OPERATIONAL-LEVEL DECISION MAKING:
A REVIEW OF CIVIL WAR CAMPAIGN DECISIONS

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By

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to explore the factors affecting military commanders’ campaign decision-making processes. Specifically, I examine four factors—operational-level logistics, the individual mental capacities of commanders, the “living reaction” of the enemy commander, and the uncertainty of intelligence inherent to battle—to determine which most significantly affects commanders’ decisions. Though I initially treat the above as four competing hypotheses for explaining commander decision making, using two Civil War campaigns—General George B. McClellan's Peninsula Campaign and General Ulysses S. Grant's Overland Campaign—as case studies, I find that depending upon a commander's mental individualities, operational-level logistics can either serve as a constraint or enabling factor in campaign decision making, while enemy reactions and uncertain intelligence may be seen as either insurmountable obstacles or minor issues to be overcome. I conclude with policy recommendations.
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Introduction

Admiral Hyman Rickover declared that, “Bitter experience in war has taught the maxim that the art of war is the art of the logistically feasible.”\(^1\) While no one with a cursory understanding of military affairs would deny the message of Admiral Rickover's statement, it begs a larger question, that is, how do logistical realities actually affect military actions. Specifically, what role do operational-level logistics play in campaign decisions made by commanders?

Unlike tactics and grand strategy, which have been copiously discussed in academic literature, the body of literature addressing military logistics remains comparatively small. In 1977, historian Martin van Creveld wrote the seminal work on logistics, *Supplying War: Logistics from Wallenstein to Patton*, a cross-national study of logistics from the Thirty Years' War through World War Two. Additional major logistics studies include James Huston's *The Sinews of War: Army Logistics, 1775-1953*, the compilation of articles in *Feeding Mars: Logistics in Western Warfare from the Middle Ages to the Present*, and the Army's bimonthly publication *Army Sustainment*. While these works thoroughly examine various aspects of logistics and its effects on waging a campaign, each fails to frame the above question in the greater context of decision-making. In his magnum opus, *On War*, eighteenth century military theorist Carl von Clausewitz outlined three “peculiarities of war” that dictate a commander's choices in battle: individual mental capacities, the “living reaction” of the enemy commander,

and the uncertainty of intelligence inherent to battle.² Combined with the existing logistics literature, Clausewitz’s emphasis on these peculiarities necessitates that the above question be refined. That is, compared to Clausewitz’s peculiarities of war, what role do operational-level logistics play in campaign decisions made by commanders?

The relationship between logistics and military decision making holds tremendous significance today. Waging a war in landlocked Afghanistan, America faces inevitable logistical constraints and, as such, must outsource its supply lines through Uzbekistan and Pakistan. Relying on others for logistical support has its downsides, as demonstrated by Pakistan’s recent closure of the Khyber Pass route, through which most of the 580 daily truckloads of fuel and supplies used by NATO forces must travel.³ If the United States is to succeed in Afghanistan, the effects of these logistical realities on campaign decisions by commanders cannot be ignored. Additionally, the relationship between Clausewitz’s peculiarities of war, specifically the mental individualities of commanders, and campaign decision making remains a critical issue to policymakers. Though numerous elements compose an officer's promotion to admiral or general, if Clausewitz's thesis regarding his peculiarities of war proves significant, policymakers ought to be approving flag and general officers based more on the individual capacities of each, and less on the political viability of promotion for certain candidates.⁴

While the factors influencing campaign decision-making by commanders are varied, this

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paper isolates four issues- operational-level logistics, individual mental capacities, the “living reaction” of the enemy commander, and the uncertainty of intelligence inherent to battle- and aims to determine the role each plays in a commander's decision-making process over the course of a campaign. Though I initially viewed each of Clausewitz's peculiarities and operational-level logistics as four competing hypotheses for explaining commander decision making, using two Civil War campaigns- General George B. McClellan's Peninsula Campaign and General Ulysses S. Grant's Overland Campaign- as case studies, I find that depending upon a commander's mental individualities, operational-level logistics can either serve as a constraint or enabling factor in campaign decision making, while enemy reactions and uncertain intelligence may be seen as either insurmountable obstacles or minor issues to be overcome. The paper unfolds as follows.

First, I provide definitions and review two bodies of literature, that discussing the role of logistics in campaign decision-making and that discussing the role of Clausewitz's peculiarities of war. Second, I conceptualize an empirical model to test the relationship between the above four factors and commanders' decision-making processes. Third, utilizing the aforementioned case studies, I test multiple hypotheses regarding decision-making in military campaigns. The paper concludes with implications and recommendations for U.S. policymakers.

Definitions of Terms

Before undertaking a review of logistics literature, it is necessary to outline some basic doctrinal definitions. Joint military doctrine divides war into a continuum of strategic,
operational, and tactical levels, all of which include corresponding levels of logistics with distinct functions. The strategic level supports the organizing, training, and equipping of all forces needed to advance the national interest. This level links the national economic base (people, resources, and industry), to military operations. At the lowest end of the spectrum, tactical logistics includes unit capabilities and the combat service support necessary for military operations. Tactical logistics coordinates the functions necessary to sustain and move units, personnel, equipment, and supplies during a battle. Operational-level logistics, upon which this paper will focus, links tactical requirements to strategic capabilities to accomplish operational objectives. At the operational level, logistics supports the waging of sustained military campaigns (for this reason, I will use campaign and operational-level logistics interchangeably). Depending on the campaign commander’s requirements, operational logisticians coordinate the flow of strategic capabilities into the area of operations. For the sake of this paper, a military campaign is defined as, “a connected series of military operations forming a distinct phase of a war,” with the campaign commander determining how to carry out these operations.

To link strategic resources to tactical requirements, operational-level logistics includes three key functions: arrival and assembly, intratheater lift, and sustainment. The arrival and assembly phase begins with the arrival of the first ship or transport vessel of the main body of troops at a designated arrival and assembly area (AAA). This phase concludes when units receive sufficient supplies and equipment to attain combat readiness for the coming campaign.

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Intratheater lift is a continuous function throughout a campaign; it represents the sum of all transportation modes available to move, sustain, and redeploy forces. Finally, sustainment entails the provision of personnel, supplies, and other support needed to maintain and prolong combat operations. In the following campaign analyses, discussion of operational-level logistics will focus on these three functions.

**Literature Review**

Dr. Moshe Kress of the Naval Postgraduate School writes of logistics as the “management of combat resources and combat means.” In this capacity, history has demonstrated the inseparability of logistics and warfare; logistics “facilitates movement, fire and sustaining of the impetus and vitality of combat forces along time and space.” Martin van Creveld furthers this definition, writing that before even considering particular battlefield tactics, a commander must be able to supply his troops with the food necessary to campaign, to say nothing of ammunition, powder, and artillery. Furthermore, commanders cannot simply decide on a movement and carry it out; roads and means of transportation must exist for every movement. Consequently, operational-level logistics are inseparable from commanders' decisions over the course of a campaign. Yet, van Creveld recognizes that, while logistics proves necessary to campaign decisions, it is not sufficient in explaining the courses of action chosen by commanders. Rather, van Creveld cites Napoleon in suggesting that as significant as the

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7 “Marine Corps Warfighting Publication (MCWP) 4-12, Operational-level Logistics.”
physical attributes of an army may be, certain externalities exist that truly dictate the course of a campaign. Unfortunately, van Creveld's analysis ends here, leaving a gap between logistics, these externalities, and their respective roles in campaign decision making.

