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## **The Birth of the Operational Art: The Formalization of the Political-Military Relationship in the United States in the Civil War**

**Antonio Vargas**

Maneuver, lines of operations, and calculated risk are all aspects of the operational art that General Ulysses S. Grant developed in the Civil War that birthed modern warfare.<sup>1</sup> Modern warfare is stereotypically characterized by large armies, joint operations, and an attacking mindset usually associated with World War II or the Gulf War. But this style of warfare was derived from the American Civil War. In the Eastern Theater during the first half of the Civil War, battles were more defensive-minded following Jominian theory. But during the course of the war joint operations and the operation art replaced the defensive-minded Jominian theory of war. This change in military operations, in addition to political influences and good leadership, played a crucial role in the Union's victory. President Abraham Lincoln was the first President in American history to actively enforce his duties as commander-in-chief guiding national policy and military strategy. In the beginning of the war his objective was the preservation of the Union, but as the war progressed, it became clear that this was a weak goal. To solve this problem Lincoln published his Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation in the fall of 1862. This created a moral buy-in for soldiers giving them purpose but also a clear indication to his generals to attack the enemy to enforce this proclamation. This created an environment for generals to be more creative, and General Ulysses S. Grant rose above the others with the creation of the operational art. The formalization of the political-military relationship and creation of a definitive purpose of the war through the Emancipation Proclamation created a conducive environment for the birth of the operation art, the birth of modern warfare.

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<sup>1</sup> Department of the Army. Planning and Orders Production. FM 5-0, (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 2022), [https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR\\_pubs/DR\\_a/ARN36775-FM\\_5-0-001-WEB-3](https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/ARN36775-FM_5-0-001-WEB-3).

Understanding how war evolves, along with a willingness to adapt, is important because the lessons learned can foreshadow patterns of the next war. For example, when Confederate General Robert E. Lee couldn't defeat Grant, during his Overland Campaign, Lee entrenched his army around Petersburg, which led to a nine-month stalemate. This pattern of entrenchment foreshadows the horror of trench warfare that defined World War I. It is important for historians to understand that there are many influences that directly impact military success. By focusing solely on the social, political, or economic ramifications of war is to lose sight of the importance of how warfare evolves. The formalization of the political-military relationship and the creation of the operational art are the components that define modern warfare, and the main reason why the Union won the war.

Before Lincoln took the oath of office on March 4, 1861 the Confederacy attempted to legitimize and secure its power. The Confederacy's first object was seizing federal forts and buildings in order to secure its borders. But the important forts for the Confederacy to seize were those along the rivers and coastlines. In the last few months of James Buchanan's presidency, his administration promised the authorities in Charleston, South Carolina that the federal government would not reinforce these forts in order to maintain the status quo in the area. However, Major Robert Anderson, originally stationed at Fort Moultrie, moved his troops to the more secure Fort Sumter after misinterpreting orders from the War Department on December 26, 1860.<sup>2</sup> This action was applauded in the North, but the Confederacy's military leadership responded by not letting any ship near the fort. By March 5, 1861 Fort Sumter was running out of supplies and Major Anderson updated President Lincoln on his current situation. President Lincoln had two options: surrender the fort and withdraw his troops or reinforce the current garrison at the fort. The first option displeased Lincoln as this would go against his inaugural promise to occupy federal

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<sup>2</sup> James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2003), 265.

property.<sup>3</sup> The second, however, Lincoln approved but instead of reinforcing the fort with military personnel, the ships would only be carrying supplies, mainly food. This convoy was scheduled to arrive at Fort Sumter on April 12, 1861, and President Lincoln sent a letter to Governor Pickens of its planned arrival. Once notified of the incoming shipment the key leaders of the Confederacy gathered and ordered General P.G.T. Beauregard to not allow the shipment to reach the fort.<sup>4</sup> On the morning of April 12, 1861 at 4:30 am the Confederate batteries opened fire. With very little supplies and their artillery volleys ineffective at damaging the Confederate batteries, Anderson surrendered on April 14<sup>th</sup>.<sup>5</sup> Even though militarily President Lincoln suffered defeat, politically he achieved a victory. By having the Confederacy fire the first shots of the war, it was they who initiated conflict, galvanizing the Union to fight back. This provided Lincoln with volunteers who would fight to keep the Union whole.

At the beginning of the war Lincoln's administration made the primary purpose of the war the preservation of the Union. This meant keeping the Union together as it was before the South decided to secede. To achieve this goal Lincoln was willing to allow slavery to persist to preserve the Union but inhibit its expansion, a key component of the Republican Party platform. In a letter written in 1855 to his friend Joshua Speed, an enslaver from Kentucky, Lincoln stated "I also acknowledge *your* rights and *my* obligations under the Constitution, in regard to your slaves..." however, "I do oppose the extension of slavery."<sup>6</sup> This understanding of constitutional obligation was key in Lincoln's attempt to preserve the Union during his presidential campaign. Lincoln argued that if he was elected president the South should not fear the eradication of the institution of slavery due to its

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<sup>3</sup> Abraham Lincoln, "First Inaugural Address" (1861), in *Abraham Lincoln, Slavery, and the Civil War Selected Writings and Speeches*, ed. Michael P. Johnson. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's), 66.

<sup>4</sup> McPherson, 273.

<sup>5</sup> McPherson, 273-274.

<sup>6</sup> Abraham Lincoln, "Letter to Joshua F. Speed" (1855), in *Abraham Lincoln, Slavery, and the Civil War Selected Writings and Speeches*, ed. Michael P. Johnson. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's), 21-22.

Constitutional protections. As president his obligation was to faithfully execute the duties of his office and abide by the laws enshrined in the Constitution and those passed by Congress. His obligations did not include changing the laws of the United States, that was the responsibility of Congress.

Although Lincoln attempted to ease the fears of the South, his personal views undermined his message of preservation. Lincoln criticized slaveholders stating that "... in politics, they dictate the course of all of you, and are as completely your masters, as you are the masters of your own negroes."<sup>7</sup> Lincoln understood that the South and its culture was intertwined with the institution of slavery and that the South would always demand its continuation and expansion. In one of his most well-known speeches, *A House Divided*, Lincoln stated and understood that "this government cannot endure, permanently half *slave* and half *free*."<sup>8</sup> This dichotomy of internal separation, as Lincoln understood, was the cause of Union's political strife, but he was uncertain which path the country would follow. Publicly, however, Lincoln primarily focused on trying to bridge the relationship between the North and South to keep the Union together.

