern highways and into the woods to gain an appreciation of the difficult terrain and limited field of vision, but the area is much more open than it was in 1864. The width of today's highways and secondary roads would have been a blessing to the officers who attempted to move their troops through the Wilderness. In 1864, the major roads were narrow and lined with dense forest; many secondary roads were mere woodcuts or trails.

Participants and students of the battle unfailingly commented on these physical features, and others, that made

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5 For difficulties other than the thick forests, such as swamps, swales, and the topographical effects of previous mining activity in the region, see Lyman, Meade's Headquarters, 89; McHenry Howard, "Notes and Recollections of Opening the Campaign of 1864," PMHS, 4:97; Catton, Stillness at Appomattox, 64-65; Steere, Wilderness Campaign, 1, 108-09.
the Wilderness almost impenetrable for a large military force. Units as small as companies often found it impossible to maintain organization, dress their lines, or even see their enemy, and offensive operations generally disintegrated into blind fire fights between troops who could only aim at the smoke and flash discharged by enemy muskets. At the highest command levels, the region restricted Grant and Meade as they struggled to understand and influence the battlefield situation, particularly the deployment of troops, communications, and the collection and analysis of timely intelligence.

The road net also had a profound effect on how the battle of the Wilderness unfolded. Two major west-east highways traversed the Wilderness, running from Orange Court House to Fredericksburg. The Orange Turnpike and the Orange Plank Road ran roughly parallel from the vicinity of Mine Run eastward for five miles, where a narrow, inferior road bisected them (hereafter referred to as Wilderness Run Road). The northern intersection, on the Turnpike, was only a few hundred yards west of the major intersection of the Turnpike and the Germanna Plank Road, which ran southeast from Germanna Ford. Nearby stood Wilderness Tavern. At the southern intersection, on the Plank Road, was Parker's Store.

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6 Students particularly interested in the immediate battlefield area can obtain a set of five maps from the Chancellorsville Visitors Center for the moderate sum, as of October 1994, of $6.00. Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park: Troop Movement Maps of the Battle of the Wilderness, May 5-6, 1864. Prepared by Ralph Haple, January 1962. For other descriptions of the road net, see Steere, Wilderness Campaign, 32-33; Grant, Memoirs, 2:185-88; Atkinson, Grant's Campaigns, 89.
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As the Turnpike and Plank Road continued eastward, they angled toward a convergence two-and-a-half miles west of Chancellorsville. The Wilderness Tavern and Parker’s Store intersections, four miles apart on a northeast-southwest axis, were key battlefield positions.

Two other roads, and two intersections they created, were also important features of the region. The Brock Road turned south off the Turnpike a mile or so east of the Wilderness Tavern intersection and crossed the Plank Road three miles east of Parker’s Store, forming the Brock Crossing. The Brock Road, inferior to both the Turnpike and the Plank Road, continued southeast toward Spotsylvania Court House and intersected the Catharpin Road four miles below the Brock Crossing at the Todd’s Tavern intersection. The west-east Catharpin Road skirted the southern fringe of the Wilderness.

To summarize the significance of the road net, the Orange Turnpike, Orange Plank Road, and Catharpin Road ran roughly perpendicular to the Union army’s line of advance into and through the Wilderness, making control of the resulting intersections important for both armies. As a result, the Confederates enjoyed direct access to the Federal right flank if they could strike before the Union army.

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7 A word on flank directions. When the Army of the Potomac crossed the Rapidan on 4 May its front lay generally facing south, its left flank to the southeast and east, and its right flank to the southwest and west. Both the various plans for the 5 May advance and the actual march initiated that morning sought to wheel the army to the west so that the army’s front lay to the west, its left to the southwest and south, and its right flank to the northwest and north.
wheeled right, or west, or before it concentrated south of the Wilderness.

Humphreys' march orders for the Army of the Potomac specifically sought a concentration south of the Wilderness. Time-space calculations based on the Mine Run experience indicated that by starting at midnight the army could clear the Wilderness on the second day of the advance and turn the right flank of Lee's strong position along the west bank of Mine Run before the enemy could interfere. But Humphreys faced two vexing problems as he labored to develop his plan: it was impossible to predict Lee's reaction to the Union initiative, and it was imperative that the advance cover and protect the army's trains from a rapid Confederate thrust eastward. This second consideration, and Humphreys's ultimately accurate calculations concerning the time required to cross the trains, necessitated halting the Army of the Potomac in the Wilderness at the end of the first day's march.9

Concern for the security of the trains restricted the Federal advance in numerous ways, some anticipated during the planning stage and others dependent upon Confederate dispositions and other contingencies that might arise once the movement commenced. Humphreys developed two lines of advance for the Army of the Potomac (Grant was responsible

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9 Brigadier General Seth Williams, Assistant Adjutant-General (AA-G), Army of the Potomac, Orders, 2 May, OR, 36, pt. 1, 331-34. To avoid superfluous citations, further references in the text to Humphreys's (first) plan or the 2 May march order are not cited.

9 Humphreys, Virginia Campaign, 11-12.
for coordinating the integration of Ninth Corps into the operation). Humphreys later described his initial efforts:

Two ["projects"] were sketched out by me, the one turning Lee's right by the Catharpin and Pamunkey roads in comparatively open country, the other by roads having about the same general direction as the Pamunkey, but from five to eight miles eastward of it, passing two to four miles west of Spottsylvania [sic] Court House. The two projects were coincident for the first day and for a part of the second, and both were subject to material modification or entire abandonment on the second day, dependent upon the movements of Lee.\(^{10}\)

The 2 May march orders embodied and refined Humphreys's first project, using the Catharpin and Pamunkey roads to flank Lee's Mine Run entrenchments, which continued south across the Plank Road.

Rejection of the more ambitious turning movement, as contemplated in the second project, provides circumstantial\(^{11}\) evidence pertaining to Union aims and concerns during the early days of the campaign. Humphreys's second project was bold, and it offered the Army of the Potomac an opportunity to fight south of the Wilderness. Logistical restraints, Lee's unknown intentions, and the political situation, however, counseled against such an audacious plan.

Grant chose to turn Lee's right in response to the logistic difficulties inherent in a movement around the

\(^{10}\) Ibid.

\(^{11}\) Circumstantial because little documentation of the intricacies of the planning stage exists beyond Humphreys's brief, almost cryptic post war account. Despite the "modern" command system the Union created in the spring of 1864, no organization comparable to a modern operational division existed, and thus little paperwork, the inevitable output of modern organizations, was created.
Confederate left flank and the political damage a serious reverse would inflict on northern morale—guardedly optimistic but perhaps too fragile to withstand disaster under Grant's personal direction. Other than the highly unlikely annihilation of the Army of the Potomac, Lee could best derail Union plans and depress northern morale by once again exploiting the natural invasion route of the Shenandoah Valley. Neither Grant nor Meade seemed to believe it likely that Lee would start for Maryland once the huge Federal army crossed the Rapidan, but Lee's unpredictability made another Confederate raid a possibility.

Humphreys' second project contemplated such a wide turning movement that it threatened to allow Lee freedom to maneuver. Grant had already determined to leave Ninth Corps on the railroad until Meade's army safely crossed the river, to discourage, block, or at least harass any Confederate advance. If Lee moved north, the Army of the Potomac would have been marching away from Burnside's support. Turning Lee's right might allow him access to the Valley; the greater the arc around his right flank, the more freedom of maneuver Lee would enjoy. (A logical extension of this reasoning

12 Simon, PUSG, 10:361. Grant fully expected to order Burnside forward and abandon the Orange and Alexandria, but if the enemy actively opposed the river crossing and forced the Army of the Potomac to conduct extensive operations on the Rapidan, Burnside could maintain Meade's communications by relieving the railroad guards holding the bridges until Meade's army established water-borne communications farther south. See dispatches between Grant, Burnside, the War Department, Major General Christopher C. Augur, Commander, Department of Washington, and Brigadier General Robert O. Tyler, OR, 36, pt. 2, 380-81. To a certain extent Grant hedged his logistical bet, unsure of the difficulties the army might face crossing the Rapidan. His praise for the army's 4 May river crossing reflected his genuine concerns.
portrays a change of base to Fredericksburg as an even wider arc around Lee’s right.)

Even after detailed map study, it is difficult to ascertain which roads Humphreys’s second project would have followed. It is clear, however, that the movement required a considerable march to the south-southeast. If Grant and Meade ever seriously considered this plan, it is doubtful that they would have made the same logistical preparations that attended the plan ultimately adopted. The region Humphreys contemplated is virtually equidistance from Germanna Ford and Fredericksburg. The use of Fredericksburg as a base would have negated the necessity of the huge, slow supply train, but Lincoln had rejected the idea of shifting the Army of the Potomac to Fredericksburg the previous November. Shifting the army to the east offered Lee the opportunity to seize the strategic initiative, an eventuality Grant wished to avoid.\footnote{Grant’s Report, 22 July 1865, OR, 36, pt. 1, 17. Seizing the initiative, whether strategic or tactical, was a basic tenet in Grant’s command style. Grant, Memoirs, 2:193; Catton, Stillness at Appomattox, 58.} Despite the obvious advantages of the wide turning movement to flank Lee’s Mine Run line, fighting on the open ground south of the Wilderness ultimately proved less important to Grant and Meade than other considerations.

An analysis of a plan never adopted (and perhaps never seriously considered by Grant or Meade) illustrates the primary objectives assigned to the Army of the Potomac at the outset of the 1864 campaign. This process continues with an
analysis of the plan actually adopted, its implementation on 4 May, and the modifications made to the plan that day in preparation for the 5 May advance. To assess the 2 May march order and its 4 May modification, it is necessary to consider how Grant and Meade viewed Lee's options, and their own.

