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## Series Editors' Introduction

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Americans remain fascinated by the Civil War. Movies, television, and video—even computer software—have augmented the ever-expanding list of books on the war. Although it stands to reason that a large portion of recent work concentrates on military aspects of the conflict, historians have expanded our scope of inquiry to include civilians, especially women; the destruction of slavery and the evolving understanding of what freedom meant to millions of former slaves; and an even greater emphasis on the experiences of the common soldier on both sides. Other studies have demonstrated the interrelationships of war, politics, and policy and how civilians' concerns back home influenced both soldiers and politicians. Although one cannot fully comprehend this central event in American history without understanding that military operations were fundamental in determining the course and outcome of the war, it is time for students of battles and campaigns to incorporate nonmilitary themes in their accounts. The most pressing challenge facing Civil War scholarship today is the integration of various perspectives and emphases into a new narrative that explains not only what happened, why, and how but also why it mattered.

The series *Great Campaigns of the Civil War* offers readers concise syntheses of the major campaigns of the war, reflecting the findings of recent scholarship. The series points to new ways of viewing military campaigns by looking beyond the battlefield and the headquarters tent to the wider political and social context within which these campaigns unfolded; it also shows how campaigns and battles left their imprint on many Americans, from presidents and generals down to privates and civilians. The ends and means of waging war reflect larger political objectives and priorities as well as social values. Historians may continue

to debate among themselves as to which of these campaigns constituted true turning points, but each of the campaigns treated in this series contributed to shaping the course of the conflict, opening opportunities, and eliminating alternatives.

The Overland campaign of 1864 pitted the two leading generals of the war in a six-week struggle across central Virginia. Ulysses S. Grant came east with an impressive string of military triumphs to his credit; nevertheless, he sensed the whispers circulating around the headquarters of the Army of the Potomac that he had yet to meet Robert E. Lee, whose victories in Virginia served as proof of his extraordinary abilities. Observers speculated that this clash of titans would decide the outcome of the war. Yet, as Mark Grimsley so ably explains, some six weeks of relentless combat resulted in Grant laying siege to Petersburg and the Confederate capital at Richmond. The human cost had been horrendous: The various campaigns claimed some one hundred thousand men as casualties, and many other soldiers were exhausted by the continual grinding. Moreover, Grant's other Virginia offensives had come to grief, due in large part to the bungling of subordinates who owed their jobs to their political influence. It had not been the campaign Grant had envisioned, but it was one he was prepared to fight, as was Lee. The Confederate commander confided to a subordinate that if Grant's men commenced siege operations, it would be only a matter of time before they would claim victory. But in an election year, time was precious indeed, and it looked to many voters in the North as if the two major field armies were stalemated. Grant would have to look elsewhere if his overall grand strategic plan was to succeed; at best he had come close to nullifying Lee's ability to wrest the initiative away as he had done so often in the past.

Grimsley's assessment of the performances of Grant and Lee is sure to provoke discussion. Equally rewarding is his treatment of the impact of this new style of war on the officers and men of both armies. Conscripts and bounty hunters were no replacement for the veterans of three years of war, a good number of whom were counting the days until they could go home and crossing their fingers that they would survive that long. Both the Army of the Potomac and the Army of Northern Virginia gave as good as it got during those six weeks of spring, and neither was ever quite the same again.

## Preface

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“The art of war,” maintained Lt. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant, “is simple enough. Find out where your enemy is. Get at him as soon as you can. Strike at him as hard as you can and as often as you can, and keep moving on.”<sup>1</sup> By the spring of 1864, Grant had demonstrated that philosophy in a series of campaigns that marked him as the North’s preeminent commander. In gratitude, and with the expectation that he would win the war, President Abraham Lincoln placed him in charge of all Union forces. Of his own accord, Grant soon placed himself with the Army of the Potomac, the nation’s largest, most famous, and arguably least successful fighting force.