However, Southerners interpreted Lincoln's election as president as a direct attack to the very heart of the South: the institution of slavery. Their goal was to keep the institution of slavery strong and continue its expansion westward. During the 1850s Southern politicians attempted to create more slave states out of the western territories. In the end, both the Compromise of 1850 and the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 allowed some western territories the ability to decide whether to become either a slave state or free state through popular sovereignty.<sup>9</sup> One crucial legal

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<sup>7</sup> Lincoln, "Letter to Joshua F. Speed" (1855), 23.

<sup>8</sup> Abraham Lincoln, "'House Divided' Speech" (1861), in *Abraham Lincoln, Slavery, and the Civil War Selected Writings and Speeches*, ed. Michael P. Johnson. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's), 32.

<sup>9</sup> Popular Sovereignty at its core was the ability for territories to freely choose whether to be admitted into the Union as either a free state or a slave state. This caused friction between the North and the South as well as violence in the Kansas-Nebraska territory. In what's infamously called Bleeding Kansas, the territory was the focal point of violence to sway the vote. For further reading see James McPherson's *Battle Cry of Freedom* Chapter 5 "The Crime Against Kansas"

and political victory that helped this goal was the Dred Scott Decision on March 6, 1857.<sup>10</sup> The Supreme Court decision ensured that African Americans were not eligible for citizenship and that the Missouri Compromise of 1820 was unconstitutional. Therefore, the expansion of slavery was no longer confined to the Southern half of the Union. But Lincoln, and therefore the Republican platform, were against the expansion of slavery. If they won the election of 1860, even if Lincoln upheld his campaign promise to strictly adhere to the Constitution on the issue of slavery, Southerners knew they faced critical opposition to slavery's expansion. Thus, various southern states seceded, the Confederacy formed, and after the attack on Fort Sumter, the war began.

During the first year of the war, the question of enslaved individuals who ran away became a point of tension and concern for President Lincoln. Lincoln needed to convince the South that the Republican Party would take away their slaves in order to keep channels open for a peaceful resolution with the South in order to reach his goal of preserving the Union. But the questions of slavery and the conduct of Union generals made Lincoln's task nearly impossible. In July 1861 General Benjamin Butler received three enslaved individuals who fled from Confederate lines to Fort Monroe. Their enslaver, a Confederate colonel, asked for their release under the Fugitive Slave Law. Butler stated that these individuals were contraband since Virginia claimed to be out of Union and thus the Fugitive Slave Law did not apply. On July 30, 1861 Butler asked for clarification of the administration's stance on the issue.<sup>11</sup> This issue created debate in Congress, who, with grievances from many Democratic Congressmen, ultimately passed the Confiscation Act.<sup>12</sup> The reservations regarding the Confiscation Act

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or Allen Guelzo's *Fateful Lightning* "Chapter 2 "A Game of Balances" for more information and social context.

<sup>10</sup> The Dred Scott Decision was a Supreme Court decision from the *Dred Scott v. Sanford* (1857) case which stated that enslaved people could never become citizens. For further reading, see the transcript of the document on the National Archives Website linked here:

<https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/dred-scott-v-sanford>.

<sup>11</sup> McPherson, 355.

<sup>12</sup> McPherson, 356.

gave Lincoln a clear indication that it was necessary to tread lightly if his goal was to only preserve the Union.

Although Congress answered questions regarding the status of the institution of slavery, numerous generals acting as military governors overstepped their given authority. One of these commanders was General John C Frémont. On August 30, 1861 Frémont declared martial law announcing the death penalty for any guerillas sabotaging the Union and freed those enslaved by all Confederate activists in Missouri.<sup>13</sup> This overstep of authority appalled Lincoln, who in turn removed Frémont from command. Additionally, he overturned Frémont's declaration of martial law and stance on freeing those enslaved in Missouri. Lincoln received fierce political backlash for removing Frémont from command from the abolitionist population in the Republican Party, but Lincoln understood that advocating for the abolition of slavery would not be fully supported at this time.<sup>14</sup> By balancing the political attitudes in Congress and the home front, Lincoln created conservative approach to the purpose of the war to gain public support.

Militarily, the goal of preserving the Union was not achievable. Lincoln, as president, was the commander-in-chief of the navy and the army, and was the main authority to guide national strategy by giving his generals his commander's intent.<sup>15</sup> However, by stating his desire to preserve the Union, Lincoln provided an incomplete commander's intent. This created various problems for Lincoln's generals. First, this intent had no clear actionable objectives. Typically, when given the commander's intent from the president, the top generals then create an overall plan to achieve a desired endstate within the commander in

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<sup>13</sup> McPherson, 352.

<sup>14</sup> Lincoln understood that the Confiscation Act was debated fiercely in Congress and passed the Senate 24-11 (senate.gov) and avoided talking about emancipation in his annual address to Congress on December 3, 1861.

<sup>15</sup> The Commander's Intent is composed of three key components: purpose, key tasks, and endstate. The purpose answers why the war is being fought, the key tasks give the next steps and restrictions, and the endstate describes the state in which the war should conclude. Regarding the war, Lincoln's endstate was the preserve the Union or keep the Union together.

chief's intent. This plan is called the national military strategy.<sup>16</sup> However, by only providing the endstate without a purpose or key tasks, as Lincoln did, his goal created ambiguity that inhibited the creation of an effective national strategy. Additionally, this limited information did not place any restrictions upon his generals. With limited understanding of how Lincoln wanted to approach the war, generals struggled with how to plan military campaigns.