As Grant planned his campaign in Virginia, he seemed to believe that when the Army of the Potomac crossed the Rapidan, the Army of Northern Virginia would most likely fall back to the North Anna River or the Richmond fortifications. The objectives Grant assigned to Sigel and Butler, if gained, would likely compel Lee's army to withdraw to a position near Richmond in an attempt to protect or recover his southern and western communications. Grant could not know nor assume that Sigel and Butler would both fail to obtain their objectives, but he did have to operate on the possibility that neither of these forces could advance rapidly enough to materially affect Lee's dispositions during the first few days of the campaign. If Lee chose instead to stand, Grant welcomed battle. His primary concern, from the outset of the 1864 campaign through Appomattox, was to prevent Lee from detaching forces to fight on other fields. Contact with the Army of Northern Virginia would prevent any Confederate redeployment.

In April, Grant had ordered the preparation of a supply fleet to ascend whichever river the future position of the Army of the Potomac demanded, and had instructed Meade to

14 Grant's Report, OR, 36, pt. 1, 16; Simon, PUSG, 10:364; Hattaway and Jones, How the North Won, 528.
compute the army's logistical requirements for operations aimed at turning either of Lee's flanks. He had also ordered Meade to prepare estimates for the siege train necessary to reduce Richmond.\textsuperscript{15} Grant looked for a rapid advance to the environs of Richmond and a junction of the Army of the Potomac and Butler's Army of the James.

New to the Virginia theater, Grant focused on developing his plans to prevent or accommodate Lee's most drastic strategic responses—movement toward Maryland or toward Richmond. Grant probably developed these plans with little input from Meade beyond the detailed logistical calculations Grant requested. Lee's other two options—fighting in the Mine Run entrenchments or engaging Federal forces as they marched through the Wilderness—required greater collaboration with Meade and other members of the eastern officer corps.

Grant's estimation that Lee was more likely to fall back than to advance was not necessarily an example of Grant's underestimating the Confederate commander. Meade also thought it unlikely that Lee would advance down the valley, although there is no evidence to suggest that he shared Grant's optimism concerning the likelihood that Lee would abandon all the territory north of Richmond, or even north of the North Anna River, without a fight. Despite Meade's

\textsuperscript{15} Grant to Halleck, 29 April; Halleck to Brigadier General Montgomery C. Meigs, Quartermaster General, 30 April; Grant to Meade, 9 April; Brigadier General Henry J. Hunt, Chief of Artillery, Army of the Potomac, to Meade, 16 April; Meade to Grant, 17 April, \textit{OR}, 33, 1017, 1023, 828, 880-81, 889-90. According to Atkinson, one army corps required 100 to 130 tons of supply per day. \textit{Grant's Campaigns}, 94.
frustration the previous fall, he had developed a keen awareness of the logistical constraints that impinged upon Lee’s operational capabilities.

Meade had firmly believed in the Anaconda Plan since the first year of the war, and by late fall 1863, his analysis of Confederate supply and logistics in Virginia was superior to that of Lincoln or Halleck, although even Meade failed to perceive the depth of Lee’s growing supply crisis. Meade and Grant, both meticulous logicians, undoubtedly discussed this aspect of the enemy’s situation. An advance by Lee’s army into the Valley would give it access to stores, but unlike the raids in September 1862 and June 1863, there were no crops in the fields to collect in early May 1864. A withdrawal to Richmond would surrender territory critical to Lee’s logistical support and sever the most direct rail connection with the Valley. Understanding the logistical support required even by an army as lean as Lee’s, the Federal commanders, through Meade’s experience and vigilant observation, had good reason to downgrade the likelihood of a strategic counteroffensive. Past experience also indicated that Lee seemed to prefer thrashing the Army of the Potomac before such an advance.

Meade’s estimate of Lee’s options along the south bank of the Rapidan—to accept a tactical assault from the

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17 Meade, *Life and Letters*, 2:192. Meade also believed that experience should have taught Lee that the defensive policy was his proper choice.
prepared Mine Run position or to engage the Federals in the Wilderness—had a profound impact on the subsequent battle. If Grant believed Lee would probably fall back and either offer battle in the comparatively open ground to the south or occupy a prepared position where tactical defense would negate the Union's numerical superiority, Meade, based on his experience in the Chancellorsville and Mine Run campaigns, believed that Lee would most likely reoccupy his Mine Run entrenchments and accept the tactical assault that, to his frustration, Meade had declined to launch the previous November. Perhaps Meade's training as an engineer and his grudging respect for Lee's formidable works augmented this opinion; Meade would almost certainly have chosen to occupy such a position in comparable circumstances. A more concrete explanation was Meade's previous experiences in Virginia's Wilderness.

The encounter battle of the Chancellorsville campaign occurred east of the Wilderness near Zion Church, and during the early movements of the Mine Run campaign, Lee's forces advanced beyond the run but then withdrew to accept a tactical assault. In neither instance did Lee immediately advance into the Wilderness with his entire force. Humphreys's time-space calculations indicated that if Lee responded to the Federal advance as he had in November, the Army of the Potomac would have ample time to complete its deployment. Humphreys's estimate of Lee's possible response

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to the next Federal advance, however, recognized that Lee could speed up his timetable and send units beyond Mine Run more quickly than he had in November. Humphreys’s solution was to begin the Union march earlier. At the outset of the Mine Run operation Union troops had moved at dawn, and after a screening fog lifted, the Confederates discovered the Federal maneuver. Humphreys determined to begin the advance at midnight,\(^{19}\) gaining perhaps five or six hours before discovery and possibly achieving the head start necessary to move the army through the Wilderness before Lee could interdict the march.

This was the best Humphreys could do, given the political and logistical constraints placed on the Army of the Potomac by the undesirability of another Confederate raid northward, an immediate shift to Fredericksburg, or the prospect of launching a tactical assault on a position of great natural and engineered strength. The army had to advance into the Wilderness on the first day, stop and spend the night to protect the supply train, and move on the second day to achieve a position that would compel Lee to abandon his fortified line along Mine Run.

Before turning to the 2 May march order, it is important to note that nothing in Humphreys’s admirable planning process precluded the possibility of fighting in the Wilderness. Humphreys’s plan sought to place the Union army south of the Wilderness before Lee could offer battle, but the very calculations supporting the plan indicated that if

\(^{19}\) Humphreys, *Virginia Campaign*, 11-12, 18.
Lee wanted to engage the Army of the Potomac in the Wilderness, he could. Units of Confederate Lieutenant General Richard S. Ewell's Second Corps were camped from twelve to fifteen miles west of the Wilderness Tavern intersection and, advancing east on the Turnpike, could arrive at the Wilderness Tavern intersection on the morning of the second day. If Lieutenant General Ambrose P. Hill's Third Corps marched east along the Orange Plank Road from its encampment on Ewell's left, it would probably trail Ewell's advance by less than six hours. Estimates of the possible arrival of Longstreet's First Corps were less exact, both because Longstreet's forces had not participated in the Mine Run campaign and because the officers of the Army of the Potomac knew little about the area west of Gordonsville, where the Confederate First Corps was located.

Humphreys could not predict Lee's intentions or ultimate reaction to the Union advance. The plan adopted sought to minimize the chances of fighting in the Wilderness, but the officer corps of the Army of the Potomac recognized Lee's unpredictability and shared that knowledge with Grant and his staff. If the ultimate goal was to avoid battle in the Wilderness, the plan was faulty, for it ultimately left the decision to Lee. Rather than a faulty plan, Grant had no qualms about fighting in the Wilderness, and he operated on what a later American officer called the principal of the

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20 The arrival of Ewell's Corps at any particular point primarily depended on Confederate discovery of the Federal maneuver and Lee's reaction to that intelligence.
calculated risk. Fighting in the Wilderness was risky, but it was less risky than a failed attempt to turn Lee’s left or than any other plan, such as the North Carolina expedition or an eastward shift to Fredericksburg, that might allow Lee to seize the strategic initiative.

No documentary evidence has been discovered that clearly delineates the relationship between Grant, Meade, Humphreys, and other general and staff officers who might have influenced the planning process that resulted in the 2 May march order. Certain negative evidence, however, does indicate that the plan actually adopted was Grant’s as much as it was anyone’s.

During the first few weeks after Grant’s arrival in Virginia, Meade noted that the new general-in-chief seemed disinclined to interfere with Meade’s prerogatives as an army commander. As late as 13 April, Meade wrote his wife that “Grant has not given an order, or in the slightest degree interfered with the administration of this army since he arrived.” This pleased Meade, but it was not surprising that Grant showed no inclination to involve himself in the details of Meade’s command. During this period Grant created and worked to implement his strategic design for the 1864 campaign, paying particular attention to the Virginia theater. Grant had no time to engage in such interference,

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22 Meade, Life and Letters, 2:189.
had he wanted to, and he desired no such role. Grant's command style consisted of assigning objectives to competent subordinates and then allowing them the discretion to accomplish their assignments.

Toward the end of April, however, Grant increasingly focused his attention on the problem posed by the Army of Northern Virginia, and Meade's letters home stopped commenting on Grant's disinterested attitude toward the Army of the Potomac. In any event, Meade's earlier comments concerned the administration, not the ultimate direction, of his army. Clearly, as the weeks passed Grant became more and more involved in the kinds of decisions usually reserved to an independent army commander. Having already made the decision that the Army of the Potomac would attempt to turn Lee's right flank, Grant was aware of the 2 May march order's aim and development, and there is no evidence that it failed to meet his requirements, no matter how it was actually drafted.

