CONTENTS

List of Maps and Illustrations ix
Preface xi

Prologue: On Judging Civil War Generals 1
1. Rosecrans in West Virginia: A Tale of a Goose, a Dog, and a Fox 11
2. Grant in Missouri and Tennessee: A Tale of How a Nobody Became a Somebody 29
3. Grant, Halleck, and a Failure to Communicate 53
4. Grant at Shiloh: How to Win by Not Losing 67
5. Grant Advances by Staying Put 83
6. Nobody at Antietam 96
7. Grant and Rosecrans at Iuka and Corinth: The Birth of a Rivalry 120
8. Rosecrans at Stones River: How a Near Disaster Became a Much-Needed Union Victory 149
9. Meade at Gettysburg: How to Win by Staying Put 172
10. Grant Victorious at Vicksburg: How to Win by Causing Your Enemies to Defeat Themselves 191
11. Rosecrans Takes Chattanooga and Grant Takes a Fall 205
12. Rosecrans and Thomas at Chickamauga: The Fortunes and Misfortunes of War 220
13. Grant at Chattanooga: How to Win a Battle Contrary to Plan 235
14. While Grant Fails to Defeat Lee, Sherman Invades Georgia: Circling around to Move Forward 248
15. Grant Remains Stymied, Sherman Takes Atlanta: Decision in the West 266
16. Sheridan in the Shenandoah 280
17. Sherman Marches to the Sea, Schofield Repulses Hood, and Thomas Vanquishes Hood at Nashville 290
Contents

18. Death Blows: Grant, Sheridan, and Sherman Win the War, but the Union Generals Fight On 300
Epilogue: The Victors in Blue—Who and Why 312

Notes 319
Index 347
Maps

Eastern Theater 5
Western Theater 8
Rich Mountain 18
Shiloh 77
Iuka 129
Vicksburg Campaign 198
Rosecrans’s Advance to Northern Georgia 213
Chickamauga 224
Chattanooga 243
Shenandoah Valley 285

Illustrations
(gallery follows page 138)
Lincoln and His Generals
Ulysses S. Grant, mounted
Ulysses S. Grant
William T. Sherman
Philip H. Sheridan
George H. Thomas
George G. Meade
Henry W. Halleck
John M. Schofield
William S. Rosecrans
This book’s purpose is threefold. First, it describes succinctly the battles and/or campaigns that contributed decisively to Union victory in the Civil War and explains how they did so. Second, it examines the performances of the generals who achieved these victories—the “victors in blue”—with a view to judging the quality of their generalship. And third, when pertinent, it takes note of what might be termed the war within a war that occurred among the top Union generals and how it affected their conduct of military operations.

With the exception of the very first, all of the campaigns and consequent battles discussed herein have been the subject of many books—in some instances perhaps too many. Hence, what follows usually offers little new by way of facts, and if some of the analyses seem somewhat original, even heretical, as a rule they merely restate views expressed long ago but which have become buried beneath the ever-accumulating historical silt deposited by subsequent chroniclers of the “American Iliad.” All I have endeavored to do, when deemed appropriate, is excavate and present these views in a more objective fashion supported by greater documentation—an exercise, if you will, in interpretative archeology.

The closest this book comes to exploring some hitherto uncharted historical terrain is when it deals with the aspirations of the generals who comprise its main cast of characters and how they endeavored to attain them. All of them possessed superior personal qualities, albeit of different kinds and degrees, and all were West Pointers who found in the Civil War a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to ascend the ladder of military rank, power, and glory, thereby realizing ambitions far transcending their prewar professional expectations—supposing they still retained any. They also recognized, once hostilities began and they achieved some measure of success on the battlefield, that extremely few of them would be able to reach the top rungs of that ladder. Only one of them would become commander of the whole army and from there rise to the only place higher still. Such being the case, intense and sometimes vicious rivalries were bound to occur among them, and so they did—rivalries complicated by the presence in the army of high-ranking non–West Pointers with political wagons attached to the stars on their shoulders. This competition had profound consequences for both
their careers and the course of the war, as shall be demonstrated in ensuing pages.