Despite his lack of military experience, Lincoln utilized presidential powers that had not been used by any of his predecessors in guiding the action of his generals. Previous presidents during wartime never took an active role in the military decision-making process. They delegated these responsibilities solely to their subordinate generals. Lincoln, by being active in the military decision-making process, created the template for the role of commander-in-chief. Over the course of the war Lincoln learned how to lead his generals, but the initial desired endstate of preserving the Union was only good for creating political ambiguity rather than providing any clear direction. This ambiguous endstate of the war did not create any political avenues for the North and South to mend its relationship, it barely created any moral purpose for soldiers who joined the army. Using the preservation of the Union as the primary endstate of the war without guidance about his purpose nor specific tasks on how to preserve the Union, ultimately created a weak and unachievable goal.

For the first year of the war the national strategy sought to advance the Anaconda Plan created by General Winfield Scott. The Anaconda Plan at its heart was to sever the economy of the South and avoid large military confrontations. The goal was to bring the South back into the Union, not to destroy them. With this in mind, Scott initially created two main military objectives to achieve this goal: a Union blockade that would guard all southern ports limiting their importing and exporting ability and controlling the Mississippi River, which would economically

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<sup>16</sup> FM 5-0 states that the National Military Strategy expands upon the (National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy, but in the Civil War it was Lincoln's goal to Preserve the Union) by defining national military objectives (ends), how to achieve these objectives (ways), and addresses the military capabilities (means) required to execute the strategy.



sever the South into two. Theoretically, this strategy would have minimal impact on the Southern way of life and limit Union casualties. Additionally, Congress called for a march onto Richmond, which became the Confederacy's capital in early 1861, to forcefully bring the South back into the Union. President Lincoln accepted this addition and gave the order to execute the Anaconda Plan. This exponentially increased the size of the US Navy and gave birth to what would be a two-theater war: the Western Theater and the Eastern Theater.<sup>17</sup>

Knowing that Lincoln wanted to keep diplomatic channels open for the newfound Confederacy to rejoin the Union, Scott created the Anaconda plan which inherently was more defensively minded. This possibly led to generals to be hesitant during the early battles and campaigns: McDowell at Bull Run and McClellan during the Peninsular Campaign. Both generals moved forward with caution, taking minimal risks to preserve combat power, and they committed to an attack only when the chances of victory were high.<sup>18</sup> The problem with this philosophy was that Lincoln's early generals failed to understand that in order to preserve the Union, the Union had to win. By mid-1862, President Lincoln understood this truth and took steps to change the national strategy.

Before the Civil War, the Union Army was a frontier army. Its main purpose was to assure the safety of travelers moving westward from indigenous peoples and maintain the various forts on these routes. But when the Civil War began the old frontier army needed to become a professional army. During the initial stages of the secession crisis, the Union Army had around 16,000 soldiers, and by the end of Civil War, the Union Army stood at 1,000,000 soldiers across two separate theaters.<sup>19</sup> There were three early changes that turned the frontier army

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<sup>17</sup> A Theater is defined as any region or space where war is fought. For example, in World War II, there were two main theaters from the United States perspective, the Pacific Theater and the European Theater. In the Civil War, there were two theaters, the Eastern Theater and the Western Theater.

<sup>18</sup> Combat power has eight elements: leadership, information, command and control, movement and maneuver, intelligence, fires, sustainment, and protection

<sup>19</sup> Gary B Griffin, "Strategic-Operational Command and Control in the American Civil War," (US Army Command and General Staff College, 1992), 5.

into a professional army: unit restructuring, the creation of a military culture, and the creation of a staff system. These changes created a more disciplined fighting force, a decentralized command structure, and increased the army's combat effectiveness.

In the first Battle of Bull Run, General McDowell personally commanded twelve divisions with little help from his division commanders. This led to him being personally overworked and unable to coordinate with each division to effectively execute large scale maneuvers. When McClellan took over, he reorganized and trained the men of McDowell's Army to form the Army of the Potomac. McClellan used the regiment as the base unit when he created the Army of the Potomac and worked up through the echelons of command.<sup>20</sup> There were two to four Regiments per Brigade and two to four Brigades in a Division.<sup>21</sup> Each infantry division had an attached artillery battery and cavalry brigade. This made divisions more independent and allowed division commanders to adjust their units, based on the current battlefield situation, without the explicit permission of the army commander.

Additionally, McClellan needed to create a new military culture for the Army of the Potomac. Using his experience as an observer of the Crimean War, he used extensive drilling and training to transform the army of recruits into the Army of the Potomac. He created discipline through the ranks and increased the morale of those in Washington by showing off the troops in marches across the capitol. The increase of discipline and professionalism to create a new military culture in the Army of the Potomac was one of McClellan's greatest achievements and success of the war.<sup>22</sup>

Although the initial restructuring of the Union army and creation of a new military culture were important at the tactical level, the need for a staff system for overall campaign planning was apparent. Before

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<sup>20</sup> This means the most maneuverable or lowest tactical combat effective unit.

<sup>21</sup> Griffin, 5.

<sup>22</sup> It is important to note this culture change was only in the Eastern Theater, there were different military cultures in the Eastern and Western Theaters of the war. This became apparent when Gen. Grant became General in Chief and the perceptions of professionalism differed.