Although the 2 May march order included little articulation concerning the march objectives for the second day's advance, Edward Steere's reconstruction of Federal

23 Six weeks passed between Grant's arrival in Culpeper and the crossing of the Rapidan. Apparently Grant wanted to begin the campaign earlier than he actually did, meaning that there was even less preparation time than events actually allowed, but mid-April rains required delay. See Simon, PUSG, 10:350.

intentions for the second day was reasonable. Meade’s three corps were to occupy a line from the Pamunkey Road on the south (Second Corps), through Fifth Corps’ position on the Catharpin Road near Craig’s Meeting House, to Parker’s Store on the Orange Plank Road (Sixth Corps). Presumably Grant would instruct Ninth Corps to extend the line northward and cooperate with a cavalry division to protect the army’s right flank and the trains. This disposition, if achieved by the afternoon of the second day as intended, would provide the army with a jumping-off position for a subsequent advance to the west that would flank Lee’s Mine Run entrenchments. If Lee reoccupied that fortified line, the advance would foil his attempt to compel a frontal assault and force him to retreat or fight on open ground chosen by his enemy.

Military historians, who know that the lead brigades of Ewell’s Second Corps appeared within two miles of the Wilderness Tavern intersection at 6:00 a.m. on the second day of the Federal advance, must recognize that this plan, the less audacious of the two originally “sketched” by Humphreys, was ambitious in its own right. Whether Grant and Meade ever fully believed that Lee would allow the Federals to reach their objectives unimpeded is unknown, but both men probably viewed the successful acquisition of the second day’s march objectives as a best-case scenario.

The Army of the Potomac crossed the Rapidan on 4 May, each corps achieving its assigned position by mid-afternoon,

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some units hours earlier. As far as Grant, Meade, or anyone else could tell, the army had conducted the maneuver flawlessly, considering its complexity and the inherent danger involved in river crossings. Relieved of his concerns about the necessity of conducting prolonged operations along the river, Grant considered the 4 May advance "a great success." As Grant, Meade, and their respective staffs congregated on the south bank of the river near Germanna Ford, intelligence reports from the Cavalry and Signal Corps provided information on Confederate dispositions. By 1:15 p.m., analysis and interpretation of these reports led to decisions that resulted in "material modification" of the 2 May march order.

The ability of the Federal Signal Corps to decipher the signals of their counterparts gave the Union command insight into Lee's reaction. Confederates on Clark's Mountain and Federals on Cedar, Stony, and Pony Mountains had kept a watchful eye on each other all winter, and Humphreys's plan took into account that daylight would reveal the Federal maneuver to the vigilant enemy. As the army marched to the fords and crossed the river throughout the day, Meade's Signal Corps stations decoded enemy signals and sent the information to headquarters. According to Horace Porter, then a colonel and aide-de-camp on Grant's staff:

26 Hancock to Meade, 4 May, OR, 36, pt. 2, 374.
27 Grant's Report, ibid., pt. 1, 18; Porter, Campaigning With Grant, 43.
28 On 4 and 5 May, Grant's headquarters were near Meade's, a practice that continued through the balance of the war. Grant, Memoirs, 2: 118.
About one o'clock word came from Meade that our signal-officers had succeeded in deciphering a message sent to General Ewell, which read as follows: "We are moving. Had I not better move D. and D. toward New Verdierville [sic]? (signed) R." The general manifested considerable satisfaction at receiving the news, and remarked: "That gives just the information I wanted. It shows that Lee is drawing out from his position, and is pushing across to meet us." 29

Grant immediately sent a dispatch to Burnside, instructing him to make a night march with his four divisions, and soon thereafter he informed Halleck: "The crossing of the Rapidan effected. Forty-eight hours now will demonstrate whether the enemy intends to give battle this side of Richmond. Telegraph Butler that we have crossed the Rapidan." 30 Lee was not moving toward the Shenandoah Valley, but toward Grant, who relished the prospect.

What was Grant's appraisal of the situation? His dispatch to Halleck indicated that it was still questionable whether the enemy would fight or withdraw, and his instructions to Burnside emphasized haste as Grant sought to concentrate south of the Rapidan. The dispatch Porter cited as convincing Grant that the enemy was moving east was actually a thin reed upon which to conclude that Lee had abandoned any intention to cross the Rapidan himself, since the deciphered Confederate signal asked a question rather

29 Porter, Campaigning With Grant, 44. The 4 May Stony Mountain dispatches are in OR, 36, pt. 2, 371-72. New Verdierville was a mile east of the point where the Turnpike and Plank Roads converged as they headed for Orange Court House, and in the immediate rear of the entrenchments across the Plank Road that continued the Mine Run line.

30 Grant to Burnside, Grant to Halleck, 4 May, OR, 36, pt. 2, 380, 370.
than delivered an order, and the Federal signal officer's message containing this information included the observation that the enemy was still digging positions along their front.\textsuperscript{31}

Whether Grant based his appraisal on evidence that has been lost, drew a conclusion that the information at hand did not support, or intuitively grasped the true situation is not clear. To further confuse the issue, Meade concluded that the following day's march order required modification.

A great irony of the command relationship between Grant and Meade is that the proximity of the two men—the very situation that generates interest in their interaction—made extensive documentation of their exchanges unnecessary. It is clear that by 1:00 p.m., Meade decided to change his cavalry dispositions for 5 May, but it is unclear whether Meade's deliberations concerning the deployment of the Army of the Potomac on 5 May involved Grant.\textsuperscript{32} Grant and Meade crossed the river together just before noon and established their headquarters in close proximity. At 6:00 p.m. Meade issued the march order for 5 May, which modified Humphreys's plan by changing the cavalry dispositions and ordering a more constricted infantry advance to the south and west than the

\textsuperscript{31} Steere, \textit{Wilderness Campaign}, 48-49.

\textsuperscript{32} Humphreys to Hancock, 4 May, OR, 36, pt. 2, 375. Edward Steere described an intriguing scene at Meade's headquarters that depicted Grant's involvement at this time, between noon and 1:00 p.m., as minimal. Unfortunately, Steere cited Humphreys (\textit{Virginia Campaign}, 21) as his source, and Humphreys's account contained no reference to this event. \textit{Wilderness Campaign}, 58-59.
one contemplated on 2 May. 33

Meade’s concern for the safety of the wagon train, which would not complete the river crossing for another twenty-four hours or more, led him to change his cavalry dispositions. Initially, Brigadier General Alfred T. A. Torbert’s First Cavalry Division, after guarding the army’s rear on 4 May, was to cross the Rapidan and operate on the army’s right in conjunction with Brigadier General James H. Wilson’s Third Cavalry Division. Reacting to reports of a large body of Confederate cavalry on the army’s left, a few miles south of Fredericksburg at Hamilton’s Crossing, 34 Meade ordered Torbert’s division to cooperate on the left with Brigadier General Wesley Merritt’s Second Cavalry Division in guarding the trains and operating against the enemy cavalry.

Little is known about the events that transpired at army headquarters that warm spring afternoon on the south bank of the Rapidan. Meade decided to divert Torbert’s cavalry by 1:00 p.m., either with or without Grant’s input. There is no evidence, however, that at this early hour either Grant or Meade had yet decided on objectives for the infantry advance on 5 May that would require further modification of the 2 May march order. Five hours passed before Meade’s headquarters issued the order modifying infantry movements for 5 May. It

33 AA-G Williams, Orders, OR, 36, pt. 2, 371. Again, to avoid superfluous citations, further references to the 4 May march order or the modification of the 2 May march order are not cited.

34 Hancock to Meade, 4 May, ibid., 374. To facilitate the advance of the supply train, the wagons crossed the river at both Ely’s and Culpeper Mine Fords and parked in the vicinity of Chancellorsville and Dowdall’s Tavern, just to the west on the Turnpike.
is inconceivable that Grant—despite his reputation as an avid conversationalist who liked to reminisce when among intimates, and proximity was fast making Meade an intimate—and Meade failed to discuss current army business during an afternoon in which their only pressing duties were analysis of intelligence reports and preparation for the morrow. If, however, Grant managed to pass those hours without understanding what orders Meade intended to issue for the 5 May march, the commander of the Army of the Potomac removed all doubt by sending a copy of the order to the general-in-chief, who accepted it without further alteration. Grant, who had to know of Meade's dispositions so that he could coordinate Ninth Corps movements, was fully aware of the intended deployment. Whether Grant merely confirmed Meade's decision or made the decision himself is unclear.

Critics of Federal planning and dispositions that resulted in a general engagement within the confines of the Virginia Wilderness bemoaned Meade's modification of the 2 May march order and portrayed Meade as a timid commander.

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35 Williams to Rawlins, 4 May, OR, 36, pt. 2, 370. Grant's postwar account indicated that he determined the 4 May modification: "My orders were given through General Meade for an early advance on the morning of the 5th." Grant, Memoirs, 2:192. Acceptance of this statement means that Meade's critics should have blamed him for following orders, not issuing them, and that Grant made another decision generally reserved to the army commander. Or, perhaps Grant only alluded to the commencement, not the objectives, of the 5 May march.

36 Years later, Humphreys complained about the role of Ninth Corps: "It was an encumbrance to the army at the beginning—in preparing the plan of operations at the opening of the campaign of /64, Meade never said a word to me about the corps, and in the plan of operations it was not considered in the least." Humphreys to de Peyster, 10 June 1883, Humphreys Papers, HSP, 30:114.
"whittling down a good plan." 37 By restricting the more ambitious marches required of the infantry, the modification sought a more limited advance on 5 May, leading one critic to refer to the army's proposed position as a static line. 38 Moreover, the deployment of Torbert's cavalry division on the left, nearer the trains, instead of the on the right, facing the enemy, supposedly proved that the safety of the wagon train obsessed Meade. 39

The primary difficulty in refuting these criticisms is the order in which they are addressed and the manner in which the evidence is arranged, for interrelated factors led to the modification. Perhaps the most straightforward refutation involves the removal of Torbert's force from the Federal right flank. The assignment of Wilson's Third Cavalry Division, smallest in the corps and led by an inexperienced officer, to the task of screening the critical right flank and retarding any Confederate advance that might forestall attainment of the 5 May objectives was questionable. Yet to charge that the alteration of Torbert's assignment for 5 May was an error assumes that it materially weakened the Federal

37 Steere, Wilderness Campaign, 39-40.

38 Rhea, Battle of the Wilderness, 92. Rhea's interpretation was sound, as far as it went. Yet the establishment of the line contemplated by the 4 May march order differed in location, not intent, from the line contemplated two days earlier. Both orders viewed the march objectives as a concentration to be followed by a general advance if Lee occupied his Mine Run line.

cavalry’s ability to accomplish its mission as defined in the 2 May march order.