To repeat in order to emphasize, none of the interpretations contained in this book is truly original. Yet some are likely to be found novel, even outrageous. I, of course, hope for agreement, the more the merrier, but I am prepared for disagreement, mayhap vehement. Indeed, I shall welcome it: passionate dissent is preferable to passive indifference.

The first thirteen chapters reflect my views on the subject matter therein discussed. For the final five chapters, I have had some assistance from a once-young historian, Brooks D. Simpson, who is not above having opinions of his own. Occasionally, Simpson persuaded me that I should reconsider some of my own views, and at other times we found ourselves in agreement, perhaps to the surprise of one or both of us. However, when we have disagreed, the views expressed in the book remain mine. Simpson can write his own book to clear his name.
The North’s immense advantage in manpower, manufacturing, material, and money made its victory in the Civil War possible but not inevitable. Factors other than sheer strength determine the outcomes of wars. Chief among them is quality of military leadership. Sufficient superiority in the skill of its army commanders would have more than compensated for the Confederacy’s inferiority in everything else except the courage of its soldiers. “It was not the legions,” spake Napoleon, “which crossed the Rubicon, but Caesar.”

The Confederates could have realized command superiority in two ways, one positive, the other negative. The positive way would have been for their top generals to have been so outstanding that their Union counterparts, even if competent, still would have lost more battles than they won, especially the decisive ones. Unfortunately for them, they produced only one such general—Robert E. Lee. Thanks mainly to him they did have three opportunities, potential at least, to win the war and their independence: (1) In the early fall of 1862, when Lee, following his victories near Richmond and at Second Manassas, invaded Maryland; (2) in the summer of 1863 when Lee, having defeated a Federal army twice the size of his own at Chancellorsville, marched into Pennsylvania; and (3) as autumn approached in 1864, with Lee having fought Grant to a standstill in Virginia, inflicting such heavy losses on his army that Northern morale plummeted and Lincoln despaired of victory both in the upcoming presidential election and in the war.

But the South failed to produce another great commander, one able to do for it in the West what Lee did for it in the East. Conceivably, Albert Sidney Johnston might have been that commander had he not lost his life while seemingly winning the Battle of Shiloh on April 6, 1862. What is known beyond reasonable doubt is that none of Johnston’s successors in the West—P.G.T. Beauregard, Braxton Bragg, Joseph E. Johnston, and John Bell Hood—displayed an extraordinary talent for generalship. The most that can be said for any one of them is that he might have been able to defeat a Federal force of equal or lesser size, as did Bragg at Chickamauga; but even that victory was the product of luck rather than skill, and it turned out to be pyrrhic (see chapters 12 and 13). As for Joseph Johnston, commonly deemed the ablest of them, only three times during four years of more-or-less active service did he attempt to defeat an enemy army by attacking it.
Each time he applied the same basic method, and not once did he succeed. He was the Southern equivalent of his good prewar friend George B. McClellan in that he was so afraid of losing that he was incapable of winning except when the foe was obliging enough to assault him in an impregnable position (Kennesaw Mountain). That the end of the war found him commanding what by then passed for the Confederacy’s only major army other than Lee’s is a testimony to the South’s shortage of generals competent to head more than a corps or its equivalent.²

The negative way in which the South could have enjoyed a decisive edge in military leadership was for all of the Federal commanders to have been so inept that even mediocre ability on the part of the Confederate generals would have provided war-winning superiority. This, obviously, did not happen. The Union developed some top generals who were, or became, highly capable—in some instances more than that—and thus able to apply the North’s greater power in a fashion that achieved total Union victory.

What follows are accounts of the decisive applications of that power and the reasons they were decisive. At the same time judgments will be offered about the quality of generalship displayed by the Union commanders who did the applying—the “victors in blue.” That being the case, a statement of the criteria by which their performance is assessed should be, and therefore will be, given. First, though, let us examine how Civil War commanders went about their job of commanding and why.