Like Napoleon, military theorist Carl von Clausewitz recognized the role that factors outside of the physical characteristics of an army play in a commander's campaign decisions. Clausewitz outlines three “peculiarities of war” that affect the way a commander wages a campaign: mental capacity, living reaction, and uncertainty of intelligence. Though these three factors are certainly interrelated, each warrants individual review.

Clausewitz's peculiarity of mind refers to the individual mental capacities of commanders, capacities that have a large importance in the decisions of a campaign; “from an imaginative, flighty, inexperienced head, and from a calm, sagacious understanding, different things are to be expected.” In other words, commanders' various mental individualities, while accounting for the role of probabilities and chance, grant “an unequal share in determining the course of [campaign] events.” As Clausewitz writes, “From the diversity in mental individualities arises the diversity of ways leading to the end.”

In other words, two commanders may face an identical situation with identical constraints, but the mental differences of the two commanders will lead to different decisions.

Next, Clausewitz addresses the role of the living reaction, that is, the enemy's “vote”. For every action taken by one force, the opposing force will respond with some reciprocal action, an

10 Clausewitz, *On War*, 104-06.
11 Ibid.,104-06.
action “that opposes anything like a regular plan;” in the course of a campaign, a commander's plan can only truly serve as a theoretical guide, because the actions of opposing forces can never accurately be forecast. Therefore, the actions of a commander must depend upon judgement and talent, not a rigorous, unchanging plan.\(^\text{12}\)

Finally, Clausewitz speaks of the uncertainty of intelligence inevitably faced in battle; “the great uncertainty of all data in war is a peculiar difficulty, because all action must, to a certain extent, be planned in a mere twilight, which […] gives to things exaggerated dimensions and an unnatural appearance.” Consequently, lacking objective knowledge, commanders must make decisions based on partial information, putting faith in talent and chance.\(^\text{13}\)

As outlined above, a gap in the decision-making literature exists between those proponents of logistics as the key determinant of decision making versus those who support the Clausewitzian model, suggesting that his peculiarities of war ultimately dictate a commander's decision. Specifically, what actually drives the individual decision-making processes of commanders over the course of a campaign? Do operational-level logistics, Clausewitz's peculiarities of war, or some combination play the largest role in campaign decisions? The following section outlines a conceptual model for examining these questions.

**Conceptualization**

An inherent difficulty to determining why people make certain choices lies in the reality

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\(^\text{12}\) Ibid., 104-06.  
\(^\text{13}\) Clausewitz, *On War*, 104-06.  
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that outsiders can never fully understand an individual's motives for action; even when people leave behind personal memoirs, their stated rationale must be questioned as self-serving. People seek to rationalize decisions with reasoning that represents personal biases. Furthermore, when first-hand accounts are not necessarily self-serving, biases still exist. In reporting on an event, accuracy falls victim to time elapsed and associated memory loss, perspective during the event, and self-knowledge, that is, the realization that people may not fully understand why they made certain decisions. These obstacles necessitate a cautious approach to examining whether operational-level logistics, Clausewitz's peculiarities of war, or some combination play the largest role in commanders' campaign decisions.

To overcome the above difficulties, the following analysis combines primary sources and existing historical analyses with a consistent methodological approach to gauge the extent to which Clausewitz's peculiarities of war and operational-level logistics affect individual campaign decisions. Specifically, the following compares two Civil War campaigns, General McClellan's 1862 Peninsula and General Grant's 1864 Overland, and addresses the campaign decisions in each. Recall, a campaign decision entails a decision made at the operational-level of war, or “The level of war at which campaigns and major operations are planned, conducted, and sustained to accomplish strategic objectives within theaters or other operational areas.” Operational-level decisions link national strategic interests with tactical, battlefield decisions, a linkage that supports the above choice of two Union campaigns. While McClellan and Grant

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commanded the Union's Army of the Potomac (AoP) two years apart, they both faced the same strategic-level advantages and constraints; each commander had access to the same national economic base, dealt with the same President, and utilized the same strategic-level logistics. Conversely, comparing the operational-level decisions of a Confederate commander would require an inclusion of the strategic-level differences between the Union and Confederacy, something thoroughly covered by other authors and beyond the scope of this paper.

In the following analysis, I divide both of the above campaigns into a series of unique, operational-level decisions made by the respective commanders. An inherent problem to this approach lies in the fact that I select on the dependent variable, that is, an infinite amount of possible decisions exist that were not made. Yet, within the scope of this paper, the chosen approach provides valuable insight into the decision-making process. Furthermore, as with any historical judgement, room for debate on my selection exists. With that said, in my judgement, the decisions outlined below most accurately fit the aforementioned parameters for operational-level action.

During his Peninsula Campaign, General McClellan made the following operational-level decisions:  

I. Use Fort Monroe as the AoP's arrival and assembly area  
II. Siege, rather than attack, Lee's Mill and Yorktown  
III. Following the Confederate escape from Yorktown, send two divisions in pursuit while sending one division up the York River to amphibiously flank the fleeing Confederates

IV. Converge on Richmond by positioning the AoP on the Pamunkey River and established supply bases at Eltham's Landing, Cumberland Landing, and White House Landing

V. Following the Battle of Seven Pines deciding not to counterattack and instead redeploying the AoP south of the Chickahomin River

VI. Pulling the AoP back to base on the James River after the Seven Days Battles

During his Overland Campaign, General Grant made the following operational-level decisions:\textsuperscript{17}

I. March south against Richmond overland using Alexandria as an initial supply depot

II. Engaging Lee's Army of Northern Virginia (ANV) in the Wilderness

III. Following the Battle of the Wilderness, not retreating to camp but advancing southeast in an attempt to turn Lee's flank at Spotsylvania Court House

IV. Following the engagement at Spotsylvania, attempting another flanking movement to the southeast at the North Anna River

V. Following the engagement on the North Anna River, attempting another flanking movement to the southeast at Cold Harbor

VI. Unable to attempt another flanking movement, rather than return north, continuing the offensive by crossing the James River and laying siege to Petersburg

In the analysis below, I address each one of these decisions in turn. For each, I examine the decision from four possible perspectives: operational-level logistics, mental capacities and individualities of each commander, the “living reaction” of the enemy commander, and the