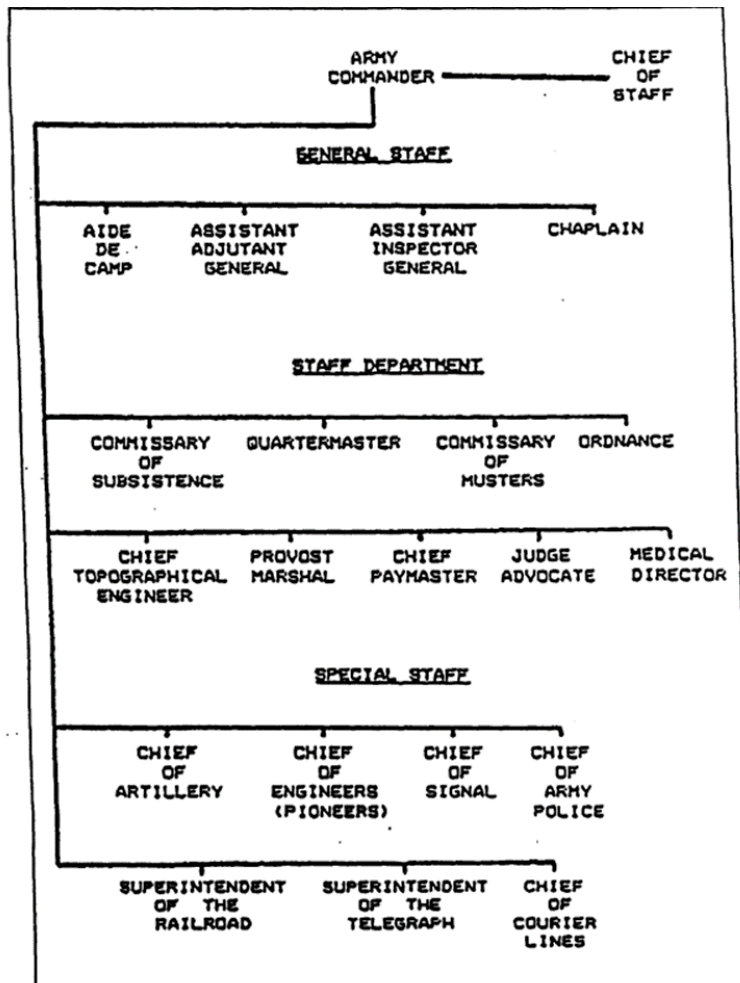
the first Battle of Bull Run, General Irvin McDowell was the commander of the newfound army full of recruits and had the difficult task of training new Volunteers using the limited supply of Regulars who were embedded in his army.<sup>23</sup> Simultaneously he had to draft plans of moving south to meet the enemy and oversee the whole logistical operations. With the lack of delegation, the army moved slowly and ultimately failed in the first Battle of Bull Run. When Lincoln replaced McDowell, McClellan reformed the staff system that would be used throughout the rest of the war. Each staff had head chief of staff that oversaw the entire staff, and each staff had three main sections the General Staff, Staff Department, and Special Staff. The General Staff communicated orders to subordinate commanders, collecting and validating received intelligence, keeping reports of the war, and assuring the arrangements were made for “quarters, precautions against surprise, movements, and battle.”<sup>24</sup> The Staff Department explicitly focused on the conduct and logistical sides of running an Army: beans, bullets, intelligence, pay, and discipline. Lastly, the Special Staff focused on the Army infrastructure of the Army: transportation, communication, and combat capabilities. The creation of this staff gave Army Commanders more flexibility and freedom to focus on the big picture of the battle while the staff focuses on the small details of the operation. This staff system, by the end of the war, was the most complex until Prussian General von Moltke created the modern staff system. Army Commanders in the Civil War became more managers of individuals than directly leading soldiers in battle, creating the tradition of a decentralized command structure that still persists in the United States military today.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> The Volunteers were soldiers recruited through their state directly, and not in the Regular (Federal) Army.

<sup>24</sup> Griffin, 9-14.

<sup>25</sup> The argument here is that the Union Army was becoming more decentralized, an article titled, “The United States Army’s Secret to Success Capitalizing on the Human Dimension to Enhance Its Combat Capabilities” states that in modern times planning is centralized, execution is decentralized. In the Civil War, the higher echelons planned each operation, but it was the lower-level commanders, Colonel and lower, even noncommissioned officers (NCOs), executed these plans.

Figure of the Staff System<sup>26</sup>

After the failed Peninsular Campaign, in July 1862, McClellan needed to create better command and control within the Army of the Potomac, so he added another echelon of command, the corps. There were two to three divisions in each corps, and all artillery was consolidated at the corps level. The cavalry had their own divisions and were attachments to the infantry corps. By the time General Meade took over the Army of the Potomac, there were seven infantry corps with an attached artillery brigade and a cavalry corps. By June 1863, the estimated total of personnel in the Army of the Potomac was 85,500 men.<sup>27</sup> With the influx of soldiers coming into the Union Army, the

<sup>26</sup> Griffin, 13.

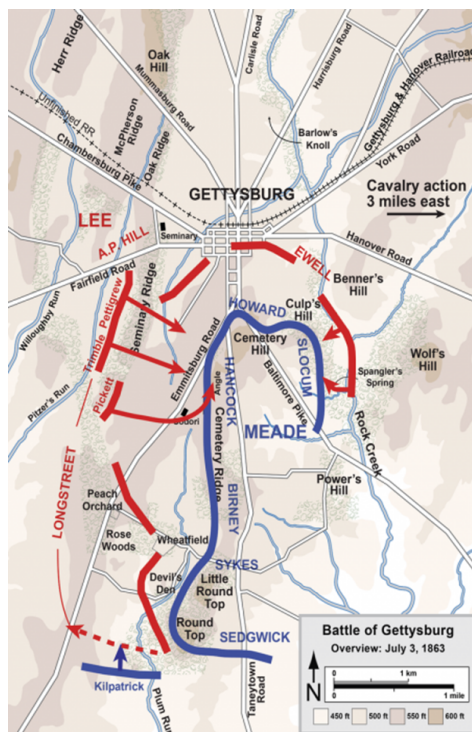
<sup>27</sup> Griffin, 7.

basic unit structure of the army changed to help commanders maintain command and control over their subordinates.

Although McClellan administratively forged the Army of the Potomac, his military decision making was rooted in his West Point education of the Jominian style of warfare. In the early nineteenth century, there were two main individuals who influenced the military theory taught at West Point: General Antoine-Henri Jomini and Professor Dennis Mahan. Antoine-Henri Jomini served in the French Army during the time of Napoleon and his treatise of warfare, *The Art of War*, describes the Napoleonic style of warfare. Using various concepts of interior lines and geometric angles on lines of defense, Jomini described the importance of massing troops at a decisive point to achieve victory. Additionally, Jomini warned that war was not a science, it was an art, and that only a minimum necessary force should be used to minimize casualties.<sup>28</sup> This theory correlated very well to the Eastern Theater of the Civil War. The Army of the Potomac and the Army of Northern Virginia fought using these principles in various battles: Gettysburg, Seven Days Battle, and Fredericksburg. The best example of the Jominian art of warfare is the Battle of Gettysburg. On the second and third day of the battle, Meade used the natural terrain around Gettysburg to create his famous ‘fish hook’, this shape embodies the geometric and defensive style of warfare of Jomini. This fish hook shape created interior lines for the Army of the Potomac that allowed them to shift troops to various points in the line to strengthen their defense in a timely manner. This ability to amass forces quickly at any given location allowed Meade the flexibility to focus his forces at the “decisive point” to achieve victory wherever the opportunity arose. Professor Mahan, a military instructor at West Point, supplemented the Jominian framework with further instruction of the defensive art of warfare and fortifications. This defensive framework of war described by Jomini and Mahan would heavily influence McClellan’s military decision making during the Peninsular Campaign.