During the Civil War the means for commanding in battle a major army—defined here as consisting by 1862 of at least 25,000 men but usually many more—still were emerging from what the Israeli military historian Martin Van Creveld aptly terms the “stone age of command.”³ For all practical purposes the leader of such an army could personally supervise and direct no greater areas of a battlefield than did Alexander the Great, Hannibal, Julius Caesar, Belisarius, Charlemagne, Gustavus Adolphus, or, for that matter, Frederick the Great and Napoleon. Indeed, his ability to control what went on actually was less than that of those mighty warriors. Two reasons explain why. First, thanks to the steamboat and, above all, the railroad, which were first used on a large scale in the Civil War, both the North and the South put into the field and maintained far bigger armies and more of them than had normally been the case in the Western world prior to the nineteenth century.⁴ Second, infantry firepower vastly increased as rifles superseded smoothbores, breechloaders, and muzzleloaders, and repeaters began replacing singleshooters. The enhanced range and accuracy of artillery made it necessary, as well as possible, to employ less compact troop formations, with the result that the Civil War’s larger armies occupied far
broader fronts than their European predecessors. Thus, to provide a comparison derived from the two most written about, at least in English, battles in all history, on the third day of Gettysburg (July 3, 1863), Robert E. Lee’s army, by then reduced by casualties to no more than 60,000 troops of all arms, was deployed along a five-mile line; whereas at Waterloo on June 18, 1815, Napoleon massed his 72,000 infantry, cavalry, and cannoneers on a two-and-a-half-mile front, which enabled him, unlike Lee at Gettysburg, to view the entire battlefield through a small telescope and react quickly to what happened on it as it happened.5

Rarely, if ever, did Civil War commanders enjoy the same advantage to the same degree. Not only were their troops spread out over too great a distance, but combat tended to take place in densely forested country, where it was impossible for them to see most of their own army, much less the enemy’s. Furthermore, although technology had increased the size of armies and of the battleground, the main means by which commanders received information from and sent instructions to their generals remained essentially what they had been when Hannibal crossed the Alps into Italy and Napoleon did the same twenty centuries later: verbal or written messages carried by a man on horseback who might be killed, captured, or become lost on the way, or, if he reached his destination, he would arrive so late that acting on those messages might make matters worse rather than better. The telegraph, to be sure, enabled commanders in the field to be in unprecedentedly rapid and frequent contact with their superiors, including the heads of the government, but this was not necessarily an advantage. In any event, Samuel Morse’s invention proved to be of small practical use during combat, except in siege or siege-like operations, as also was the case with signal flags and lights. In sum, the more troops Civil War commanders had, the less able they were to control them effectively, especially when attacking. This paradox helps explain why Grant and Lee, generally deemed the ablest generals of the Civil War, waged their least successful campaigns when conducting operations with the strongest armies they ever headed: Grant with about 120,000 men during May–June 1864 in Virginia; Lee in the Seven Days Battles (June 25–July 1, 1862), which he began with about 85,000 troops, and at Gettysburg (July 1–3, 1863), where from first to last he threw approximately 75,000 soldiers into the fray, losing nearly one-third of them and the battle.6 Another and more fundamental reason why Grant and Lee failed in these encounters is that they fought on the tactical offensive in a war dominated to an unprecedented degree by the tactical defensive owing to the aforementioned improvements in weaponry, improvements enhanced by both sides as the war progressed, resorting ever more to
the use of breastworks, rifle pits (trenches), and full-fledged fortifications, all fronted by obstructions and entanglements. As a consequence, the Civil War saw only one major battle wherein the victorious army won by a frontal assault: Chattanooga, November 25, 1863. There, as shall be described, Federal troops on their own initiative charged up Missionary Ridge and routed the Confederate center. In all other large-scale encounters, the attackers achieved success only when able to outflank the defenders, which is why Civil War commanders usually sought to do this when on the offensive and almost always to guard against it when on the defensive.7