Torbert’s report, written in July 1864, proved as brief and cryptic as did most of the after-action reports of the May-June battles that culminated in the siege of Petersburg. His report did state that at midnight 4 May he received orders “to cross the Rapidan River at Ely’s Ford instead of Germanna, as previously ordered.”40 He was to advance his division to Chancellorsville and cooperate with Gregg’s Second Division. To reach Chancellorsville from Ely’s Ford, he had to take the same road that the wagon train was still using, and would use throughout the following day, and these wagons seriously delayed his advance to Chancellorsville, despite Hancock’s best efforts to clear the road for Torbert’s advance.41

Since Torbert had not crossed the Rapidan before midnight, pursuant to his original instructions, the modification apparently imposed no delay on the start of his advance. The hour at which he was to have crossed the river is unknown, but the 2 May march order stated: “On the morning of the 5th the First Cavalry Division will cross the Rapidan at Germanna Ford and cover the right flank of the trains while crossing the Rapidan and during their movements

40 Torbert, Report, 4 July 1864, OR, 36, pt. 1, 803.

41 Lieutenant Colonel C. H. Morgan, Second Corps Chief of Staff, Orders, 4 May, ibid., pt. 2, 376. Hancock’s prompt efforts to assist Torbert’s advance were more than simple professionalism. Forming the left-rear of the army, with reports of enemy cavalry on the left and rear of his line of march, Hancock undoubtedly welcomed all the cavalry Grant and Meade cared to send him.
in rear of the army." Had this order remained in effect, the First Cavalry Division could not have alerted the army of Ewell's advanced position on the Turnpike any earlier than did Fifth Corps infantry pickets. Receiving orders at midnight, if Torbert started his command across at 4:00 a.m., he would have had to pass down the Germanna Plank Road, an artery Federal infantry commanders struggled to keep from becoming choked with the passage of the rear elements of Sixth Corps and the van of Ninth Corps.

The "what ifs" multiply rapidly. Perhaps Torbert's lead units could have advanced southwest down the Culpeper Mine Ford Road (also the Spottswood Farm Road), a narrow lane that led from Germanna Plank Road toward Ewell's position on the Turnpike, early on 5 May and altered Ewell's dispositions. The usefulness of Torbert's troopers on the Union right on the morning of 5 May, however, is not the basis of this criticism. The 2 May march order, not its modification, withheld this force on 4 May from the region between the Union right and the potential line of advance of Confederate infantry. It also left Wilson, commanding approximately thirty-five hundred troopers, to screen the army's right flank alone. As events unfolded, Wilson's inexperience, and his misunderstanding of orders, allowed lead elements of the Confederate Second Corps to camp for the night of 4 May just two miles from the Union Army. This force, if it advanced early on 5 May, could influence or even interdict the Federal

advance. It was a mistake to burden Wilson’s division with sole responsibility for screening the army’s right flank, but it was a mistake embedded within the 2 May march order which Humphreys, Meade, and Grant all accepted.

Redeployment of Torbert’s cavalry to the left supposedly offered evidence that timid George Meade, obsessed with his trains, declined to order his cavalry to aggressively oppose the grizzled Army of Northern Virginia. This argument generally concluded with a qualification, offered with varying degrees of sincerity, that indeed the safety of the wagons was important.\(^{43}\) The fact that the enemy never attacked the wagon train did not, however, prove that measures taken to prevent such an eventuality were unwarranted.

Meade’s experience in Virginia in 1862 and 1863 gave him ample reason to assure the viability of his logistical arrangements. Any disaster that befell the wagon train meant withdrawal to a tight position covering the fords and the redeployment of Ninth Corps along the railroad to reestablish communications, withdrawal to the environs of Fredericksburg, or even recrossing the entire army to the north bank of the river (unlikely considering Grant’s aversion to retracing his steps). Despite the virtual certainty that the doggedly determined Grant would have met such a reversal with vigor, and immediate measures to recover the situation, the

\(^{43}\) Atkinson noted Meade’s legitimate concern for his logistics, while Rhea and Steere were less sympathetic. Atkinson, *Grant’s Campaigns*, 94-95, 125-26; Rhea, *Battle of the Wilderness*, 91-92; Steere, *Wilderness Campaign*, 39-40.
potential effect of such an immediate "back track" on northern morale was incalculable. Simply stated: no trains, no offensive.

In August 1862, as a brigadier, Meade had participated in the marching, countermarching, and eventual disaster that befell the Federal Army of Virginia when it discovered that Stonewall Jackson's corps had materialized on the Union supply line at Manassas. If the memory of Pope's difficulties at Second Bull Run seemed remote to Meade in May 1864, a more recent campaign had indicated the threat the Army of Northern Virginia could pose to Federal logistics and communications.

Northern commentators either viewed the Bristoe Station campaign as a brilliant ploy on Lee's part that consumed a month of good campaigning weather or a quick-footed response by the Army of the Potomac to a dangerous Confederate thrust. Meade himself seemed unsure how to interpret the campaign, writing that his withdrawal to the heights of Centreville was not a retreat but an attempt to seize good ground from which he would fight, that Lee aimed at severing the Army of the Potomac's communications, again, and that "[Lee had played] a deep game, and I am free to admit that in the playing of it he has got the advantage of me." If Meade was unsure exactly

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44 This was Stanton's reaction to the Mine Run campaign. "Meade is on the back track again, without a fight." Stanton to Butler, 2 December 1863, OR, 29, pt. 2, 537. It is impossible to guess Stanton's reaction, or that of the North in general, to any logistical disaster that might have compelled the Army of the Potomac to delay or abandon its advance without even the benefit of an infantry fight.
what to make of Lee's October campaign, he did know that careless logistical arrangements might present Lee an opportunity, of which he would probably take advantage.

While caution and prudence had characterized Meade's operations, Grant had also experienced the disruption of a campaign as a result of Confederate attacks on his logistical arrangements. In December 1862 Grant's first attempt to reach dry ground east of Vicksburg had failed when enemy raiders broke his communications at Holly Springs, Mississippi, and Jackson, Tennessee. He solved the problem imposed by the vulnerability of railroads by basing his subsequent attempts on secure, water-borne communications, and his Mobile and North Carolina plans also sought to exploit Union naval superiority. Grant's forces on the Rapidan would utilize water-borne communications as soon as he could lead them far enough south, but in the meantime wagons were the logistical foundation that supported his main advance in Virginia. There is no reason to assume that bold, aggressive U. S. Grant viewed the safety of the wagon train any less carefully than did Meade.46

45 Meade, Life and Letters, 2:153-55. Humphreys's assessment was clear: "Lee was within a hair's breath of getting between us and Wash[ington]." Humphreys to his wife, 16 October 1863, Humphreys Papers, HSP, 33:40. For an account of Bristoe Station highly unfavorable to Meade, see Williams, Lincoln Finds a General, 2:767-71. Perhaps Meade's difficulty in discerning Lee's objective accurately reflected the ambiguous goals of Lee's offensive. Michael A. Palmer, "The Bristoe Station Campaign: Robert E. Lee's Generalship in Microcosm." My thanks to Dr. Palmer for allowing me to review this article.

46 See Porter, "Opening the Campaign of 1864," PMHSN, 4:19.
A final argument used to prove that Meade’s caution crippled the Federal attempt to achieve objectives envisioned in the 2 May march order was that despite the wording of his order regarding cavalry operation on the army’s left, his only intention was to protect the trains. The modification ordered Sheridan to “move with Gregg’s and Torbert’s divisions against the enemy’s cavalry in the direction of Hamilton’s Crossing.”

Meade and Sheridan conducted a tempestuous relationship. When Sheridan arrived in Virginia as Grant’s hand-picked leader of the Army of the Potomac’s Cavalry Corps, the conditions of the horses in Meade’s command concerned the fiery Irishman. Meade’s handling of his cavalry had produced mixed results. Under their former commander, Major General Alfred Pleasanton, Union troopers had successfully engaged Confederate Major General James E. B. Stuart’s cavalry on the third day at Gettysburg, thwarting the enemy attempt to cut Meade’s communications. During the winter, however, Meade had deployed the cavalry in a sixty-mile circle around his infantry, and the duty had a debilitating effect on the horses. Sheridan protested and Meade acquiesced, replacing the mounted patrols with a constricted infantry picket line. The horses’ condition steadily improved.

47 Grant, Memoirs, 2:133.

48 Sheridan to AA-G Williams, Sheridan to Wilson, 19 and 20 April, OR, 33, 909-10, 923; Starr, Union Cavalry, 2:72-80. Improvement in the performance of Federal cavalry in the east resulted from various developments. Meade was responsible for few if any of the improvements, and his employment of the mounted arm was unimaginative.
The main difficulty between Meade and his new cavalry chief was that both men had strong ideas, explosive tempers, and opposing concepts of how to employ cavalry. Grant placed Sheridan and Wilson, western officers, in command to infuse some vigor into the eastern cavalry. While Meade viewed cavalry as an adjunct to the infantry, useful for security, reconnaissance, and communications, Sheridan was a proponent of using large bodies of cavalry as an offensive weapon to fight enemy cavalry, interdict enemy communications, and destroy their logistic base.49 Until the morning of 8 May, when Meade and Sheridan produced one of the more explosive discussions of operations on record after the night march to Spotsylvania Court House,50 Grant apparently allowed the two men to work out their problems among themselves.