\textsuperscript{17} Mark Grimsley, \textit{And Keep Moving On: the Virginia Campaign, May-June 1864} (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 2002)
uncertainty of intelligence inherent to battle. Specifically, using the papers and memoirs of both commanders, other primary source writings, and existing historical analysis, I deconstruct each decision to determine how significant a role each of the above four elements played. It would be flawed to suggest that any decision is motivated by a single cause; however, with careful analysis, it is possible to gain a qualitative understanding of the levels to which each element affected individual decisions. Figure 1 summarizes this conceptual model:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Operational-level Logistics and/or Mental Capacities/Individualities and/or Living Reaction of the Enemy and/or Uncertainty of Intelligence</th>
<th>Lead(s) To COMMANDER'S DECISION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Having conceptualized the empirical model, it remains to outline the model's limitations. First, as stated, regardless of how throughly one examines a commander's decision from the past, it is not possible to know with certainty the exact motivations behind a choice. Consequently, following a thorough review of the data, certain judgement calls and assumptions are inherent to this model. Next, while the literature suggests that logistical constraints and Clausewitz's peculiarities of war act as significant determinants of commander decision making, other motivations exist outside of the scope of this paper; political pressure, pressure from subordinates, topography, weather, and the original campaign plan all, to some extent, play a role in the decision-making process. However, in line with the above literature regarding logistics and Clausewitz's peculiarities, the following analysis assumes a secondary nature for these causes. Finally, with respect to any policy implications regarding commander decision making
gleaned from this analysis, an obvious counterargument addresses the temporal gap between the Civil War and present. Technology, military strategy, and military educational systems have all changed drastically. Does this mean that any findings regarding commander decision making from this analysis become moot in the present? According to human nature, absolutely not. As economic analysis makes abundantly clear, human nature remains the same across generations: “How Muammar Qadhafi makes decisions today and how Henry VIII made decisions remain the same in the most fundamental way—human nature remains constant.”¹⁸ In other words, while context may change, the decision-making findings from this paper will prove valid to policymakers today.

Hypotheses

Having outlined a conceptual model for examining the roles that Clausewitz's peculiarities of war and operational-level logistics play in campaign decision making, in my analysis, I test the following hypotheses:

- **Hypothesis 1:** Operational-level logistics serve as the most significant determinant of commanders' campaign decision making.

- **Hypothesis 2:** The mental capacities and individualities of commanders serve as the most significant determinant of commanders' campaign decision making.

- **Hypothesis 3:** The “living reaction” of opposing commanders serves as the most

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significant determinant of commanders' campaign decision making.

- **Hypothesis 4:** The uncertainty of intelligence inherent to battle serves as the most significant determinant of commanders' campaign decision making.

For each of these hypotheses, I would expect certain outcomes if proven true. Specifically, Hypothesis 1 suggests that maintaining an operational-level supply chain would remain the most significant determinant of commanders' campaign decisions. In other words, we could predict a commander's decision based on his supply lines, that is, a commander would not take actions removing his forces from the logistical *status quo*. Next, Hypothesis 2 suggests that a commander's personality and mental individualities ultimately dictate campaign decisions. That is, a timid, hesitant commander would make conservative campaign decisions, while a bold, daring commander's personality would reflect itself in more aggressive decisions. Hypothesis 3 suggests that a commander makes decisions in a strictly reactive fashion; rather than take the initiative, a commander would begin to carry out a plan and let the opponent's response dictate his ensuing decisions. Finally, Hypothesis 4 suggests that a commander would make decisions based on faulty intelligence. In hindsight, it is possible to determine the extent to which a lack of intelligence or false intelligence dictated a commander's actions. For each of the following decisions, I will examine the situation through the lens of each applicable hypothesis.

General McClellan's Peninsula Campaign of 1862

*Overview*
Following the Union debacle at the Battle of First Manassas, President Lincoln relieved the Federal commander, General Irvin McDowell, and replaced him with General McClellan. Upon taking command, McClellan devoted his time and energy to establishing a well-trained, well-equipped, and battle-ready Army of the Potomac. However, upon forming the Union's most powerful army to date, McClellan was slow to move south. With urging from Lincoln's government, McClellan ultimately decided to strike Richmond via the Yorktown Peninsula, the east-west jut of land formed between the James and York Rivers. On 17 March 1862, the AoP finally sailed from Alexandria, Virginia to the Peninsula.19

Decision I: Use Fort Monroe as the AoP's arrival and assembly area

In his initial, operational-level decision of the Peninsula Campaign, General McClellan decided to use Fort Monroe, at the easternmost tip of the Yorktown Peninsula, as the AoP's arrival and assembly area (AAA). While ostensibly a logistics-based decision, McClellan's choice of Fort Monroe came as a result of General Joseph E. Johnston's, commander of the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia, actions. McClellan's initial plan utilized Urbanna, Virginia, on the Rappahannock River as the AoP's AAA. Landing at Urbana, further north than Fort Monroe, would allow McClellan's forces to cut off Johnston's army, then positioned south of

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Washington at Manassas, on its march back to Richmond. Additionally, McClellan states that,

The point of landing which promises the most brilliant results, is Urbana, on the lower Rappahannock. This point is easily reached by vessels of heavy draught […] A rapid movement from Urbana, would probably cut off [Confederate General John B.] Magruder in the Peninsula, and enable us to occupy Richmond before it could be strongly reinforced.

The logistical capabilities enabled by Urbana's heavy draught port capabilities proved a prerequisite to McClellan's initial choice of AAA. However, these logistical factors failed to act as sufficient cause for the use of Urbana. Rather, the singular advantage of landing at Urbana, the chance to cut off Johnston on his march back to Richmond, disappeared when the ANV preemptively withdrew from its Manassas lines and fell back behind the Rappahannock.

Lacking the advantage allowed by an Urbana AAA, McClellan made an executive decision: “Should circumstances render it not advisable to land at Urbana […] We can take Fort Monroe as a base, and operate with complete security, although with less celerity and brilliancy of results, up the Peninsula.”

As the largest coastal fortress in America, Fort Monroe's guns commanded the waterways surrounding the tip of the Yorktown Peninsula, from the Chesapeake Bay to the Hampton Roads passage into the York River. These guns allowed, in less than three weeks, Union ships to deliver 121,500 men, 14,592 animals, 1,224 wagons and ambulances, and 44 artillery batteries to Fort Monroe. Without the success of McClellan's operational-level logistics, he would not have been able to launch his campaign up the Peninsula. While operational-level logistics proved necessary to the start of McClellan's campaign (and any

20 Sears, To the Gates, 10.
21 George B. McClellan, The Army of the Potomac (New York: Sheldon, 1864), 105.
22 Sears, To the Gates, 18.
23 McClellan, The Army of the Potomac, 105.
24 McClellan, The Army of the Potomac, 124.
campaign), the selection of Fort Monroe as a AAA primarily represented a reaction to the movements of General Johnston, the opposing commander, not a reaction to the logistical constraints of the AoP.

*Decision II: Siege, rather than attack, Lee's Mill and Yorktown*

After establishing the AoP at its Fort Monroe AAA, the next decision McClellan faced involved the Confederate defenders around Lee's Mill and Yorktown. While elements of poor intelligence, enemy action, and operational-level logistics would all play into his decision, McClellan's choice to lay siege to Yorktown and surrounding entrenchments, rather than attack them, resulted largely from his mental individualities.