Like all Civil War army commanders, Grant and Lee depended to a high, sometimes crucial, degree for success in battle on the success of their corps, division, and brigade commanders in carrying out their missions; should they fail owing to insufficient zeal or lack of skill, then the battle also probably would be a failure and with it an entire campaign. Only these subordinate (and occasionally not-so-subordinate) generals could exercise some measure of effective tactical control over their troops, because only they headed large units small enough for them personally to supervise and direct in the wild fury of combat or even, as brigadiers often did, lead them against the enemy in the manner of Lewis Armistead, charging toward the “little clump of trees” at Gettysburg at the head of his Virginians, his hat on the point of his uplifted sword. They paid for their proximity to or participation in the fighting with a very high rate of casualties, especially the Confederates, who during the course of the war lost three lieutenant generals and seventy-three major and brigadier generals killed in action, plus many more put out of action temporarily or permanently by wounds. In contrast, the sole commander of a major army to die in battle was Confederate General Albert Sidney Johnston, who bled to death at Shiloh on April 6, 1862, and the only commanders disabled while in combat were Joseph E. Johnston, wounded during the Battle of Seven Pines on May 31, 1862, and Joseph Hooker, stunned when an artillery projectile struck the porch pillar against which he was leaning at Chancellorsville, May 3, 1863.8

Civil War army commanders owed their near-immunity to serious injury not to caution, much less cowardice, but rather to their relative small number, luck, and, above all, their function: to act as the brain of their armies. They could not do this well, if at all, amid the storm of shot and shell, and should they be killed or wounded, the consequences could be calamitous, as perhaps it was in the cases of Sidney Johnston and “Fighting Joe” Hooker, who had the fight knocked out of him. Therefore, they usually established their headquarters in a house or tent far enough behind the front to be out of rifle range and deliberately aimed cannon fire, yet close enough to send
to and receive from their corps and division commanders communications with all practicable rapidity. As a rule, only in moments of crisis would they ride toward or along the firing line, as did Grant at Shiloh, William S. Rosecrans at Stones River, and Lee during the Battle of the Wilderness, where his attempt to lead a counterattack caused his troops to refuse to advance until he reluctantly complied with their shouts of “Lee to the rear! Lee to the rear!”

A staff assisted the Civil War commander to command. By modern standards it was very, one might say, quaintly small. Thus Lee’s numbered at most fourteen and Grant’s never more than twenty officers—fewer by far than today’s division commanders. These officers consisted of two types, although their roles could overlap: (1) personal staff, headed by a chief of staff or, more commonly, an assistant adjutant general and comprising aides de camp; and (2) general staff, made up of chiefs of engineers, ordnance, artillery, and commissary, plus a quartermaster, medical director, judge advocate, and perhaps a topographer (or topographical bureau) charged with preparing maps. The commander selected all or most of the former, who dined (messed) with him and accompanied him should he be reassigned. They owed their posts primarily to his perception of their personal qualities, as witnessed the head of Grant’s staff, John A. Rawlins, a young lawyer from Galena, Illinois. Totally without military experience prior to the summer of 1861, Rawlins’s fellow townsman Grant became a general and asked him to help out with the paperwork. Officers of the general staff, on the other hand, usually were assigned to an army by the war department in Washington or Richmond, not by its commander per se, and they tended to be West Pointers with regular army experience—although there were many exceptions, most famously Jedediah Hotchkiss, Stonewall Jackson’s mapmaker in the Shenandoah Valley.

The basic tasks of the general staff had to do with administration, supervision, inspection, and, in the case of the engineers, the construction of fortifications, bridges, and roads. Also the chief of artillery might perform a combat role, depending on what the commander wished and circumstances. The personal staff, for its part, drafted orders as dictated or instructed by the commander, delivered and when necessary explained them, reported on their implementation, provided assessments of the situation on sectors the commander could neither see nor visit, guided units to their designated positions, and did all else the commander might desire or require, such as assistance in trying to rally fleeing troops.