The hard luck that plagued this army stemmed primarily from the skill and élan of its opponent, the Army of Northern Virginia, led by Gen. Robert E. Lee. Although destined to be depicted as very different commanders—Grant the bludgeoner, Lee the master of maneuver—in reality the two commanders were almost identical in style. The art of war, as Grant expressed it, fit Lee’s approach as well as it did his own. Both men believed in seizing the initiative and attacking fast and hard. They were unafraid to mix things up. They could improvise. They would keep moving on. And above all, they would not concede defeat if they could possibly help it.

Grant’s presence with the Army of the Potomac, and Lee’s command of the Army of Northern Virginia, ensured that the spring campaign of 1864 would pit the Civil War’s two most successful generals against one another in a duel that became legendary almost before it began. And because both men were such fierce champions of the offensive, the resulting encounter saw the most savage, sustained fighting of the entire war.

Indeed, the conflict had previously seen nothing like it. Apart from

sieges, Civil War armies had hitherto been in direct contact for only brief periods. The titanic struggle at Gettysburg, for example, took three days; the misnamed Seven Days' battles lasted about six, with a one-day break in contact. By contrast, when the Army of the Potomac crossed the Rapidan River on May 4, 1864, it began a continuous monthlong grapple with the Army of Northern Virginia.

The fighting was not restricted to a duel between Grant and Lee, either. In order to maximize his chance of success, Grant put into motion virtually every Union soldier in the eastern theater. As a result, the struggle between the main armies—eventually dubbed the Overland campaign—was only part of a larger offensive that included major expeditions in western and southeastern Virginia as well as numerous impromptu raids aimed at the Confederate transportation infrastructure. Grant and Lee not only had to take these maneuvers into account; they often supervised them as well. It is therefore better to think, as they did themselves, in terms of a single, massive Virginia campaign of spring 1864.

Grant confronted Lee with four subsidiary offensives in addition to the Army of the Potomac's main advance: two in southwestern Virginia against Confederate saltworks, lead mines, and railroads; a third in the Shenandoah Valley under Maj. Gen. Franz Sigel; and a fourth in the James River estuary under Maj. Gen. Benjamin F. Butler. Grant intended these lesser offensives to divert strength from Lee's army and, if possible, to achieve significant results on their own. He had particularly high expectations of Butler, believing that Butler could threaten Richmond, interdict Confederate communications with the Deep South, and help place Lee at a ruinous disadvantage. But by shifting their outnumbered forces adroitly, the Confederates thwarted Grant's offensive at every turn, defeating Sigel and Butler and administering sharp checks to the Army of the Potomac in the battles of the Wilderness, Spotsylvania, the North Anna, and Cold Harbor.

The outcome of the campaign depends on one's point of view. Then and later, some have argued that Lee outgeneraled Grant, forcing him to accept the ten-month stalemate in the Richmond-Petersburg trenches. Others have maintained that Grant won because he kept up the pressure. Although Lee parried his adversary's thrusts, the one thing he could not do was to force Grant to relinquish the initiative. After each reversal, the Union general in chief simply revised his plans and pressed onward. Indecisive in itself, the Virginia campaign nevertheless became an archetype of Federal strategy during the war's final year: to make the enemy's armies

the main focus of attack; to gain success through maneuver if possible, by attrition if not; to attack the Confederate supply system; to use the North's advantage in manpower and matériel to maximum advantage; and above all else, to maintain continual pressure against the Confederacy. In doing so, the logic runs, Grant doomed Lee to eventual defeat at Appomattox.

But whatever else it may be, the story of the Virginia campaign is also about the demise of two great armies. At the outset, in May 1864, the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia and the Union Army of the Potomac still had much the same command structure and esprit de corps as in the days of Antietam, Chancellorsville, and Gettysburg. By its close, Lee's army had lost a third of its senior leadership, about thirty-three thousand of its best troops, and most of its offensive capability. The same could be said of Meade's army—or Grant's army, as the press insisted on calling it. Over fifty-five thousand Federals were killed, wounded, or captured in the forty days of the campaign. Thousands more left the army because their enlistments had expired. Losses in the officer corps were just as heavy as among the Confederates. The remaining commanders noted that their troops were no longer as responsive as they had once been. They attacked sluggishly, tentatively. Sometimes they refused to attack at all. In short, both armies emerged from the campaign as shadows of their former selves.