Confederate forces faced a daunting task defending the Yorktown Peninsula. In the entire Virginia Theater, Union troops outnumbered their Confederate counterparts in the neighborhood of 200,000 Federals to 70,000 Confederates. Consequently, the defense of the Peninsula would be left to a force a fraction of the size of the AoP facing it; General Johnston assigned the task to General John B. Magruder, who, despite inadequate resources, accepted his charge enthusiastically. Magruder first established a defensive line across the width of the Peninsula, with Yorktown anchoring its northern flank. Next, Magruder ordered a secondary line built ten miles to the rear at Williamsburg.25

Departing up the Peninsula from Fort Monroe, poor intelligence dogged the AoP from the outset; as McClellan stated, “...Serious difficulties were encountered from the want of precise

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25 “The Eastern Theater: The Peninsula Campaign.”
topographical information as to the country in advance." Coupled with faulty topographical intelligence, McClellan seriously lacked an understanding of the defenders' composition and whereabouts. McClellan initially assumed, as a result of prisoner interrogations, that he would be facing a force of 7,000-8,000 Confederates. With such a small number, McClellan concluded that the defenders would withdraw into the Yorktown citadel, holding out against the Federals from behind the walls. Thus, it came as quite a surprise when McClellan's left-most column, at Lee's Mill, encountered Confederate resistance; a man in the 7th Maine, which headed this column, wrote that, as they emerged from the woods, “We saw across the open space a long line of rebel earthworks with a stream in front, the rebel flag was flying and we could see the secesh officers riding along their lines inside the works.” The general in charge of this column reported to McClellan a column of 2,000-3,000 Confederate troops moving south towards the James River, sealing the Confederate lines from any Federal flanking movement.

What McClellan thought to be, “...The whole force of the enemy [...] probably not less than one hundred thousand men, and possibly more,” was in fact an elaborate hoax by General Macgruder to dupe the advancing Federals. With his 10,000 men, Magruder marched and counter-marched the lines, made frequent drum and bugle calls, shouted numerous marching orders, and allowed periodic outbursts of fire, all to present the illusion of a thoroughly defended line: “It was a wonderful thing,” recalled the diarist Mary Chesnut, “how [General Magruder] 

27 Sears, To the Gates, 37.
28 Ibid., 37.
29 McClellan, The Army of the Potomac, 163.
played his ten thousand before McClellan like fireflies and utterly deluded him.”³⁰

In response to Magruder's ploy, McClellan conceded that, “It will be necessary to resort to the use of heavy guns, and some siege operations, before we can assault.”³¹ McClellan ordered the siege train brought up from Fort Monroe. A French prince observing the AoP's movements, Francois de Joinville, reported on the siege as it unfolded:

Ten thousand laborers, constantly relieved, were set at work […] A powerful artillery force had been brought up, not without difficulty. Rifled guns of 100 and even of 200 pounds calibre, 13-inch mortars, were got ready to batter the [Confederate] works. Fourteen batteries had been built, armed and provisioned.³²

While the AoP's operational-level logistics capacities enabled this tremendous siege train, and Confederate actions and misinformation inspired it, Magruder's illusion did not solely depend on his small force's acting. Rather, two aspects of McClellan's mental individuality ultimately led to the decision to lay siege to Yorktown and its environs. First, McClellan possessed a highly systematic mind and as such, lacked the ability to adapt when events deviated from a set plan. Consequently, when his plans to take Yorktown fell apart due to Magruder's actions, a second of McClellan's mental individualities came to the forefront. McClellan first experienced war as a young lieutenant during the siege of Vera Cruz in the Mexican War. Subsequently, he observed the Crimean War and completed a thorough review of the siege of Sevastopol. At the time, no Civil War officer, on either side, new more about siege warfare than McClellan.³³ While poor information, enemy actions, and operational-level logistics all played into his decision,

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³⁰ Sears, To the Gates, 38.
³¹ McClellan, The Army of the Potomac, 163.
³³ Sears, To the Gates, 38-39.
McClellan's unique combination of a systematic mind and vast siege experience ultimately dictated his choice to lay siege to Yorktown.

**Decision III: Following the Confederate escape from Yorktown, send two divisions in pursuit while sending one division up the York River to amphibiously flank the fleeing Confederates**

By the time McClellan had established his entire siege emplacements around Yorktown, General Johnston had arrived to take command of the field from General Magruder. Facing 15 ten-gun batteries of 13-inch siege mortars, along with numerous smaller artillery pieces, Johnston chose to order the evacuation of Yorktown rather than face the forthcoming bombardment. Leaving behind 56 of their own siege guns, the Confederates escaped from under the thumb of AoP, without McClellan even realizing that they had left.³⁴ As de Joinville wrote, the retreat, “...had been managed with great secrecy and great skill.”³⁵ Johnston aimed to establish a defensive perimeter at the lines closer to Richmond, but first the Confederates needed to fall back to the Williamsburg lines. With the Confederates gone, McClellan needed to make a decision regarding pursuit, a decision he had not anticipated. After some hesitation, McClellan decided to split the AoP, sending half his force in pursuit up the Peninsula and the other half up the York River to amphibiously flank the fleeing Confederates.³⁶

In pursuit of the retreating Confederates, the half of the AoP sent overland caught up to

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³⁴ “The Eastern Theater: The Peninsula Campaign.”
³⁵ L'Orleans, *The Army of the Potomac*, 47.
³⁶ Sears, *To the Gates*, 67.
and engaged its foe at Williamsburg. However, McClellan remained in Yorktown assisting in the preparations for the amphibious movement. Consequently, out of touch with his troops actually in battle, McClellan made no campaign-related decisions regarding Williamsburg after initially sending troops in pursuit. With respect to his decision to split his troops, McClellan's motivation once again centered on his mental individualities.

By abandoning Yorktown, General Johnston opened the York River to the Union navy; without Yorktown's guns, Union ships faced no shore fire along the York. Due to this new reality, Johnston's actions enabled McClellan to consider a movement previously denied the AoP. Furthermore, with the York open, Union operational-level logistics allowed for McClellan to make his decision to amphibiously flank the Confederates. Recall, a pillar of operational-level logistics is intratheater lift, or the ability to move forces within a campaign; McClellan had access to a fleet of transport steamers to carry General William B. Franklin's 11,300-man division up the York. Yet, McClellan's ultimate motivation for the movement up the York proved more self-centered. Since his desire to land at Urbana, McClellan had been obsessed with flanking the Confederates by means of the area's waterways. McClellan wrote:

By pushing Gen. Franklin, well supported, by water to the right bank of the Pamunkey [River] opposite West Point [on the York River], it was hoped to force the enemy to abandon whatever works he might have on the Peninsula below that point, or be cut off. It was of paramount importance that the arrangements to this end should be promptly made.

Rather than fulfill his role as commander of the AoP and lead his troops into battle, General McClellan split his force and remained behind at the embarkation point for the amphibious

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38 Sears, *To the Gates*, 67.
movement. Due to an obsession with using waterways to outmaneuver his foe, General McClellan's mental individualities led to his decision to divide his force and attempt an amphibious flanking movement.

*Decision IV: Converge on Richmond by positioning the AoP on the Pamunkey River and establishing supply bases at Eltham's Landing, Cumberland Landing, and White House Landing*

The engagement at Williamsburg led to 1,682 Confederate casualties to 2,283 Union. Even though the AoP faced Johnston's rear guard, McClellan declared the battle a “brilliant victory” over superior forces. In reality, the engagement provided Johnston the time necessary to remove the bulk of his army to the lines outside of Richmond. Furthermore, after landing at West Point, Confederate forces repulsed Franklin's amphibious landing, forcing the Union troops to remain close to shore under the protection of naval artillery. As a result, the bulk of the ANV passed unmolested, successfully escaping McClellan's trap. McClellan now faced another significant campaign decision; how should he pursue Johnston's troops to Richmond?