On 5 May 1864, Sheridan was not yet the audacious, successful cavalry commander that, in time, he proved to be. Meade had witnessed a massed cavalry operation the previous year, during the Chancellorsville campaign, which had only succeeded in stripping the Federal infantry of flank protection and intelligence concerning enemy dispositions.51

49 Starr, Union Cavalry, 2:80-81.

50 ibid., 2:93-96; For a cogent analysis of the controversy between Meade and Sheridan concerning cavalry dispositions and the march on Spotsylvania Court House, see William Matter, If It Takes All Summer: The Battle of Spotsylvania (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), Appendix B, 367-72.

51 To be fair to the rapidly improving eastern cavalry, I should note that Meade had also witnessed the successful Union cavalry action at Brandy Station the following month, but that operation was not concurrent with an infantry offensive, as was Stoneman’s fruitless raid.
Despite the infusion of supposed western aggressiveness, at the outset of the 1864 campaign in Virginia Sheridan and Wilson were of unknown value, and Meade apparently opposed independent cavalry operations both for philosophical reasons and because of the inexperienced cavalry command structure.  

It is difficult to assess Sheridan’s interpretation of his orders as embodied in the 4 May modification. The real problem with the proposed cavalry offensive, however, was that it took Torbert half the day to reach his position near Gregg. This was ultimately Meade’s fault. Any expectation that the largest cavalry division in the army could share a narrow, confined road with the seemingly endless wagon train and still advance with any rapidity was overly optimistic. Perhaps Meade could have directed Torbert’s force to ride east along the north bank of the river and either bridge the river or cross at U. S. Ford. Maybe this longer route offered little prospect of placing Torbert in position on

52 When Grant wrote that “the little that had been accomplished by the cavalry so far in the war” had dissatisfied him, he did not differentiate between the cavalry’s performance in the east and the west. Grant, Memoirs, 2:133.

53 Starr, Union Cavalry, 2:72-78. Sheridan’s appointment to command was not the only change in the cavalry of the Army of the Potomac. A considerable reassignment of units and other personnel changes unsettled the corps.

54 Ibid., 2:87-88. Starr wrote that Meade, “preoccupied—even to an excess—with the safety of the trains,” made defensive cavalry dispositions. He cited, however, an order from 6 May, issued under different circumstances, as indicative of Meade’s thinking on 4-5 May, weakening his argument. Also see Steere, Wilderness Campaign, 67-68, for the convoluted if standard argument that Meade’s attack order to Sheridan was actually an attempt to cordon the trains, with no offensive intent.
time, but at least the roads were clear. There is no evidence that anyone investigated the possibility. Compared with the carefully calculated march of 4 May, Torbert's assignment, or at least his route, was ill-conceived.

As the Union infantry settled into camp for the evening, corps commanders issued orders aimed at achieving the objectives assigned for 5 May. Warren's Fifth Corps, ordered to march to Parker's Store and connect with Second Corps on the left and Sixth Corps on the right, would again constitute the army's right-front, as it had on 4 May, until Hancock arrived. Warren's circular order to his divisional commanders indicated that the Union command, while still attempting to place the army in position to advance westward and flank the Mine Run line, realized that enemy activity might compel fighting east of the run. The Fifth Corps commander warned his officers: "The troops must be kept well closed and held well in hand, ready to meet an attack at any moment."\(^55\)

Early on the morning of 5 May, Ewell's Corps advanced and made contact with pickets of Warren's Fifth Corp. Warren informed Meade, who had established his headquarters near the Wilderness Tavern intersection. At 7:30 a.m., Meade ordered Warren to attack, suspended the day's march orders, and notified Grant that the enemy had appeared on the Turnpike

\(^{55}\) AA-G Fred T.Locke, Circular, 4 May, OR, 36, pt. 2, 378-79. According to Porter, the attitude at headquarters on the morning of 5 May was "that in all probability they would witness before night either a fight or a foot-race—a fight if the armies encountered each other, a foot-race to secure good positions if the armies remained apart." Campaigning With Grant, 47.
and that Warren would attack "at once with his whole force." Meade's aggressiveness pleased Grant, who informed Meade that the attack should be made "without giving time for disposition." Grant, at Germanna Ford watching Ninth Corps cross the river and waiting to see Burnside when Meade's dispatch arrived, lingered a few minutes more. Becoming impatient, he decided to leave instructions for Ninth Corps to hurry southward. Grant and his staff headed for Meade's headquarters near Wilderness Tavern.

Meade's corps commanders worked to implement their new orders. Warren ordered his divisional commander in contact with the enemy on the Turnpike, Brigadier General Charles Griffin, to attack, and ordered his two divisions marching south toward Parker's Store on the Wilderness Run Road to face right and prepare to attack. Meade ordered Sedgwick's Sixth Corps, which was to have occupied Warren's vacated position, to face right and connect with Warren's right. Hancock, who had camped his Second Corps at Chancellorsville and was to march through Todd's Tavern to Shady Grove Church, on the Catharpin Road, received orders from Meade to halt at

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56 Warren to Humphreys, Meade to Grant, Grant to Meade, 4 May, OR, 36, pt. 2, 413, 403. Grant received Meade's dispatch at approximately 8:20 a.m.

57 Porter, Campaigning With Grant, 48.

58 AA-G Locke to Brigadier General John C. Robinson, Locke to Brigadier General Samuel W. Robinson, 5 May, OR, 36, pt. 2, 417. Although Warren was unable to deploy his divisions in this manner, it was his, and apparently Meade's, intention.
the tavern and await further orders. 59 Ninth Corps, two-thirds of which were inexperienced troops, 60 continued their long march from the railroad, the lead division crossing the river.

Meade's attack order and Grant's endorsement marked the suspension of Humphrey's plan as contemplated in the 2 May march order and the 4 May modification, and also indicated the nature of the relationship between Grant and Meade at the outset of the campaign. But did the Army of the Potomac blunder into the battle of the Wilderness? The answer to that question depends on the immediate goals of Grant and Meade, for two alternative interpretations explain the encounter between Ewell's Second and Warren's Fifth Corps. Either Grant and Meade dismissed the possibility that Lee would offer battle east of Mine Run, or the location of the initial 1864 encounter between the Army of Northern Virginia and the Army of the Potomac was less important than other considerations.

Meade and Humphreys had witnessed Lee's maneuvers during the Mine Run campaign, and on the morning of 5 May, both men believed that Lee would again accept battle along the run, 61

59 Meade to Hancock, 5 May, ibid., 406. A discussion of Meade's order to Sixth Corps appears in the conclusion.

60 Wainwright, Diary of Battle, 345.

61 Humphreys, Virginia Campaign, 22. The lack of intelligence from Wilson contradicting this opinion meant that Meade and Humphreys had no reason to alter their appraisals. On the night of 4 May, Comstock wrote that Meade believed the "enemy will fight behind Mine Run." Comstock, Comstock Diary, 263. Also see Porter, "Opening of the Campaign of 1864," PMHS, 4:11.
allowing time to complete their own dispositions. After ordering Warren to attack, Meade commented that he believed the enemy force on the Turnpike was only a detachment sent to delay the Union advance through the Wilderness, and that if any fighting was to occur east of Mine Run, that it should begin immediately.\(^{62}\) Meade’s attack order, his suspension of the day’s march, and his belief that Lee was only attempting to delay the Federal advance has puzzled students of the battle, for Meade’s response seemed inconsistent.\(^{63}\) If, as Meade believed, the enemy force on the Turnpike was only a detachment sent to delay the Union army, why conform to Lee’s movements and suspend the march?

This interpretation assumes that the primary goal of Grant and Meade was to avoid battle within the confines of the Wilderness. Viewing Meade’s response within the context of his experience and Grant’s ultimate objective for the Army of the Potomac, however, produces an interpretation that reveals consistency in Meade’s response, his understanding of Grant’s aims, and the relationship between the two men at the outset of the campaign.

Meade’s order to attack at once was wholly out of character. At Gettysburg, Bristoe Station, and Mine Run, Meade displayed his cautious style as an independent army commander. His 5 May attack order was a marked departure

\(^{62}\) Meade to Grant, OR, 36, pt. 2, 403; Swinton, Campaigns of the Army of the Potomac, 420-21n; Charles A. Page, Letters of a War Correspondent, ed. James R. Gilmore (Boston, L. C. Page and Company, 1899), 47.

\(^{63}\) Rhea, Battle of the Wilderness, 103, 119.
from his performance during those operations. At Gettysburg\textsuperscript{64} and Mine Run, Meade decided against attack after considering difficulties presented by terrain; after the Confederate attack at Bristoe Station, he refused to counterattack until he could discover the exact whereabouts of the enemy. It was highly unlikely that he would order Warren to attack unless he understood that Grant desired to fight Lee immediately if he offered battle. Just as Meade acted decisively under Stanton’s authority when he reorganized the Army of the Potomac, he operated aggressively as Grant’s subordinate, and under his authority, on the morning of 5 May.

The uncertainty surrounding Meade’s role in reorganization renders any analogy between his participation in that process and his response on the morning of 5 May far too indefinite to qualify as evidence, yet the comparison is intriguing. Charles A. Dana assessed Meade:

As a commander, Meade seemed to me to lack the boldness that was necessary to bring the war to a close. He lacked self-confidence and tenacity of purpose, and he had not the moral authority that Grant had attained from his grand successes in other fields. As soon as Meade had a commander over him he was all right, but when he himself was the commander he began to hesitate.\textsuperscript{65}

Dana overstated his case, for Meade lacked self-confidence only when compared to Grant, in which case there were few confident commanders in the Union Army. Yet Dana, who was a shrewd observer, seems to describe Meade’s performance in the

\textsuperscript{64} This refers to his attempt to launch an attack from the Union right on 2 July 1863.