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<sup>28</sup> Antoine-Henri Jomini, *The Art of War*, trans. W.P Craighill and G.H Mendell (West Point, NY, 1862), <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/13549/13549-h/13549-h.htm>, 321.



Meade's Fish Hook at Gettysburg<sup>29</sup>

Professor Mahan, a military instructor at West Point, supplemented the Jominian framework with further instruction of the defensive art of warfare and fortifications. Since West Point, at its founding, was an engineering school, the curriculum was primarily focused on this aspect of warfare. This engineering focus of early nineteenth century West Point played an important role in the second half of the war. With the Confederacy losing ground to the Union Army in 1863-1865, the Confederate Army fortified their defenses further at key locations to stall and hopefully outlast the will of the Union Army, like the battles of Vicksburg, Atlanta, and Petersburg. These long defensive sieges were the product of the theoretical combination of the geometric style warfare of Jomini and the engineering focus of Professor Mahan. This initial theoretical framework of both Antoine-Henri Jomini and Professor Mahan influenced the early conduct of the war, but as the nature of warfare changed, so did its tactics. However, it is the leadership and

<sup>29</sup> "Battle History," Gettysburg PA, accessed December 8, 2022, <https://www.gettysburgpa.gov/history/slideshows/battle-history>.

tactical ability of the military commander to implement and adapt these tactical theories to achieve victory on the battlefield.

In recent Civil War historiography, traditional military history is discussed very little, especially the topic of command and generalship. However, this topic is important because individual generals, their personality, leadership, and ability, influenced the outcomes of battles that shaped the social and political landscape of the home front. An exception to the lack of military history in recent scholarship is Andre Bledsoe's 2019 article, "Beyond the Chessboard of War: Contingency, Command, and Generalship in Civil War Military History." He creates a framework to analyze how effective each general was at commanding using four distinct categories: politics, personality and leadership ability, military culture, and battlefield performance.<sup>30</sup> I use this framework to analyze McClellan in an attempt to understand why he was not able to adapt to the changes of warfare during the first half of the Civil War.

A military officer, in the 1860s as well as today, is an individual who is supposed to provide their subordinates with purpose, direction, and motivation. McClellan achieved these three goals during the formation of the Army of the Potomac, in which he trained recruits on the art of warfare, constantly drilled them to establish discipline, and personally motivated his troops to continue to improve. Soldiers in the Army of the Potomac became very loyal to McClellan and were proud to be a part of his army. One soldier noted that the Army of the Potomac was always McClellan's until Gen. Grant's Overland Campaign in 1864.<sup>31</sup> By giving his subordinates a shared understanding of the purpose of the war, to bring the Confederacy back into the Union, McClellan created a moral buy-in, albeit a weak one, that motivated soldiers to want to fight.

In addition to creating a buy-in for new recruits, McClellan's administrative ability helped modernize the Army of the Potomac to make it more combat effective. As previously discussed, McClellan

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<sup>30</sup> Andrew S Bledsoe, "Beyond the Chessboard of War: Contingency, Command, and Generalship in Civil War Military History," *The Journal of the Civil War Era* 9, no. 2 (June 2019): pp. 275-301.

<sup>31</sup> McPherson, 728.

restructured the Union Army and was the first to introduce corps into the Union Army's structure, he laid the foundation for the Civil War Staff system, and his logistical ability to train an Army from scratch are all worthy achievements and deserve recognition. As a leader, McClellan's logistical and administrative skills were his strength and it helped lay the foundation for the Union's victory in the years after Lincoln removed him from command of the Army of the Potomac.

However, McClellan had a large ego and outward bravado. In one of his most famous letters to his wife Mary, he states that he could become dictator due to his popularity.<sup>32</sup> This belief permeated his entire being and altered his perception and was one of the main reasons for the tear in Lincoln and McClellan's relationship. McClellan believed that it was the political institutions and his superiors that were holding him back and placing restrictions upon him that undermined his success. However, this could not be further from the truth. President Lincoln wanted McClellan to attack the Confederacy and make a move toward Richmond, but McClellan kept delaying. To force his hand, President Lincoln published War Order No. 1 that forced McClellan to initiate movement.<sup>33</sup> Additionally, during the execution of the Peninsular Campaign McClellan stalled outside of Richmond. He stated that he could not attack because he didn't have the necessary personnel to take the city.<sup>34</sup> While McClellan was prone to not take risks, he also overestimated the enemy's actual strength. McClellan's ego and lack of will altered his perception of the battlefield, and combined with President Lincoln's conservative goal for the war, McClellan became hesitant and defensively minded.

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<sup>32</sup> Ethan S. Rafuse, "Abraham Lincoln and George B. McClellan," Abraham Lincoln's Classroom (The Lehrman Institute), accessed December 8, 2022, <https://www.abrahamlincolnsclassroom.org/abraham-lincolns-contemporaries/abraham-lincoln-and-george-b-mcclellan/>.

<sup>33</sup> Abraham Lincoln, "Executive Order-General War Order No. 1," The American Presidency Project (UC Santa Barbara), accessed December 8, 2022, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/executive-order-general-war-order-no-1>.

<sup>34</sup> Lincoln sent this letter in response to McClellan's plea for troops and reestablishment of a land supply route. Abraham Lincoln, "Letter to George McClellan (October 13, 1862)," Lincoln's Writings, accessed December 8, 2022, <https://housedivided.dickinson.edu/sites/lincoln/letter-to-george-mcclellan-october-13-1862/>.