After failing to cut off the Confederate retreat, McClellan's divided force rejoined at West Point, where the commander began a three week period of deliberation. Ultimately, after organizing his supply line, reorganizing the army, and working out the details of a new course of action, McClellan decided to approach Richmond from the northeast, along the winding

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40 Sears, *To the Gates*, 82.
41 Ibid., 85-86.
Pamunkey River, taking supply bases at Eltham's Landing, Cumberland Landing, and finally White House Landing, where the York River Railroad from West Point crossed the Pamunkey and continued on to Richmond. After deciding to approach Richmond from the northeast, McClellan declared White House his base of operations for the final assault on Richmond.42

Following the war, McClellan blamed President Lincoln for the AoP’s approach up the Pamunkey. Lincoln informed McClellan that General McDowell’s 5th Corps would be approaching from the north overland, not by water as requested by McClellan, to link up with the AoP. Consequently, McClellan claimed to be forced into approaching Richmond from the northeast, needing to protect General McDowell’s troops from a flanking movement.43 In reality, though, McClellan's decision stemmed from faulty intelligence. Reporting on Confederate numbers, McClellan stated:

All accounts report their numbers as greatly exceeding our own. The position of the rebel forces, the declaration of the rebel authorities, the resolutions of the Virginia legislature, the action of the city government, the conduct of the citizens, and all other sources of information accessible to me, give positive assurance that our approach to Richmond involves a desperate battle between the opposing armies.44

McClellan believed that the Confederate defenders outnumbered the AoP by a margin of two to one; McClellan actually had 105,000 men to Johnston's 60,000. This faulty intelligence played directly into McClellan's personality and military experience: “I shall advance steadily and carefully, and attack [the Confederates] according to my best judgement, and in such manner as

42 Ibid., 104-5.
43 Sears, To the Gates, 105.
44 McClellan, The Army of the Potomac, 197.
to employ my greatest force.” McClellan did not choose to attack Richmond from the northeast to protect McDowell's force; believing himself severely outnumbered, McClellan decided to lay siege to Richmond and recognized that the northeast approach, with its rail connection to the massive depot at White House Landing, would be necessary for his siege train. McClellan could only transport his large siege guns, the 10- and 13-inch mortars and 100- and 200-pounder Parrott rifles, via rail, necessitating his decision to approach Richmond from the northeast along the Pamunkey. Once again, McClellan's mental individuality—his systematic, plan-oriented mindset and preference of siege to attack—dictated his choice of approach towards Richmond. Encouraged by faulty intelligence, McClellan took the only approach to the Confederate capital that would allow him the operational-level logistics necessary to carry out a siege.

**Decision V: Following the Battle of Seven Pines deciding not to counterattack and instead redeploying the AoP south of the Chickahominy River**

McClellan's next major operational decision essentially sealed the fate of his campaign against Richmond, dooming it to failure. From the Pamunkey, McClellan moved the AoP forward to the Chickahominy River, across from the Confederate lines. Once again, McClellan split his force, sending half south of the river and leaving half north to protect the AoP's supply line and right flank. Recognizing that Richmond would not survive a Union siege, Johnston

45 Ibid., 197.
46 Sears, To the Gates, 105-106.
devised a plan to attack McClellan's forces south of the river, ideally isolating and destroying them. Johnston's plan called for a feint against the AoP troops north of the Chickahominy while sending the main thrust of his offensive, a three-pronged attack, against the Union forces in front of Seven Pines. After two days of fighting, the Confederates had inflicted 5,000 casualties but received 6,000 themselves, hardly an overwhelming victory. Additionally, Johnston received a wound during the battle, forcing him to be relieved by General Robert E. Lee.⁴⁷ Though not a tactical victory for either side, the battle would have immense significance to the AoP campaign. Following the battle, McClellan chose to continue forward with an “active defense” rather than counterattack the outnumbered Confederates, a decision that wrested the initiative from the AoP for the remainder of the campaign.

Following Seven Pines, two enemy actions combined to put McClellan on the defensive. First, commander of the Confederate cavalry, Colonel J.E.B. Stuart, led a daring raid behind and around the Union troops straddling the Chickahominy. Though Stuart's action led to know tactical gains, it helped further convince McClellan he was outnumbered and his supply lines were at risk. These factors were compounded by the impending arrival of Confederate General Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson's force from the Shenandoah Valley. Fearing Jackson would attack his troops north of the Chickahominy, thus severing the AoP supply line back to White House Landing, McClellan set all efforts immediately after Seven Pines into reinforcing his operational-level logistics through an active defense. In a communique to McClellan, President Lincoln stated that he was, “...Very anxious about the Chickahominy, so close in your rear and crossing

⁴⁷ “The Eastern Theater: The Peninsula Campaign.”
your line of communication.” Responding to this, McClellan outlined his defensive mindset:
“As the Chickahominy has been almost the only obstacle in my way for several days […] rest assured that it has not been overlooked. Every effort has been made, and will continue to be, to protect the communication across it.” Rather than focus on regaining the initiative following Seven Pines, McClellan allowed enemy actions to dictate his own course of action, forcing him to devote his time to a defensive posture protecting supply lines.

Poor intelligence also played a large role in McClellan's decision not to counterattack. Writing his wife, McClellan claimed that, “The [Confederates] are very strong [and] outnumber me considerably,” assuming Confederate numbers between 150,000 and 200,000 men. In reality, Lee, with reinforcements, mustered an effective force of 85,000 men at the time. This poor intelligence, combined with enemy actions and McClellan's feeling that his supply lines were threatened, played perfectly into McClellan's mindset. Refusing to see the situation for what it was, an AoP vastly superior in numbers to its counterparts, McClellan continued to delay. He wrote to President Lincoln:

I find [the enemy] everywhere in force, and every reconnaissance costs many valuable lives. Yet I am obliged to feel my way foot by foot at whatever cost, so great are the difficulties of the country. By tomorrow night the defensive works covering our position on this side of the Chickahominy should be completed. I am forced to this by my inferiority of numbers so that I may bring the greatest possible numbers into action, and secure the army against the consequences of unforeseen disaster.

49 Ibid., 225-6.
50 Sears, *To the Gates*, 162.
51 “The Eastern Theater: The Peninsula Campaign.”
This communique to Lincoln aptly represents McClellan's particular mental individualities. Faced with poor intelligence and threats to his supply lines, McClellan's systematic mind resorted to personal precedent; undertaking an active defense, which entailed advancing against an opponent from behind one's own fortifications for protection, McClellan chose to once again rely on the Union's great siege train as the only way to defeat what he viewed as a significantly larger force. As with his other decisions, McClellan's choice not to counterattack after Seven Pines arose from a series of factors; enemy actions, faulty intelligence, and the need to protect his logistics, all played serious roles, but once again, McClellan's mental individualities ultimately dictated his decision.