\textsuperscript{65} Dana, Recollections, 189-90.
fall of 1863, although a recognition of the strategic stalemate in Virginia mitigates in Meade's favor. It is of course impossible to know what effect a western command may have had on Meade, such as the colonelcy offered him in 1861. What is known is that on the morning of 5 May, Meade responded to the approach of Lee's veterans, virtually unseen and in unknown numbers, decisively. While the evidence concerning the effect clear authority—Stanton during reorganization and Grant during the unfolding campaign—had on Meade's behavior is unclear in both instances, the results in each case support the conclusion that Meade was aggressive and decisive when he understood what was required, and that for whatever reason, he never understood in the fall of 1863.

Sherman once noted the difference between him and Grant: "He don't care a damn for what the enemy does out of his sight but it scares me like hell." 66 The battle of the Wilderness was a prime example. Although Badeau belabored the point in his defense of Grant at the Wilderness, his assertion that Grant sought battle, not maneuver, rings true. If battle south of the Wilderness region was the ultimate goal, logistical arrangements 67 that forced the army to


67 Perhaps Fredericksburg could have served as a logistical base without shifting the entire Army of the Potomac to protect it, but such a development posed its own difficulties, and there is no evidence that such a logistical operation was ever contemplated after Grant learned of Lincoln's opposition to operations based on the town. After the battle and the elimination of any opportunity for an enemy counteroffensive northward, Grant shifted his base to Fredericksburg on 10 May. Hagerman, American Civil War, 247. Lincoln offered no objection.
moderate its advance to cover its huge wagon train made no sense. Yet Grant sent the Army of the Potomac forward, burdened with its supply train, apparently with little concern for how Lee would respond, at least after the army safely crossed the river. Grant had instructed Meade that wherever Lee went, Meade would go also, and if Lee promptly went into the Wilderness, Grant expected Meade to fight him there.

There are few accounts of the conversations Grant and Meade held during the planning and conduct of the battle, but Meade's reaction to the discovery of enemy infantry east of Mine Run on the morning of 5 May indicates his understanding of Grant's designs. Grant was eager to fight the Army of Northern Virginia if it would stand, and if the Wilderness was not the best place to conduct such a battle, it was preferable to the entrenchments around Richmond. Meade's aggressiveness was reminiscent of his attitude as a subordinate officer at Chancellorsville. When Meade, as an army commander, failed to counterattack after the repulse of the Confederate attack at Bristoe Station, complaining that he did not know where Lee's various units were, Halleck had criticized Meade and informed him that the best way to find those units was to attack the ones he could locate. Meade responded by asking for orders. 68

On the morning of 5 May 1864, Meade probably knew even less about enemy dispositions than he did after Bristoe Station. He knew that Longstreet

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68 Meade to Halleck, Halleck to Meade, 18 October 1863, OR, 29, pt. 2, 345-46.
could not arrive before late afternoon on the 5th, if then, and he knew that Hill was somewhere on the Plank Road, although just how close Hill actually was would not be known at headquarters until three hours after Meade ordered Warren to attack. Grant wanted to fight if the enemy would stand, and Meade understood this as the essential objective.

Unfortunately for Meade and Warren, it was far easier to order a deployment in the Wilderness than it was to execute. Grant arrived at Meade's headquarters about 10:20 a.m.69 and established his own near Meade's. Both men listened in vain to hear the sounds of Warren's attack. The deployment of a Civil War unit from marching column to line of battle took time, but in the Wilderness, it seemed to take an eternity. Even beyond the difficulties the region imposed on deployment, Warren's divisional commander, Griffin, reported conditions on his front that varied with army headquarters's assessment of the situation.

Griffin realized that the enemy in his front was no mere detachment, and he also worried about his flanks, as Fifth and Sixth Corps units on his left and right struggled to advance and extend his line. Griffin complained to Warren that without support an assault by his division was doomed. Warren related this assessment to Meade, and Meade reiterated

69 Rhea wrote that Grant arrived "shortly after ten," but later contradicted this estimate with other evidence. Battle of the Wilderness, 109, 131. See note 78.
his orders. The attack did not begin until 1:00 p.m., over five hours after Warren ordered Griffin to prepare his whole division, and despite the time taken to arrange units for the assault, the Fifth Corps division on Griffin's left and Sixth Corps division on his right were unable to coordinate their efforts so that, after some initial success, Warren's attack failed.

While Warren and Sedgwick struggled to strike a blow along the Turnpike, developments to the south took an ominous turn. Warren's objective for the day's march was Parker's Store, and by 8:00 a.m. his lead division, under Brigadier General Samuel W. Crawford, had reached the cleared, high ground of the Chewning Farm, near the Parker's Store intersection. Crawford soon found himself in a difficult situation. The Chewning Farm was an excellent position, located on high ground that allowed access to the intersection as well as cleared fields of fire for Union artillery, not found throughout most of the region. Virtually simultaneously, Crawford received two pieces of incompatible information. A Union cavalry detachment from

70 Rhea gave an excellent account of Griffin's difficulties. Ibid., 97-111. Also see Steere, Wilderness Campaign, 132-33. At one point during the morning, Grant apparently questioned the bravery of Meade's army, and Meade, stung, vented his frustration on Warren, who in turn passed the unpleasantries on to Griffin. Swan, "Battle of the Wilderness," PMHSM, 4:129.

71 AA-G Locke to Griffin, OR, 36, pt. 2, 416.

72 Crawford to Locke, ibid., 418. This message, Crawford's first dispatch, reached Meade at 9:00 a.m. and informed him that there was Confederate cavalry on the Plank Road.
Wilson's division was fighting a delaying action against Hill's Corps, which was advancing along the Plank Road. Without assistance from Crawford, Hill would force the blue troopers to abandon the intersection, presenting the Confederates with access to Warren's left or, even worse, allowing Hill to seize the Brock Crossing and cut off Hancock's command from the rest of the army. Just as Crawford began to appreciate this danger, orders arrived from Warren to abandon the Chewning Farm.\textsuperscript{73} Thus Crawford had reasons to withdraw, advance, or dig in and hold good ground. Once he achieved a better understanding of events on the Plank Road he sent his second message of the morning to Warren, at 9:00 a.m., informing him of the presence of enemy infantry at Parker's Store.\textsuperscript{74}

The significance of Crawford's second dispatch was twofold. First, this dispatch, not intelligence from Wilson's cavalry, was the first information Grant and Meade received concerning the actual position of Hill's corps. The bulk of Wilson's division was miles to the southwest, near Craig's Meeting House on the Catharpin Road,\textsuperscript{75} in accordance with his orders for 5 May. The advance of Hill's Corps on

\textsuperscript{73} Locke to Crawford, ibid., 417.

\textsuperscript{74} Crawford to Locke, ibid. This was Crawford's second message, which reached Meade at 10:15 a.m. His 8:00 a.m. message had only indicated the presence of Confederate cavalry, which had not alarmed Meade. He assumed that Wilson would have informed him of any danger on the Plank Road. Rhea, \textit{Battle of the Wilderness}, 107.

\textsuperscript{75} Steere, \textit{Wilderness Campaign}, 88-94. This refers to the 2 May march order, for "apparently [Wilson] never received fresh orders for 5 May." Atkinson, \textit{Grant's Campaigns}, 113; Wilson, \textit{Under the Old Flag}, 385.
the Plank Road cut Wilson off from communications with the army. This report also revealed the potential danger Hill’s advance posed for Hancock’s Second Corps; near Todd’s Tavern, it was farther from the Brock Crossing than Hill’s lead elements, approaching Parker’s Store. And the Confederates advanced on a road superior to that available to Hancock.

With Warren and Sedgwick struggling to engage the enemy and Hill advancing on the Brock Crossing, there was little choice consistent with a decision to fight other than ordering Hancock to march north for the crossing and sending Brigadier General George W. Getty’s Sixth Corps division, unengaged nearby, south down the Brock Road to hold the crossing, drive off Hill if possible, and maintain communications with Hancock. Another possibility at this point, 10:30 a.m., was to withdraw eastward and establish a new line. There is no evidence to suggest that anyone ever considered such a movement, again indicating that battle was Grant’s ultimate objective in response to Lee’s choice to fight in the Wilderness. Forward to battle! was the order of the day, and both history and experience indicated that Grant, not Meade, was the officer who approached war in such a manner.

It is unclear whether Grant or Meade was responsible for issuing the spate of orders at 10:30 a.m. that marked the final abandonment of Humphreys’s plan and sought to concentrate the army for battle in the Wilderness. Historian

76 Humphreys to Hancock, OR, 36, pt. 2, 407; Getty’s Report, ibid., pt. 1, 676; Rhea, Battle of the Wilderness, 133.
Gordon Rhea noted that the timing of these orders, issued just after Grant arrived on the field, indicated that he had gathered the reins of command into his own hands, and Rhea was probably right.\textsuperscript{77} Nevertheless, the intelligence report that revealed the advance of Confederate infantry on the Plank Road, Crawford’s second dispatch, only reached Meade at 10:15 a.m. The response to this report, articulated in the orders issued at 10:30 a.m., was practically the only available recourse, given the disposition of Federal forces and the desire to fight. Whether Grant or Meade was primarily responsible for the 10:30 a.m. orders, Meade could hardly have acted independently with more promptitude.\textsuperscript{78}

Getty secured the Brock Crossing with little or no time to spare. Elements of Second Corps soon began to reinforce and extend Getty’s position as they arrived on his left and rear.\textsuperscript{79} For the next twenty-four hours or so, the battle of the Wilderness was actually two simultaneous engagements between the Union Fifth and Sixth Corps and the Confederate Second Corps on the Turnpike, and the Confederate Second and,

\textsuperscript{77} Rhea, \textit{Battle of the Wilderness}, 132. Also see Steere, \textit{Wilderness Campaign}, 125-32.