McClellan's administrative leadership created the foundation for his successors to succeed in winning the war, but his lack of will undermined his ability to accurately perceive the necessary steps to achieve victory. McClellan's battlefield performance was a litany of failures. In his two largest engagements, the Peninsula Campaign and the Battle of Antietam, he failed to take the initiative to achieve a tactical victory. McClellan was hesitant, slow, and defensive, allowing the enemy to have freedom of maneuver, and the ability to prepare the battlespace that was conducive to victory. The lack of aggressiveness to attack the enemy was the downfall of McClellan in both of these engagements.

McClellan's lack of initiative was not just in combat but became apparent during the planning process for the Peninsular Campaign. Lincoln asked McClellan many times for a campaign plan, but McClellan only delayed. In response, Lincoln issued General War Order No. 1 forcing McClellan to move against the enemy no later than the 22<sup>nd</sup> February 1862.<sup>35</sup> After moving the Army of the Potomac south via navy transportation, McClellan stumbled upon a Confederate force at Yorktown. Instead of attacking the lesser Confederate force, McClellan settled for a siege. This gave the Confederate Army time to prepare defenses around Richmond and mass their forces to counter McClellan. After delaying McClellan for a month, the Confederate force at Yorktown to Richmond's established defenses. McClellan called the capture of Yorktown a victory, but instead it was a calculated decision by the enemy to trade space for time.<sup>36</sup> His lack of aggressiveness or willingness to take the initiative came again when he pushed the Confederates back to the Richmond defenses. Instead of taking risks to start defeating the enemy, he halted and prepped a defensive position because he believed the enemy had greater numbers. This backfired when Gen. Robert E. Lee took over the Army of Northern Virginia and aggressively attacked Gen. McClellan forcing him to withdraw back to Washington. His lack of aggression in the Peninsula Campaign

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<sup>35</sup> Lincoln, Executive Order-General War Order No. 1.

<sup>36</sup> FM 3-0 defines Retrograde as a type of defensive operation that involves organized movement away from the enemy (ADP 3-90) to either delay the enemy, withdraw, or retire.

highlighted his strict adherence to military theory attempting to keep a Jominian geometric shape. This lack of adaptation in combat was his downfall in this campaign.

At the Battle of Antietam, McClellan applied the lessons learned from the Peninsula Campaign and took the initiative by attacking Lee while Lee's armies were separated. But during the battle itself McClellan had a difficult time coordinating his troops in the fog of war: his armies never massed an attack on a decisive point, they all attacked at different times, and the terrain at various locations was not suitable to attack. The culmination of these various issues led to the Battle of Antietam to be the bloodiest day in American history with a casualty count around 23,000 killed, wounded, or missing.<sup>37</sup> McClellan's true failure at the Battle of Antietam was not pursuing Lee after the battle, allowing him to escape across the Potomac River to reconsolidate his forces. McClellan did not understand that he needed to be aggressive to defeat the Confederacy, but given Lincoln's goal of preserving the Union, McClellan was hesitant as he did not want to destroy the Southern people.

General McClellan as Commander of the Army of the Potomac created a combat effective army through training and discipline as well as providing soldiers with purpose, direction, and motivation. His administrative skills in updating unit structure and reorganizing the staff laid the foundation for the future success of the Army of the Potomac. However, his tactical failures, partially due to Lincoln's initial conservative approach and the president's goal of preserving the Union, inhibited McClellan from achieving victory against the Confederacy. McClellan's lack of initiative in attacking was his downfall as an army commander, but this skill shined in other generals, namely Ulysses S. Grant.

By mid-1862 President Lincoln realized the Confederacy would not come back into the Union willingly, and the morale of the Union was dropping. With various military defeats in the Peninsular Campaign

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<sup>37</sup> "Antietam National Battlefield (U.S. National Park Service)," National Parks Service (U.S. Department of the Interior), accessed December 8, 2022, <https://www.nps.gov/anti/index.htm>.

and the Second Battle of Bull Run the administration was losing the confidence of the people. This reflected the lack of a strong moral purpose for the war. Additionally, the Confederacy gained legitimacy abroad and started receiving assistance, for example, Britain supplied the Confederacy with several warships to break the Union blockade.<sup>38</sup> Understanding the domestic and international political situation President Lincoln issued his Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation after the draw at Antietam.<sup>39</sup> The action had four purposes. The first was to give an ultimatum to the Confederacy: either rejoin the Union and the proclamation will have no legal effect or continue to fight and if the Union won, then those enslaved in the rebellious states “shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free.”<sup>40</sup> The Confederates continued to fight and subsequently Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1<sup>st</sup> 1863. Second, this proclamation signaled to various nations and the American people the shift in the moral purpose of the war.<sup>41</sup> Third, it helped boost the numbers in the Union Army as shortly after the Emancipation Proclamation was signed, Congress passed legislation to allow African Americans to join the Union Army. Finally, this use of executive war power provided a legal foundation for the Confiscation Act passed in 1861 by stating that all those enslaved in the rebellious states were free.<sup>42</sup> President Lincoln was assertive in his position as

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<sup>38</sup> Allen C. Guelzo, *Fateful Lightning: A New History of the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 292-293.

<sup>39</sup> Although it is debated, the Battle of Antietam was a military draw because no side gained any advantage or beneficial outcome from the battle. Gen. Lee was able to flee with the remainder of the Army of Northern Virginia and resupply his army. Gen. McClellan had an opportunity to capture Lee’s army and failed. However, the Battle of Antietam was definitely a Union political victory.

<sup>40</sup> Abraham Lincoln, *The first edition of Abraham Lincoln's final emancipation proclamation*. Washington, D. C., January 1, 1863. Pdf. <https://www.loc.gov/item/scsm001016/>.

<sup>41</sup> Allen Guelzo in *Fateful Lightning* and James McPherson in *Battle Cry of Freedom* discuss the British perspective of the American Civil War, and talks about the political aspect regarding Britain giving the Confederacy military Aid. The British government did give the Confederacy a few warships early in the war, but after the release of the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation the British public started to turn against Britain’s policy of aiding the Confederacy with warships.

<sup>42</sup> Guelzo, 184-185.

commander-in-chief by continually readjusting national goals to reflect the realities of domestic politics and the war.