Decision VI: Pulling the AoP back to base on the James River after the Seven Days Battles

Having succumbed to his mindset of the active defense, McClellan left his army susceptible to attack. This susceptibility increased drastically with General Lee in command of the Confederate forces; unlike his predecessor, Lee refused to wait for McClellan to make a move. Rather, for Lee, “It would be necessary to strike a blow.” As McClellan continued to avoid going on the offensive, Lee sought a decisive blow against the AoP forces north of the Chickahominy. Lee planned a three-pronged flanking movement against the Union right flank, one that would bring 55,800 Confederates against the Union 5th Corps, positioned north of the river. Though poor communication dealt a heavy blow to Lee's plan, as General Jackson failed

53 Sears, To the Gates, 159.
54 Sears, To the Gates, 151.
to even enter the attack, a Confederate force still engaged the AoP at Mechanicsville, the anchor of the AoP right flank. While the engagement proved a tactical loss for the Confederates, it set the stage for McClellan's final campaign decision; following Mechanicsville, McClellan decided to move from his Chickahominy lines to the safety of the James River, giving up the chance to lay siege to Richmond.  

McClellan's ostensible rationale for retreating to the James focused on the threats to the White House Landing supply line and the tactical advantage of fighting under cover of Federal gunboats on the river:

> In anticipation of a speedy advance on Richmond, to provide for the contingency of our communications with the depot at the White House being severed by the enemy, and at the same time to be prepared for a change of the base of our operations to James River [...] I had made arrangements more than a week previous to have transports with supplies of provision and forage, under a convoy of gunboats, sent up James River.  

With this statement, McClellan attempted to rationalize his decision to retreat as a preconceived move to gain an advantage over the Confederates by utilizing Union gunboats and naval logistics; once positioned on the James, the AoP could make the final push towards Richmond. Having listened to McClellan's posturing, de Joinville relayed the commander's avowed plan: “If this movement [to the James] could be successfully and secretly made, the chances of a great battle fought on the river bank with the cooperation of the gunboats covering one flank of the army, would be much more favorable to the federals.” In reality, McClellan had lost the will to fight. The facts that General Jackson remained a menacing threat somewhere north of the AoP,

55 Ibid., 209.
56 McClellan, The Army of the Potomac, 241.
57 L'Orleans, The Army of the Potomac, 84.
intelligence still reported vastly superior Confederate numbers, and McClellan's carefully planned operations did not unfold as hoped, combined to overwhelm McClellan's systematic and cautious mind. Leaving the Chickahominy lines to the shelter of the James was not, as McClellan alleged, a “change of base” but a retreat; McClellan had been mentally crushed, leading him to quit his campaign against Richmond.58 Once again, McClellan's peculiarities of mind- his mental individualities- ultimately dictated this decision.

Conclusion

In the above conceptualization, I initially viewed operational-level logistics and each of Clausewitz's peculiarities of war as four competing hypotheses for explaining campaign decision making; however, McClellan's decisions on the Peninsula illustrate another reality. Rather than serving as four equal factors, McClellan's mental individuality, specifically his cautious nature and early indoctrination to siege warfare, acted as a filter through which operational-level logistics, uncertain intelligence, and enemy reactions affected his decision-making process. For General McClellan, maintaining operational-level supply lines dictated the pace of his campaign; that is, logistics constrained his campaign as it unfolded. Protecting his supply line simply served as a convenient excuse for retreat, befitting McClellan's mental individualities. Furthermore, in the culminating battles of the campaign, McClellan faced an aggressive Robert E. Lee and lacked sound intelligence. Rather than overcoming these realities, McClellan let them dictate his campaign, leading to a retreat to the James River. While operational-level

58 Sears, To the Gates, 211.
logistics, the enemy's reaction, and questionable intelligence all played a role in campaign
decisions, McClellan's mental individualities served as the most significant determinant of his
decisions on the Peninsula.

General Grant's Overland Campaign of 1864

Overview

In the Spring of 1864, President Lincoln appointed Ulysses S. Grant General-in-Chief of
all Union armies. Unlike McClellan, no one accused Grant of being a timid commander.
Following the bloody battle at Shiloh in April 1862, which Grant commanded, Lincoln aptly
summed up Grant's leadership style while fending off calls for his removal: “I can't spare this
man- he fights.”59 Demonstrating Lincoln's prescience, Grant followed up Shiloh with decisive
victories at Vicksburg and Chattanooga, essentially cutting the Confederacy in two. Upon taking
command of all Union forces, Grant devised a two-fold plan for defeating the Confederacy: a
southern push by General Sherman against Atlanta concurrent with an Army of the Potomac
movement against General Lee's Army of Northern Virginia. Though General George G. Meade,
hero of Gettysburg, technically commanded the AoP, Grant established his headquarters with this
army and served as its de facto commander during the Overland Campaign. On 4 May 1864,

59 “Ulysses S. Grant,” The White House, accessed November 10, 2010
http://www.whitehouse.gov/about/presidents/ulyssessgrant/
Grant began his advance south.\textsuperscript{60}

\textit{Decision I: Crossing the Rapidan River east of the Army of Northern Virginia to engage Lee's forces}

General Grant maintained a simple view of war, a view that would dictate the entire Overland Campaign: “Find out where the 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.”\textsuperscript{61} After devising the above two-fold strategy for defeating the Confederacy, Grant needed to decide how to mount an AoP campaign against Lee's forces in line with his aggressive view of war. In the spring of 1864, the ANV occupied a defensive line just beyond the Rapidan River, which flows into the Rappahannock River and, ultimately, the Chesapeake Bay. The Confederates possessed a string of encampments along this line, with reinforced positions at each of the Rapidan fords. Consequently, to engage Lee, Grant had three options: one, attack headlong at the Rapidan strongpoints; two, attack around Lee's left (western) flank; or three, flank Lee along his right.\textsuperscript{62}

After considering the first option, to attack Lee's strongpoints head on, Grant decided that such an approach would be suicidal. Even after recognizing that, “The campaign now begun was destined to result in heavier losses, to both armies, in a given time, than any previously suffered,” attacking strongly positioned troops across a wide-open ford proved untenable; the

\textsuperscript{60} “Ulysses S. Grant.”
\textsuperscript{61} Quoted in Grimsley, \textit{Moving On}, viii.
\textsuperscript{62} Grimsley, \textit{Moving On}, 8.
Union would suffer far too many losses to rationalize this approach. Next, Grant considered attacking Lee's left flank, a move that would prevent the ANV from utilizing the Shenandoah Valley for another raid northward, as it had done the previous summer during the Gettysburg campaign. While cutting off Lee from the Shenandoah made this approach tempting, Grant discarded this movement, because it would be too difficult to keep the AoP adequately supplied. At the onset of Grant's campaign, the AoP brought with it ten days' rations, a supply of forage, and ammunition in wagons. Additionally, each soldier carried three days' rations and fifty rounds of ammunition. Consequently, after the ten day mark, the AoP would require an unbroken supply chain to a rear depot to continue its campaign; attacking west, Grant could not guarantee such a chain. With the first two options for crossing the Rapidan discounted, the AoP moved east against Lee's right flank. By moving east, Grant avoided the shortcomings of the first two options; the AoP could avoid attacking Lee's reinforced positions head on while maintaining a secure supply chain from the Union supply depot in Alexandria to the front.

