

## Grant, Vicksburg &amp; Modern War

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"Until a few years ago I accepted the conventional point of view that Grant was a butcher and Lee was one of the greatest generals the world has ever seen." This statement reflects the popular assessment of Ulysses S. Grant today, in whom most see an unsophisticated brute who bludgeoned his way to victory, callously expending lives, secure in the knowledge that Union forces could make good their losses while the Confederates could not. But Grant's record belies this mindset. Far from the callous butcher of popular imagination, Grant was actually a sophisticated commander who implicitly rejected the universally accepted theory and practice of war in favor of an approach that presaged the warfare of today.

In 1861 the most widely accepted theory of war was position warfare as espoused by Baron Henri Jomini. Position warfare might be described as the "places theory of war" because it focused on geography, emphasizing the importance of "fortifications, interior lines, a strong supply base, and the occupation of territory." Position warfare theory seeks to maneuver the enemy out of key positions and separate him from his base, without combat if possible, and avoid general engagements unless absolutely necessary. Many Civil War commanders accepted Jomini's theory while practicing its antithesis, attrition warfare. The practitioner of attrition warfare seeks "destruction of the enemy's mass," attempting to overpower the enemy or to erode his force by confronting his strength with strength. In short, position warfare theory seeks to defeat the enemy through capture of key points upon which he depends, while attrition warfare theory seeks to defeat the enemy through the destruction or capture of his main body.

Although unjustly condemned as a crude practitioner of attrition warfare, Grant practiced neither position nor attrition warfare. Although Grant frequently used the capture of critical points and the destruction or capture of enemy armies as a framework within which to articulate his goals, his actions reveal that the central organizing principle of his method of warfare was not to confront the enemy's strength head on, but rather to identify and exploit enemy "critical vulnerabilit[ies]"—those weaknesses that if attacked, would negate, undermine, or neutralize enemy strength and bring about his defeat. Although he may not have been conscious of it, Grant's style held the germ of modern maneuver warfare. Maneuver warfare theory seeks decisive victory not by directly confronting enemy strength, but by dislocating, preempting, and disrupting it. Grant's campaigns demonstrate his implicit grasp of these principles, and none does so better than Vicksburg.

In early 1863 two obstacles stood between the Union and control of the Mississippi River. These were the Confederate garrison at Port Hudson, LA and the Confederate stronghold at Vicksburg, MS.<sup>8</sup> As commander of the Army of Tennessee, it fell to Grant to crack the nut of Vicksburg. Garrisoned by 30,000 men under Confederate GEN John C. Pemberton, the city was strategically positioned at a hairpin bend in the river that forced river traffic to slow as it passed, rendering ships easy pickings for the batteries on the towering bluffs 250 feet above. The swampy Yazoo River Delta protected the city's northern flank, and another stretch of swamp covered the southern approaches. Confederate GEN Joseph E. Johnston covered the city's rear with an army to the east at Jackson, MS. In early 1863 Grant made four separate attempts to reach the high ground east of Vicksburg, all thwarted by natural obstacles, weather, and Confederate resistance. The Grant of popular imagination would have doggedly pursued one or more of these efforts until, through the expenditure of blood and sweat, his army crashed through to its goal or consumed itself in the effort. But this Grant is myth, as his response to the challenge demonstrates.

Central to maneuver warfare theory is the concept of dislocation. Dislocation is "the art of rendering the enemy's strength irrelevant. Through dislocation, the friendly force temporarily sets aside the enemy's advantages . . . and causes those strengths to be unrelated to the outcome of the conflict." This is exactly how Grant dealt with Vicksburg. On 4 April 1863, Grant revealed his plan for dealing with the natural strength of the Vicksburg position. Rather than tackle the fortress head on, he would neutralize it by marching south past Vicksburg on the western bank of the river, while running his gunboats and river transports past the city under cover of darkness. These would ferry his army back to the east bank

below Vicksburg where Grant could assault the city from its vulnerable eastern flank. Although the river batteries would pose a serious threat to his fleet as it ran past the city, the natural obstacles and fortifications surrounding the city would not otherwise hinder Grant's move. He would, in effect, temporarily remove them from the equation as a primary source of the enemy's strength.

By the beginning of May Grant had marched his army south, run his fleet past the river batteries, and successfully recrossed to the enemy side of the river. Awaiting him were two formidable challenges. First, the route directly north to Vicksburg was blocked by rugged, broken terrain almost as strong as the ground he had bypassed in the north. There were few roads, and the "hillsides [were] covered with timber and ravines with vines and canebreakes [sic]." Even if a force defending in this terrain failed to defeat Grant, it would still delay him. Such delay could be deadly, because it would give the Confederates time to exploit the second of their advantages—numbers. Delay would allow them to assemble a superior force by concentrating the armies of Pemberton and Joe Johnston, then operating to the east near the state capitol at Jackson. But Grant refused to concede these advantages. Bypassing the rugged terrain to his front, Grant turned his direction of attack 90 degrees, marching on Jackson 40 miles to the east before turning west against Vicksburg itself, defeating Johnston and Pemberton each in detail. In so doing, he once again dislocated a major enemy advantage, marching through relatively open country to the east and thereby neutralizing the strong defensive terrain to the north. In taking the indirect approach to Vicksburg, Grant also evinced an intuitive understanding of two additional maneuver warfare concepts—preemption and disruption.

Preemption is conceptually similar to surprise but goes further, seeking not merely to catch the enemy unprepared for the fight, but rather to neutralize or disarm him ahead of time and thereby effectively preventing him from taking part in the fight at all. This Grant did brilliantly. He captured Jackson on 14 May, effectively excluding Johnston's army from the fight for Vicksburg almost before it began. Having captured Jackson, it was an easy matter for Grant to drive Pemberton back at Champions Hill and Black River Bridge and then to stop him up in Vicksburg.

Disruption is the employment of friendly strength against the enemy's critical vulnerability, defined as that weakness that if exploited paralyzes the enemy or renders him ineffective. The Confederate's critical vulnerability at Vicksburg was communications, and Grant effectively exploited it. With Union gunboats on the Mississippi south of the city and Grant's army operating to the south and east, Vicksburg's only connection to the rest of the Confederacy was a single, tenuous rail link to Jackson. By first striking east at Johnston instead of directly north toward Vicksburg, Grant not only cut Pemberton off from resupply and reinforcement, but he frustrated any hope Pemberton may have entertained of effectively cooperating with Johnston or anyone else. The loss of his only communications link reduced Pemberton to the single course of action of falling back on Vicksburg, effectively immobilizing his army for the remainder of the campaign.

Grant's actions at Vicksburg illuminate the commander that he really was. Far from the clumsy brute of popular imagination, Grant was a commander of keen insight who intuitively grasped the evolving nature of war in his day. Grant's implementation of these insights broke with the past, presaging and therefore shaping the theory and practice of war as we know it today.