Militarily, the Emancipation Proclamation gave Union commanders the freedom to conduct offensive operations to “practically restor[e] the constitutional relation between the United States, and each of the States, and the people thereof, in which States that relation is, or may be, suspended or disturbed.”<sup>43</sup> By stating that the military would be the enforcement mechanism of ensuring the mandates of the proclamation, Lincoln gave Union commanders the official authority over refugees, as well as ensuring that all people enslaved in the rebellious states were set free. This meant that the Union Army had to attack and invade the South to meet these objectives. After the publishing of the proclamation this attitude shift within the Union Army was noticeable.

In the Eastern Theater General Ambrose Burnside attacked Fredericksburg in December 1862 and General Joseph Hooker attacked Chancellorsville in April-May 1863. Although both of these generals lost their respective battles, their actions reflected the changed strategy compared to McDowell and McClellan because they took the initiative by attacking the enemy force to achieve Lincoln’s goals. In the Western Theater, General Ulysses Grant took a large risk during his Vicksburg Campaign and was ultimately victorious.<sup>44</sup> When news of his victory reached Washington, D.C the public celebrated. This was a different reaction than his victory at Shiloh the previous year that horrified the public.<sup>45</sup> The Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation in September 1862 and the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863 fundamentally shifted the national strategy of the war by creating an

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<sup>43</sup> Abraham Lincoln, *Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation*. 1862. Pdf. <https://www.loc.gov/item/scsm000950/>.

<sup>44</sup> Dec 29 1862-July 4, 1863

<sup>45</sup> McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 414-415. In short Shiloh was a battle fought at Pittsburg Landing between the Union Army commanded by Gen. Grant and the Confederate Army commanded by Gen. Albert Sydney Johnston. For two days, April 6-7 1862, the two armies fought and in the end the Union were victorious. However, the casualties were estimated to be around 20,000. This is the first time in American history that these high casualty numbers were ever produced.

attacking mentality within the Union Army and within the Union populace to create a shared understanding to preserve the Union, the Union had to win the war. However, to oversee this transition into attacking warfare, the upper echelon of the military structure needed to readjust their positional responsibilities.

When General Henry Halleck succeeded McClellan as general in chief, the main responsibility of the position was to coordinate and oversee the execution of the national strategy. But as the war continued, there was a need to separate some of these responsibilities. When Grant became general in chief, Halleck became Army chief of staff, whose responsibility was to oversee the logistics of war for the entire Union Army as well as being a liaison to Lincoln on behalf of Grant. This played into Halleck's strength as an administrator and political savvy. Halleck in this role, not only helped logistically, but kept Lincoln informed about the status of ongoing military operations. Additionally, Halleck helped Grant understand the intentions of Washington since Grant was embedded within the Army of the Potomac conducting military operations. The separation of responsibilities formalized the political-military structure and also set a precedent that the Army chief of staff is the administrative head of the entire US Army.

While Halleck focused on the administration of the Army, Grant as general in chief focused on the combat operations of all the Union Armies. In his 1864 Campaign, Grant used the various armies to hit key strategic objectives to stretch the already limited resources of the Confederacy. Using the technological advantages of the Union Army, Grant used the telegraph to communicate with all the Armies underneath his command to clearly communicate his intent as well as effectively coordinating the timing of military operations. This combination of coordination and communication was the deadly blow for the Confederacy as their resources were stretched too thin to cover the entire front. All the Confederacy could do was dig in at key strategic points like Petersburg and Atlanta and hope they could outlast the Union. But with Halleck overseeing the administration, and Grant's coordination with the other armies, the Union increased the military pressure against the Confederacy. Grant, in his role as general in chief, laid the

foundation for what would be the modern-day combatant commander, as he controlled all the Union Armies within the United States with the primary focus of defeating the Confederacy.

To adapt to Lincoln's new approach to the war, military commanders needed to be more creative while attacking. In the first half of the war, commanders in the Eastern Theater fought in the "traditional" style of warfare, but in the Western Theater commanders began testing new tactics and theories of war that would birth joint operations and the operational art. John Keegan in his book, *The Civil War: A Military History*, argues that the early development of these tactics in the Western Theater was due to the natural topography in the area with its dense woodlands, swamps, and interconnected system of rivers.<sup>46</sup> Terrain played an enormous role in the military decision-making process as commander's had to logistically plan the movement of their army but also how to attack a given objective. It was his ability to read topographic maps, understand the surrounding terrain, his determination, and creativity that allowed Grant to mainstream both joint operations and forge the operational art. These tactical developments allowed Grant to achieve crucial victories in the first half of the war, but he also provided a template to use all available assets jointly to creatively defeat the Confederacy. However, it was the shift in national strategy, not just terrain, that allowed Grant to continue developing these tactics as the Union populace were now willing to bear its cost.

Additionally, the lack of a key engagement made the creation of the operational art necessary to achieve battlefield success. In the traditional Jominian style of warfare, wars were won in one key engagement, for example, the Battle of Waterloo. The American Civil War has no such battle. Some Confederates thought that the first Battle of Bull Run was one such victory, but that optimism didn't last long. Battles in the Eastern Theater in the first half of the war were disjointed with no clear objective after a large engagement, like the Peninsular

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<sup>46</sup> John Keegan, *The American Civil War: A Military History* (London: Vintage Books, 2010), 69-73.

Campaign, due to the initial conservative approach taken by the Lincoln administration. However, with the new moral purpose from the Emancipation Proclamation, the public was willing to bear the cost of Grant's forged a new style of warfare which ultimately eliminated the need for a key engagement.<sup>47</sup>

Militarily, joint operations are defined as any operation coordinated between two or more military branches or agencies. During the Civil War, the two main military branches were the Army and the Navy. Grant first operated jointly with the Navy in his victory at Fort Henry and Donelson in February 1862. Using the ships under Flag Officer Andrew Foote, Grant transported his Army toward the forts and disembarked outside the range of the Forts guns. The ships of Flag Officer Foote then shelled the forts allowing Grant's infantry to maneuver around the fort more freely. This use of joint operations produced swift victories and helped secure the Cumberland River for follow on operations down the Mississippi River.