Lee's strong defense of the key fords along the Rapidan certainly played a role in Grant's decision. However, establishing a defensive line before a campaign begins does not qualify as a "living reaction," rather, the ANV's defensive positions simply served as elements for Grant to consider before beginning his campaign. Ultimately, the need to maintain an operational-level supply chain to the Union depot in Alexandria dictated Grant's decision to begin the Overland Campaign by crossing the Rapidan on Lee's right flank.

64 Grimsley, Moving On, 8.
65 Grant, Memoirs, 512.
66 Grimsley, Moving On, 8.
Following the decision to attack the ANV's right flank, a dense tangle of land known as the Wilderness represented the next obstacle Grant's forces. Roughly seventy square miles in size, the Wilderness consisted of, “nearly impenetrable undergrowth, which it was very difficult for even small bodies of men to move in.” Furthermore, except along the few main roads through the region, artillery could not find the room to deploy, severely limiting Union firepower and numerical superiority. As Union chief-of-staff Andrew A. Humphreys stated,

> An enemy remaining on the defensive awaiting attack where this undergrowth existed, would be unseen, while the troops advancing to attack would make their presence known, and thus the tangled growth would serve in some measure as an [entrenchment], at least for the first and most destructive fire.

For these reasons, Grant hoped to avoid engaging Lee in the midst of the Wilderness. To avoid such an engagement, the AoP crossed the Rapidan just after midnight on 4-5 May, believing that it could pass through the Wilderness under cover of darkness before Lee could react. This plan proved too ambitious, as the Union infantry quickly traversed the region while the artillery and supply chains became bogged down in the undergrowth.

On the morning of the 5th, Grant was forced to make his second major decision of the campaign: whether or not to fully engage the ANV. At 0700, the AoP's lead element in the

67 Chief of Staff Humphreys quote in Grimsley, *Moving On*, 10.
68 Ibid., 10.
69 Curtis King, William Robertson, and Steven Clay, *Staff Ride Handbook for the Overland Campaign, Virginia, 4 May to 15 June 1864: A Study in Operational-Level Command* (Fort Leavenworth: Combat Studies Institute, 2006), 49.
Wilderness reported contact with Confederate skirmishers; the previous day, Lee had correctly anticipated Grant's move and deployed a corps to the Wilderness. In this fashion, Lee's actions forced a Union decision, but Grant still had the option to fully engage or continue its flanking movement, skirting the ANV in the hopes of a fight on more suitable terrain. During his decision-making process, Grant also possessed limited knowledge of enemy strength and location; Union cavalry, the main source of gaining intelligence, had been relegated to defending the supply lines rather than scouting enemy positions.\(^{70}\)

While Lee's actions set the stage for a possible engagement, and the AoP was constrained by poor intelligence, Grant's mental individualities as a commander ultimately led to the full-scale fighting that occurred on 5 May. Referring to the initial contact with the Confederate troops on the morning of the 5\(^{th}\), Grant stated,

> It was my plan then, as it was on all other occasions, to take the initiative whenever the enemy could be drawn from his [entrenchments] if we were not [entrenched] ourselves.\(^{71}\)

Rather than refuse engagement for any number of reasons—poor intelligence, poor terrain, Confederate positioning—Grant confirmed Meade's suggestion for Union forces to attack immediately upon contact with the AoP's entire lead corps.\(^{72}\) Facing the aforementioned constraints in the Wilderness, Grant nonetheless fulfilled his motto: “Find out where the 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.”\(^{73}\)

\(^{70}\) King et al, *Staff Ride*, 50.
\(^{71}\) Grant, *Memoirs*, 527.
\(^{72}\) King et al, *Staff Ride*, 49.
\(^{73}\) Quoted in Grimsley, *Moving On*, xiii.
Decision III: Following the Battle of the Wilderness, not retreating to camp but advancing southeast in an attempt to turn Lee's flank at Spotsylvania Court House

The fighting in the Wilderness proved particularly costly to the AoP. After two full days of fighting, both sides had entrenched and a stalemate ensued; Union forces had taken 17,666 casualties to the ANV’s 7,800. Considering that the AoP crossed the Rapidan with 125,000 soldiers, two days of fighting cost Grant roughly 14 percent of his effective force. Such devastating losses would have persuaded other generals to disengage, return to camp, and prepare another offensive; Union generals Joseph Hooker and John Pope, both of whom commanded forces in previous Wilderness battles, did just that. For Grant, rather than retreat, he ordered the AoP to pull out of its lines and attempt another movement around Lee’s right flank. If the Union forces could beat the ANV to the crossroads at the town of Spotsylvania, they could cut the Confederates off from Richmond and force Lee to numerically superior AoP in an entrenched position.

Several factors—poor intelligence, logistics, and Grant’s personality—played roles in the decision to continue the campaign. Still plagued by poor intelligence, Grant assumed that after two days of fighting, “[Union] losses in the Wilderness were very severe. Those of the

75 Ainsworth et al. United States War Department, “The War of Rebellion: a compilation of the official records of the Union and Confederate armies; Series 1 - Volume 36 (Part I)” <http://digital.library.cornell.edu/cgi/text/text-idx?c=moawar;idno=waro0067>, 277-278.
76 “The Eastern Theater: The Forty Days.”
Confederates must have been even more so,” but he admits that, “I have no means of speaking with accuracy on this point.”\footnote{Grant, \textit{Memoirs}, 534.} Grant failed to recognize that the Confederates had sustained less than half the casualties lost by the AoP, misinformation that certainly played into Grant's decision to push forward. Additionally, maintaining operational-level logistics affected the continued movement. To undertake this renewed push around Lee's right flank while maintaining the Alexandria supply depot, the AoP would need to provide a large cavalry escort to protect the lines of communication, cavalry that Grant could not afford to spare.\footnote{Charles Dana Gibson with E. Kay Gibson, \textit{The Army's Navy Series, Volume II: Assault and Logistics, Union Army Coastal and River Operations, 1861-1866} (Camden: Ensign, 1995), 420.} To solve this problem, the Federals shifted their base from Alexandria to Belle Plain on the Potomac River, positioned behind the advancing Union troops and connected by rail to a forward position at Fredricksburg.\footnote{King et al, \textit{Staff Ride}, 32.} In this case, logistics did not dictate Grant's decision. Instead, Grant's aggressive attitude and desire to “get at” the Confederates in the open field proved the most significant factor in his decision to advance; maintaining operational-level logistics, while necessary, could be completed in such a way as to allow Grant to pursue his offensive-minded \textit{modus operandi}.