What Civil War staff officers of both types, including those bearing the title of chief of staff, did not do was prepare and present to the commander
detailed plans ("recommendations") for the conduct of a campaign or battle, as became the standard practice in European and eventually the U.S. armed forces following the spectacular success of the Germans, with their *Generalstabs des Herres*, in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–1871. All, or at least nearly all, of the top Union and Confederate generals made their own plans, strategical, operational, and tactical, and then issued the orders embodying them verbally, in written form, or a combination of the two. They might discuss affairs informally with staff officers, seek or receive advice from one or more of their generals, and hold “councils of war” attended by most if not all of their corps and sometimes division commanders—something Lee and Grant rarely did. Yet regardless of how much or little advice they obtained from others, it was they who decided, both before and during battle, what was to be done; when, where, how, and by whom; and to what purpose. It was also they who garnered the glory of victory or bore the blame of defeat. Sometimes they deserved neither, but that is the way it was because, fair or not, it was the way it had to be and still is.

To achieve victory against a potent enemy under difficult circumstances a Civil War commander required, like all successful military leaders past, present, and future, a strong but not necessarily brilliant intellect, self-confidence, and the ability to inspire confidence in others, enormous energy and endurance, moral courage, coolness and presence of mind in times of crisis, and, above all, a knack for war and good luck in waging it—an attribute Napoleon considered more important in a general than skill. All but one of the Union commanders deemed “victors” in the ensuing pages possessed these qualities, albeit in varying degrees and proportions (Halleck’s contributions being of a different order). None, though, began the war qualified through training and experience to head a large body of troops in active operations, much less battle. At West Point they learned how to drill an infantry platoon, load and aim a cannon, and ride a horse while waving a saber, but their sole exposure to anything that had to do with the “art of war” came from a few lectures on the subject by Professor Dennis Hart Mahan and whatever they chanced to read on their own about matters military, which in the cases of Grant and Philip Sheridan evidently was little or nothing. Moreover, only three of them—Grant, George Thomas, and George Meade—had any previous experience in the Mexican War of combat against regular troops, and all except Thomas, Meade, and Sheridan had left the army long before 1861 to pursue civilian careers with indifferent success and without expectation of returning to it. Therefore, the “victors in blue” were fortunate in that all of them, save one, had an opportunity to develop the military know-how needed to command successfully a
major army by first heading regiments or brigades, then divisions, corps, or small armies. Even the exception—William Tecumseh Sherman, who failed miserably on being placed, much against his desire, in charge of Federal forces in Kentucky during the fall of 1861—had an opportunity to redeem himself in less demanding roles while acquiring the confidence and competence, despite several more miserable performances, to become what he eventually became—second only to Grant in rank and prestige.

By the same token, and again with one exception, the West Pointers who began the war with high rank and command, or obtained them early on—Irvin McDowell, Don Carlos Buell, John Pope, and most notoriously McClellan—ended up by the fall of 1862 either on the military shelf or in the military boondocks. The exception was Henry Wager Halleck. He not only began high, albeit not as high as he would have had he not been in California when the war began, but soared still higher until he became in July 1862 the highest of all as general in chief of the U.S. Army. Halleck held this post until he was superseded by Grant in March 1864, whereupon he continued doing most of what he did before as Grant’s chief of staff.

Success, of course, is the hallmark of proficiency in a commander. Yet it is not an absolute one. If so, then Wellington would have to be considered superior to Napoleon, and Montgomery to Rommel. Since this is (or should be) an obvious absurdity when it comes to judging a general’s generalship, other, more sophisticated questions must be asked and answered than merely whether he won or lost. The following are the main ones:

1. If victorious in a battle and/or campaign, did he contribute decisively to the victory and how so?
2. Why did he win? Through superior skill on his part? The far greater strength of his army? A brilliant feat of arms by one or more of his generals? Enemy blunders? Sheer chance? Or a combination of some or all of these factors?
3. What were his objectives and how did he set about realizing them?
4. Did he accomplish as much as could be reasonably expected under the circumstances? More? Less?
5. If less, what could, and therefore should, he have done on the basis of information available to him at the time to achieve more, and why did he not do it?

The first question contains the standards for selecting the generals who won the war for the Union. The following four queries present the criteria by which these generals will be examined and judged. Readers, of course, will decide how well or ill this has been done. All I ask of them is to be prepared for some surprises—even, mayhap, some shocks.