In that sense, the campaign is unique in U.S. history—an American Golgotha with more in common with Verdun than Belleau Wood, Normandy, even Iwo Jima or the Chosin Reservoir. For that reason, simply to record the casualty figures seems inadequate, even a bit obscene, as if one were using human bone and gristle as a score card to measure which side was up or down. Thus, this book devotes an entire chapter to the human suffering generated by the Virginia campaign and its impact on the two home fronts as well as the troops themselves.

Even so, it does not present the action primarily from the viewpoint of the common soldiers who fought it. On the contrary, its focus remains on the senior command: Grant, Lee, Meade, their corps commanders, and key subordinates such as P. G. T. Beauregard, Benjamin F. Butler, Franz Sigel, and John C. Breckinridge. This approach would not have appealed to Leo Tolstoy, who was giving life to his majestic *War and Peace* even as the Armies of the Potomac and Northern Virginia grappled in the Wilderness.

To emphasize the role played by military commanders, Tolstoy maintained, is all wrong. On the contrary, in words that anticipated the so-



ciocultural historians of our own day, he argued that to study the laws of history, one must entirely change the subject under observation, away from elites (who only seem to be in control) and toward “the common, infinitesimally small elements that influence the masses.” Napoleon, Tolstoy insisted, did not win the battle of Borodino, but merely “played his part as the representative of authority. . . . He did nothing to hinder the progress of the battle; he inclined to the most reasonable opinions, created no confusion, did not contradict himself, lose his head, or flee the battlefield, but, with his sound judgment and great military experience, calmly and competently performed his role of appearing to be in command.”<sup>2</sup> Much the same could be said of Grant, who whittled on a stick while the Union army battled in the Wilderness, or of Lee, who passively remained at his headquarters while his troops fought the battle of Cold Harbor. What Tolstoy overlooked, however, was that these men initiate the battle and give meaning to the outcome (Grant sending the Army of the Potomac south after the two-day fight in the Wilderness being perhaps the classic example). Indeed, making sense of any campaign without reference to the perspectives of those in charge of it is hard. In that respect, the commanders create the narrative. Moreover, Tolstoy was unfair to senior commanders even as regards their role in the fighting, for the senior leadership often chooses when and where to send in additional troops and, occasionally, inspires the troops by their personal presence on the field (the “Lee to the rear” episodes in the Wilderness and at Spotsylvania are classic examples of that).

I have dissented from Tolstoy in a third respect as well. Unlike the great novelist, who viewed military commanders somewhat as pompous marionettes, I have evaluated the principal leaders as sympathetically as possible, always bearing in mind that they were intelligent men who operated under extraordinary conditions and pressures. True, to write is to judge, and ultimately I have made judgments that are sometimes harsh, but I have encountered few historical actors—even such perennial goats as Ben Butler—for whom I could not muster at least some respect.

Finally, I have been impressed by the way in which this campaign—like Napoleon’s Russian campaign, where Tolstoy set his novel—quickly became, in part, a mythical campaign, a duel between Grant the butcher and Lee the fox. The concluding chapter shows how interpretations of the campaign that began while it was still under way metamorphosed into interpretations that served various postwar agendas, but particularly those of the Lost Cause. Indeed, the Overland campaign remains, more than

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any other, the *locus classicus* of the Southern myth that the Confederacy was defeated not by insufficient valor, poor strategy, or internal strains but rather by the stronger battalions. The Confederates ended the campaign in the certain belief that they had won a solid triumph over their Yankee assailants, with the prospect of independence still bright. Memory changed that. As one prominent Confederate officer summarized the outcome in retrospect, “However bold we might be, however desperately we might fight, we were sure in the end to be worn out. It was only a question of a few months, more or less.”<sup>3</sup>