The most well-known joint operation of the Civil War was Grant's Vicksburg Campaign in 1863. Working alongside Admiral Porter, Grant moved his forces south of the Mississippi River capturing Port Gibson on May 1, 1863. This allowed Grant to bypass very restrictive terrain that he failed to march through in his earlier attempt at capturing Vicksburg in the Fall and Winter of 1862. Grant then disembarked his Army and moved eastward toward Jackson, where he eliminated the combat effectiveness of General Sidney Johnston at Jackson on May 14, 1863 before pushing General John Pemberton into Vicksburg and laying siege between May 18-July 4, 1863. While sieging Vicksburg, Grant had Admiral Dixon Porter shelled Vicksburg from the river while he shelled the city by land. The Navy helped Grant's Army stay supplied, ease transportation in restricted terrain, and helped apply military pressure on Pemberton's forces. The Joint Military Historical Collection states that

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<sup>47</sup> Grant had already begun to forge this new style of warfare before the publishing of the Emancipation Proclamation, but it was only due to its publication giving the war a moral purpose that he was allowed to continue its development as the public was more willing to bear its cost.

the Vicksburg Campaign was one of the foundational operations that birthed modern day joint operations.<sup>48</sup>

With the capture of Vicksburg on July 4, 1863, the Union practically controlled the Mississippi achieving one of Lincoln's strategic objectives using creative attacking tactics. This template of joint operations and the operational art achieved battlefield success, and Lincoln took notice. After this victory, Lincoln wrote a letter to Grant for the first time on July 13, 1863 stating that, "...I never had any faith, except a general hope that you knew better than I... I now wish to make the personal acknowledgment that you were right, and I was wrong."<sup>49</sup> This letter demonstrated that Lincoln was not only grateful for Grant but started placing trust in Grant's ability to achieve victory. After Vicksburg Lincoln with his newfound trust in Grant placed him as commander of the Division of the Mississippi, a conglomerate consisting of the Department of the Cumberland, Ohio, and Tennessee. With this responsibility Grant continued achieving victory and secured Tennessee with the victory at Chattanooga and Missionary Ridge. Lincoln took notice of Grant's tactical success and in March 1864 Lincoln made Grant general in chief with the goal of winning the war.

The military definition of operational art is armies engaging in a series of clashes, ideally under the guise of a campaign plan, to destroy the enemy incrementally instead of in a single decisive battle.<sup>50</sup> This can be clearly seen in Grant's 1864 Campaign, also called the Overland Campaign. In the Overland Campaign Grant fought in several large engagements: Wilderness, Spotsylvania, Hannover Junction, Cold Harbor, and the initial attack on Petersburg from May 5 through June 16. During this time Grant wore down Robert E. Lee's Army incrementally in each engagement forcing them closer and closer to Richmond. Grant, unlike previous generals who retreated after losing an engagement,

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<sup>48</sup> Joint Chiefs of Staff. *Joint Military Operations Historical Collection*, (Washington, DC: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 1997), <https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/History/Monographs/JMO.pdf>

<sup>49</sup> Abraham Lincoln, "Letter to General Ulysses S. Grant," Abraham Lincoln Online, accessed December 8, 2022, <https://www.abrahamlincolnonline.org/lincoln/speeches/grant.htm>.

<sup>50</sup> Griffin, 8.



always moved forward to outmaneuver Lee.<sup>51</sup> Grant's focus was not the acquisition of territory but defeating the organized armies of the Confederacy to diminish their combat power and combat effectiveness. Grant knew that the other Union Armies had to act "in concert" with his movements so he delegated specific military objectives to his Army Commanders.<sup>52</sup> Grant's ability to delegate is demonstrated in a communication to a staff officer during the planning stages of the Overland Campaign.<sup>53</sup> He wrote, "When I have sufficient confidence in a general to leave him in command of an army, I have enough confidence in him to leave his plans to himself."<sup>54</sup> Grant placed a large amount of trust in his subordinates, and it is this trust that allowed Grant to delegate significant authority to his Army Commanders that made their armies more independent. Grant's practice of delegating to subordinates laid the foundation for implementation of the newfound operational art and the birth of modern warfare.

In short, the Civil War was a war of transition. Politically, the war went from the preservation of the Union to creating a moral purpose of abolishing slavery in those states that rebelled. Militarily, battles transitioned from the defensive and geometric style of Jominian warfare to the fast-paced attacking warfare that defines the operational art. The Union failed to defeat the Confederacy in the first half of the Civil War because the transition to modern warfare required that various structures be built or evolved: an understanding of national strategy, unit structure, staff structure, and tactics influenced battlefield success. Additionally, Lincoln's active role in military policy created the foundation of the military-political relationship between the commander-in-chief and their top generals regarding their roles and responsibilities.

The initial failures of the Union in the first half of the Civil War stemmed from Lincoln taking a conservative approach to the war to keep

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<sup>51</sup> Griffin, 8.

<sup>52</sup> Griffin, 36.

<sup>53</sup> Grant had a National Military Strategy using all Union Army elements. The two largest sections were Sherman's Army in the Western Theater to capture Atlanta and Meade's Army (with Grant's embedded headquarters) to tackle and destroy Lee's Army.

<sup>54</sup> Griffin, 35.

the channels of diplomacy with the Confederacy open. Lincoln's initial national strategy of the preservation of the Union and the implementation of the Anaconda Plan influenced his generals to conduct more defensive-minded campaigns. But as the war progressed, the understanding of the nature of warfare evolved as well, reflecting the changing goal of the war. Early failures in the Eastern Theater of the war, like the first Battle of Bull Run, demonstrated the need to reorganize the unit structure of the army and update the staff system. Following failures, such as the Second Battle of Bull Run and the Battle of Antietam, made it clear to Lincoln that the war needed a definitive purpose and goal. To achieve that goal Lincoln, as commander-in-chief, shifted the national strategy by signing the Emancipation Proclamation allowing military commanders to be more aggressive and attack the enemy in order to enforce the policies of the proclamation. Meanwhile in the Western Theater, the restrictive natural terrain forced Grant to begin forging new tactics and began conducting joint operations with the navy. This early creativity by adapting to the demands of attacking warfare along with the changing direction of the war laid the foundation for Grant's Vicksburg Campaign which birthed the operational art and modern warfare.