\textsuperscript{78} Either Grant reached Meade before Crawford’s second dispatch, or Grant arrived later than “shortly after ten”, closer to 10:30 a.m. Meade sent a borrowed Sixth Corps staff officer to inform Grant of Crawford’s report, which had not reached Meade until 10:15 a.m. Grant probably arrived closer to 10:30 a.m. Rhea, \textit{Battle of the Wilderness}, 131. Despite Rhea’s self-contradiction, he was probably correct that Meade desired Grant’s input concerning what action to take in response to the changed situation. Grant arrived a few minutes later. It is impossible to know how Meade would have responded had Grant’s arrival suffered a considerable delay.

\textsuperscript{79} Hancock’s Report, Getty’s Report, \textit{OR}, 36, pt. 1, 318, 676.
eventually, First Corps and the Union Second Corps, assisted by a hodgepodge of units from the commands of Warren, Wright, and Burnside, on the Plank Road.

Unlike the plains of Manassas, the natural amphitheater of Chattanooga, or the rolling hills of Gettysburg, the Wilderness forced commanders to conduct battle by remote control even more than usual. Not uncommon to Civil War battle, but more pronounced than was typical, the two engagements became self-stoking cycles—"soldiers' battles"—as brigade, division, corps, and army commanders of both armies fed units into an escalating engagement as soon as they arrived on the field. Grant and Meade spent the day in close contact at their headquarters, as they did the following day, receiving reports from subordinates and issuing orders, but struggling to control events after the initial encounters on the Turnpike and the Plank Road escalated and eventually evolved into a general engagement.

When Grant arrived at Meade's headquarters about 10:20 a.m. and learned from his army commander that intelligence reports from Federal infantry indicated Lee would fight in the Wilderness, Grant replied, "That is all right."\(^{80}\) Apparently the situation suited the general-in-chief. Lee was not threatening a raid, forcing Grant to conform to a Confederate initiative and frightening Grant's superiors. Nor was Lee withdrawing to prepared fortifications that would act as a force multiplier for his outnumbered army. If the thickets and wilds of Lee's chosen battleground acted as a

\(^{80}\) Hyde, *Following the Greek Cross*, 183.
regional or environmental fortification, useful to negate Federal numerical superiority, it still offered Grant an opportunity to engage the enemy in an unprepared position. Grant had made contact with the Army of Northern Virginia, and he intended to maintain that close association until some final decision closed the interminable American Civil War.
CONCLUSION

Ulysses S. Grant and George G. Meade followed different paths to the north bank of the Rapidan River, but once they and their troops crossed the river at the outset of the 1864 campaign, their paths and fortunes combined in a parallel advance that ended, ultimately, in victory. Their personalities and experiences, so similar in most respects, so different in others, made them a study in contrasts, but a generally effective team.

These personal factors were also important components of both their individual command styles and of the partnership they forged. Grant and Meade rose to army command because both were lucky enough to survive the dangers inherent in their subordinate assignments, talented enough to lead men in war, confident enough to master the responsibilities associated with larger and larger commands, and ambitious enough to overcome frustrations and see themselves as part of the solution to the military problem presented by domestic insurrection. Both men were loyal to their government and its cause, subordinate to proper authority, whether military or civilian, and convinced that the destruction of the military power of the Confederacy was the only way to end the rebellion. Academy training and practical experience in the Mexican War gave them the tools—the outlook of the mid-nineteenth-century professional officer—to make themselves leaders of men, but as with any other American in 1861, they had to learn how to command and control the mass armies
called forth by the Civil War.

Grant honed his command style in the vast western theater where geography, dispersion, often unreliable communications, and an intermittent unified command forced subordinate commanders to develop self-reliance, an ability to cooperate with other Federal commanders, and an appreciation of the constraints logistics imposed on operations. These relatively decentralized conditions provided an excellent environment for the growth and maturation of Grant's strategic thinking because it required many of the traits found in Grant's personality. His confidence, independence, determination, and imagination found an outlet and a purpose that he enjoyed in no other period of his life.¹

Meade forged his command style in the very different circumstances of the eastern theater where geography, concentration, the proximity of the nation's political center, and a highly politicized officer corps forced commanders to develop careful subordination, an understanding of the political camps that divided the officer corps, and a comparatively restricted view of the broader implications of continental warfare. The more constricted situation in Virginia, describing both the smaller area of operations and the eastern army's command structure, had an ambiguous impact on Meade, reinforcing his professionalism and diligence but fostering caution and restricting the development of his

¹ Obviously this paragraph and the next are generalizations, yet they are descriptive of the broad differences between the army's experience in the western and eastern theaters.
strategic thinking.

In the latter half of 1863, Grant led Union armies to victory at Vicksburg and Chattanooga, operations that dealt staggering blows to the Confederacy and marked him as both the preeminent northern military hero and the most successful general in the Union Army. During the same period, Meade led the Army of the Potomac to victory at Gettysburg, shattering the myth of the invincibility of the Army of Northern Virginia. His failure to attack the enemy north of the Potomac, however, or to achieve substantial success during the fall campaign, led to discontent with his leadership and speculation concerning his retention as an independent army commander.

By mid-December 1863, Grant, Meade, and anyone who could read a newspaper (and probably most of those who could not) knew that Congress had begun deliberations on a bill to revive the rank of lieutenant general, and that Grant was the clear choice for such a post. Thus Grant spent the winter attempting to conduct operations to maintain pressure on the enemy while awaiting the outcome of political deliberations that eventually elevated him to command of all the Union armies. Meade, frustrated by his failure to break the strategic stalemate in Virginia and aware of Grant’s impending promotion, worked to strengthen the Army of the Potomac and tried to prepare himself for whatever role he was to play in the 1864 campaign.

Grant’s decision to place his headquarters in the field with the Army of the Potomac and to maintain Meade as that
army’s commander created the dual command structure that led the Army of the Potomac through the balance of the war. Command and control of that army became the responsibility of both men, and an informal arrangement emerged that saw Grant exerting greater direct responsibility for the army’s direction as the weeks passed. Initially, until about the middle of April, Grant concentrated on developing his strategic plan for the Union Army and assigning objectives to army commanders. Meade, pursuant to Grant’s orders, prepared detailed logistical estimates and attended to the myriad details that constituted the preparation of an army for active campaigning. Once Grant focused on the question of how to employ the Army of the Potomac in the campaign, however, he began to make decisions that, had he placed his headquarters in Washington or Chattanooga or virtually anywhere other than Culpeper, Virginia, would otherwise have devolved upon Meade as an independent army commander.

Grant decided that Meade’s army would turn Lee’s right flank. Logistical and political constraints limited Grant’s options, and despite his success in the western theater with operations against Confederate logistics, he knew that Lincoln and Halleck believed that the Army of the Potomac could best fight Lee’s army well north of Richmond and its defenses. Grant thus accepted the necessity of risking battle immediately upon crossing the Rapidan, and considering the risks inherent in an attempt to turn Lee’s left, this meant the possibility of fighting in the Wilderness. Grant

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2 Hattaway and Jones, How the North Won, 513-14.
sought to reduce the likelihood of such an engagement by assigning Sigel and Butler objectives that, if obtained, would compel Lee's army to rapidly withdraw to the environs of Richmond.

During those last weeks before the army crossed the Rapidan, Meade adopted an attitude of "perfect subordination"\(^3\) to the general-in-chief. Meade maintained this attitude throughout his association with Grant in Virginia, and although he and Humphreys were both aware of the likelihood that their contributions to success would be lost in the public's regard for Grant,\(^4\) they worked diligently and conscientiously to achieve the objectives assigned to the Army of the Potomac.

Neither Grant nor Meade thought it likely that Lee would raid northward in response to their advance. Grant thought Lee would probably withdraw to Richmond, and even as late as the third week of May, after the battle of Spotsylvania Court House, Grant still misunderstood the importance of the region north of Richmond as a source of supply for Lee's army.\(^5\) Meade thought Lee would probably reoccupy his Mine Run entrenchments, and Humphreys's plan specifically aimed at flanking that position.

\(^3\) Porter attributed this term to Grant. *Campaigning with Grant*, 114.


The successful and unopposed river crossing on 4 May seemed to relieve Grant of his greatest anxiety—that the army would become engaged during the crossing. As the afternoon progressed, the lack of intelligence reports warning of the Confederate Second Corps approaching on the Turnpike gave Grant and Meade a false sense of security concerning the time available for the army to complete the 5 May march and concentrate for a general westward advance.

Any assessment of the command and control of the Army of the Potomac through the morning of 5 May must rest as heavily on inference as it does evidence, and must also consider the ultimate aim of Humphreys’s plan and of Grant’s strategic design in Virginia. If battle south of the Wilderness was the most important factor in Federal planning, that planning required different logistical requirements, for the Mine Run experience and the resultant space-time calculations demonstrated that if Lee determined to fight in the Wilderness, he could force the issue. The plan to pass through the Wilderness in two days could not assure that Lee’s response would not demand deployment and battle in the region.

Delineation of the exact roles Grant and Meade played during the planning phase is impossible without discovery of further evidence. This uncertainty tempts the historian to resort to semantics in an effort to describe the functioning of the dual command structure. During the march from Spotsylvania Court House to the North Anna River, Meade wrote his wife that Henry Coppee’s description of “what share we
[Grant and Meade] each have in the work," was generally accurate; Coppee noted that the Army of the Potomac was "directed by Grant, commanded by Meade, and led by Hancock, Sedgwick and Warren."6 Despite Meade's endorsement of this assessment, made after two weeks of battle, it actually says very little about how the two men divided day-to-day responsibilities. Meade also wrote that during those two weeks Grant had gradually taken greater control.

It is therefore tempting to conclude that Meade commanded the army while Grant controlled it, but perhaps this assessment only repeats past descriptions in contemporary military terminology. Both men, however, were properly designated commanders, and more forceful conclusions about their relationship must await further study. Despite this continuing ambiguity, however, analysis of the operations of the Army of the Potomac upon crossing the Rapidan River offers an opportunity to infer the true nature of the Grant-Meade command relationship.

This analysis absolves Meade of many criticisms concerning the 4 May modification of the march order for the following day. Had Torbert's troopers advanced on the right on the morning of 5 May as originally ordered, they would not have encountered the Confederates on the Turnpike before Griffin's pickets sounded the alarm at 6:00 a.m. Wilson, who reconnoitered the Turnpike early on the 4th, failed to leave a detachment to maintain the cavalry screen that would have indicated the extent of the Confederate approach late on the

6 Meade, Life and Letters, 2:197-98.
afternoon of the 4th. Nevertheless, the fact that the Confederates did approach the Union position on 4 May is the key issue. Despite the deployment of the First Cavalry Division on the left on 5 May and Wilson's carelessness on the afternoon of 4 May, the presence of enemy infantry that far east on the Turnpike demanded an adjustment in the Union plan. Informed early on the evening of 4 May that Confederate infantry was located at Robertson's Tavern, it is probable that Grant would have ordered abandonment of the following day's march order and sought battle in the Wilderness, a few miles west of where it actually occurred. Such information would have indicated that perhaps Lee would not reoccupy the Mine Run line, the very situation Federal planning sought to prevent.

Until 10:30 a.m., 5 May, Meade still believed that the enemy infantry force on Fifth Corps's front was a detachment sent to delay the Federal march. Yet two facts, and a divergence in the manner in which Grant and Meade conducted offensive operations, make it difficult to argue that earlier intelligence reports from the infantry convinced Meade that the enemy force on the Turnpike was a mere detachment.

First, both the 2 May march order and the 4 May modification sought to maintain large bodies of infantry on the Union right, from Wilderness Tavern intersection north to Germanna Ford. The 2 May march order assigned the task to Sixth Corps, and the 4 May modification informed Sedgwick that the arrival of Ninth Corps would relieve a division of his corps from the duty of covering the bridge at the ford.
On the surface, this appeared a natural precaution to maintain communications with Burnside's advancing troops by securing Germanna Ford.

But to protect this position from what? Only the possible approach of a strong force of enemy infantry could have justified the continued presence of substantial Union infantry at the ford and along the Germanna Plank Road. If Meade or Grant thought it impossible that Lee would advance such a large force toward the ford, a detached brigade could have guarded the ford until Burnside's entire command crossed the river, instead of the difficult and confusing dispositions that saw Sixth and Ninth Corps units replacing one another until Burnside's last division reached the south bank. As for a Confederate cavalry dash at the Union right from the direction of Mine Run, the 2 May march order placed Torbert's division in position to counter such a threat, and at any rate a large scale cavalry attack through the tangled brush and along the narrow roads was unlikely.

Second, when Warren informed Meade that enemy infantry was on Griffin's front, Meade ordered Warren to "attack at once with your whole force." Why attack a detachment with four divisions? While Meade's attack order revealed his

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7 Walker, History of the Second Army Corps, 376. Walker argued that concern for the right flank during the early operations of the Mine Run campaign resulted in the decision to stop in the Wilderness on the night of 4 May. If fear of advancing Confederate infantry determined an issue as important as the 4 May march objectives, the discovery of Confederate infantry in the Wilderness early on 5 May could hardly have been a surprise.

8 Rhea, Battle of the Wilderness, 131.
clear understanding of Grant's primary objective--battle if Lee would stand--Meade's decision to attack a detachment with a corps was a strange reaction. Meade's various statements revealing his belief that the enemy was not in strength on the Turnpike is indicative of a man whistling past the graveyard. Meade did not want to find a large body of Confederate infantry in the position indicated by Warren, and if he did, he certainly did not want to discover it with his infantry pickets. Nonetheless, Meade immediately began preparations to assault this "detachment" with the entire Fifth Corps. He may have believed it was a detachment, but he was not sure, and consistent with his past experience, he prepared, perhaps unconsciously, for a worst case.

Finally, it is clear that Grant and Meade interpreted the phrases "to attack at once" "without giving time for disposition" differently. Even if Lee's entire army was on Griffin's front, it would take hours for it to deploy, and the terrain difficulties, which affected Confederate deployment as well as Federal, would make this a time-consuming event. The larger the force, the longer it would take to deploy. This simple fact was true on the parade ground, and the terrain could only lengthen the time required by the enemy to form in the woods. Grant probably understood "attack at once" to mean that whatever force could be quickly formed, a brigade or perhaps two, would dash down the road and find out just how many Confederates were on the Turnpike. The absence of intelligence from Wilson should have led Grant and Meade to conclude that the enemy force was probably
small; the larger the force, presumably the easier it was to
detect. Surely Wilson could not have missed an entire corps.
If, however, a large force was present, the longer the delay
in attacking, the longer the Confederate line would grow.

This issue of time on the battlefield was the difference
in Grant’s and Meade’s philosophies of offensive warfare.9 It
is impossible to discern from Meade’s actions exactly how he
interpreted “without giving time for disposition.” Both
Grant and Meade wanted to avoid battle in the Wilderness, but
once enemy infantry appeared on the Turnpike, they accepted
it. Yet both men fell victim to an impatience that ignored
the difficulties of deploying in the region. If Meade truly
believed that a small enemy force was all Griffin’s division
faced, when he failed to hear the sounds of battle within the
timeframe required to deploy one or two brigades, he should
have ridden to Griffin and issued peremptory orders. That
was not, however, Meade’s command style.

Meade’s great error on the morning of 5 May was not the
operational decision to suspend the Federal advance and
accept battle within the Wilderness, but his contradictory
tactical deployment. Beyond his decision to launch a corps
at a detachment, he, or Sedgwick, failed to promptly advance
units of Sixth Corps to connect with Warren’s right.

Of course Sedgwick, killed on 9 May during the march to
Spotsylvania Court House, never wrote his report of the
battle of the Wilderness. Apparently he spent a considerable

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9 For a brief but cogent discussion of time on the Wilderness
battlefield, see Thomas L. Livermore, “Grant’s Campaign Against Lee,”
PMHSN, 4:420-23.
part of the morning at Meade’s headquarters, and perhaps Meade delivered most of his directives for Sixth Corps to Sedgwick in person. Sometime between 9:00 and 10:00 a.m., Meade informed Warren that Sedgwick’s lead division was advancing on Fifth Corps’ right. Yet the lead brigade of this division did not actually begin this advance until 11:00 a.m. Why Sixth Corps’s response to Meade’s order to support Warren’s right was so sluggish is unclear, but Meade was ultimately responsible for coordination between the two corps.10

Despite Humphreys’s elaborate planning and previous Federal experience in the Wilderness, by the early afternoon of 5 May the Army of the Potomac engaged in a pair of encounter battles that soon broiled into a general engagement within the dreaded region. Adam Badeau, whose exuberance in defense of his chief led him to write that critics who claimed Grant suffered surprise at Shiloh were “writers hostile to the national cause,”11 typically overstated Grant’s purpose in the Wilderness. Badeau wrote:

The absurd idea that Grant hoped or desired to pass unobserved by Lee’s right, and reach his rear without a battle, could never have been entertained by a soldier: yet the assertion has been made by some who had no knowledge of Grant’s intentions, that his objective point was Gordonsville!

The front of the Army of the Potomac was indeed turned towards Lee, who stood between Grant and Gordonsville: but Grant took the road nearest Lee’s lines in order to provoke, not avoid, a

10 Brigadier General Emory Upton, Report, 1 September, 1864, OR, 36, pt. 1, 665. Upton was a colonel at the time of the battle. See Rhea, Battle of the Wilderness, 106-09, 131-34.

11 Badeau, Military History of U. S. Grant, 2:112.
battle; as for Gordonsville, he had no more idea of going thither than to New Orleans, or to any other place a thousand miles away, towards which the front of his army might be turned.12

It is not necessary to deconstruct Badeau’s argument. Obviously, if Grant’s intentions were actually this unsophisticated, there was no reason for Humphreys to plan anything more complicated than a repeat of the Mine Run advance.

Badeau’s point about Grant wanting to provoke a fight, however, is consistent with Grant’s desire to engage Lee as soon as possible. Grant, Meade, and Humphreys tried to pass the Army of the Potomac through the region before engaging Lee and failed. If Federal engagement in the Wilderness is viewed out of context, without reference to the logistical and political constraints that made fighting in the Wilderness less risky than a number of options, then the encounter battle and the resulting general engagement was a mistake. Battle, as soon as possible, was more important to Grant than the location of the engagement, that he desired that battle sooner rather than later. Meade, scarcely thirty-six hours into the campaign, had assumed his subordinate though important position as Grant’s operational officer.13 Meade seems to have functioned more as a modern chief of staff than as an independent army commander. His performance in that capacity on the morning of 5 May was uneven.

12 Ibid., 2:97. Italics in original.

13 Meade, Life and Letters, 2:197-98.
Grant's determination to fight, even on unfavorable ground, might have been a tactical mistake, but it was consistent both with his previous conduct and his immediate objective for the Army of the Potomac. Lincoln, Halleck, and Meade had all failed to break the stalemate in Virginia. Grant, like Meade, saw the James River as the ultimate line of operations for the destruction of the Army of Northern Virginia and the reduction of Richmond; unlike Meade, Grant demonstrated over the following weeks that he possessed the tactical tenacity to fight his way there.
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