\textit{Decision IV: Following the engagement at Spotsylvania, attempting another flanking movement to the southeast at the North Anna River}

Despite the bold nature of Grant's plan to turn the Confederate flank at Spotsylvania,
Lee's troops beat the AoP to Spotsylvania Junction and established a solid defensive position. With this position established, the following twelve days witnessed fierce engagements leading to steep losses to both sides and, ultimately, a tactical stalemate. As in the Wilderness, Union losses outnumbered Confederate ones. But, once again, Grant failed to recognize the lopsided casualty count; he stated that:

> We have lost to this time eleven general officers killed, wounded and missing, and probably twenty thousand men. I think the loss of the enemy must be greater- we having taken over four thousand prisoners in battle, whilst he has taken from us but a few except a few stragglers.\(^{80}\)

In reality, after the battles of the Wilderness and Spotsylvania, AoP casualties totaled over 30,000 while the Confederates had lost 18,000, further demonstrating the shortcomings of Union intelligence.\(^{81}\)

After twelve days of fighting and both sides firmly entrenched in a stalemate around Spotsylvania, Grant needed to make another decision: continue the push south or return north to nurse the AoP's wounds. As in the decision to attempt another flanking movement after the Wilderness, poor intelligence, logistics, and Grant's attitude all factored into this next decision. As illustrated above, Grant still maintained that Confederate losses superseded Union ones, which surely encouraged another push south. Yet, Grant also recognized the need to replace his losses: “The arrival of reinforcements here will be very encouraging to the men, and I hope they will be sent as fast as possible, and in as great numbers.”\(^{82}\) Without reinforcements, Grant would

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be hard pressed to make the aforementioned push south around Lee's right flank, a problem solved by superior Union logistics. On 15 May, Union reinforcements numbering between 16,000 and 17,000 soldiers arrived via the Belle Plain supply depot on the Potomac, providing Grant the manpower necessary to continue his campaign.83

Even with the above reinforcements, Grant faced another logistical constraint; by pushing around Lee's southern flank again, the AoP would be cut off from its base at Belle Plain, making it useless. As a result, Union forces established a new base in Port Royal, farther south on the Rappahannock River.84 The Federals chose Port Royal because it marked the navigable limit for deep draft vessels on the Rappahannock.85 No rail line existed between Port Royal and the AoP, but the distance from the base to the front constituted a relatively short wagon haul. Once again, Grant faced logistical and intelligence constraints after Spotsylvania, but Grant's mental individualities and aggressive nature proved critical to his decision to attempt to turn Lee's flank again and push to the North Anna River; regardless of AoP constraints, Grant assured that he would, “Fight it out […] if it takes all summer.”86 Rather than allowing logistics and poor intelligence to dissuade him from action, Grant altered the operational-level logistical situation to serve his goals.

Decision V: Following the engagement on the North Anna River, attempting another flanking movement to the southeast at Cold Harbor

83 King et al, Staff Ride, 212.
84 Grimsley, Moving On, 130.
85 Dana and Gibson, The Army's Navy Series, 420.
86 Grant, Memoirs, 551.
Like the Wilderness and Spotsylvania before, at the North Anna River Grant failed to get around and attack Lee’s flank. The two armies met on directly on the North Anna, with the Federals attempting to take Hanover Junction, where the Virginia Central Railroad met the Richmond, Fredricksburg, and Potomac lines.87 Lieutenant Colonel Theodore Lyman explains the brilliant Confederate defense that prevented a Union enveloping maneuver: “The enemy, with consummate skill, had run their line like a V, with the point on the river, so that our army would be cut in two, if we attacked, and either wing subject to defeat.”88 The AoP stepped directly into this trap, with two corps crossing the North Anna upstream of the tip of the “V” and one crossing downstream. Fortunately for the AoP, Lee had fallen ill that day and could not lead the counterattack that would have devastated Grant's troops.89

Recognizing the vulnerability of his divided troops, Grant ordered all Union attacks stopped so the troops could entrench against a potential counterattack. After two days waiting in these entrenchments, the AoP withdrew back to the north side of the North Anna to deliberate. Considering the AoP's next move, Grant decided,

\[\text{We could do nothing where we were unless Lee would assume the offensive. I determined, therefore, to draw out of our present position and make one more effort to get between [Lee] and Richmond.} \]

Having come to this conclusion, Grant ordered the AoP to, once more, march around Lee's right flank. The goal of this movement was to reach Cold Harbor, a key intersection of five roads on

87 King et al, *Staff Ride*, 32.
88 Lyman, Theodore, *With Grant and Meade: from the Wilderness to Appamatox* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1994), 127.
89 “The Eastern Theater: The Forty Days.”
the way to Richmond. To accomplish this movement, the AoP would need to again advance its supply depot. Confident in his ability to surmount Lee’s efforts to hold the AoP at the North Anna, Grant pressed Major General Halleck, Chief of Staff of Union forces, to switch the Federals’ advanced supply depot to White House Landing on the Pamunkey River. Halleck opposed, believing that an overland supply route from Port Royal should be continued. Grant replied by stating that,

A full survey of all the ground satisfies me that it would not be practicable to [retain the Port Royal supply line] to enable us to use it for supplying the Army. To do so would give us a long vulnerable road to protect, exhausting much of our strength guarding it.91

Accepting Grant’s advice, Halleck ordered that all future supplies for the AoP be sent to White House.92

Living up to his confidence, Grant overcame Lee’s efforts to hold the AoP at the North Anna. Moving southeast, the Federals crossed the Pamunkey River, setting the stage for an engagement with the Confederates at Cold Harbor. The location of the Federals’ new White House base allowed Union troops to be resupplied by the Richmond and York River Railroad.93 In his decision to attempt another flanking movement of the ANV, Grant's aggressive attitude once again dictated his action. Lee's brilliant defensive design on the North Anna certainly played a role in Grant's decision; the AoP could not realistically mount an attack. However, Grant's confidence in his ability to get around Lee's flank ultimately led to his decision; rather than concede defeat because of the ANV's superior defensive position, Grant aggressively called

91 Dana and Gibson, The Army's Navy Series, 425.
93 King et al, Staff Ride, 32.
for an advanced supply depot and further movement south.

*Decision VI: Unable to attempt another flanking movement, rather than return north, continuing the offensive by crossing the James River and laying siege to Petersburg*

Three days into June, the AoP began its most costly fighting since crossing the Rapidan. Charging a dug-in Confederate line at Cold Harbor, Federals lost 7,000 men in the space of one hour. After this fierce initial fighting, the opposing lines stabilized. For ten days at Cold Harbor, Grant considered his options. Since crossing the Rapidan, the AoP had lost 50,000 casualties, roughly 41 percent of its original strength. Despite these staggering losses, Grant's plan essentially worked; while he had not destroyed the ANV, Grant's actions kept Lee bottled up behind the Richmond defenses, unable to mount any offensive action. However, critics claimed that Grant had simply placed himself in the same position as McClellan two years prior, with many more casualties. 94 Unlike McClellan, though, Grant saw Lee's defensive position as an opportunity, stating that,

Lee's position was now so near Richmond, and the intervening swamps of the Chickahominy so great an obstacle to the movement of troops in the face of an enemy, that I determined to make my next left flank move carry the Army of the Potomac south of the James River. 95

Making a bold decision, Grant decided to fully disengage from the Confederates at Cold Harbor, make a wide flanking movement over the James River, and lay siege to Petersburg, a key rail

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94 “The Eastern Theater: The Forty Days.”
95 Grant, Memoirs, 590.
hub where several lines connected before continuing to Richmond. By taking Petersburg, Grant would cut the major supply routes for both Richmond and the ANV.96

This final movement effectively ended the Overland Campaign. Cold Harbor represented the Federals’ final opportunity to defeat Lee in the open. Grant’s avowed objective since crossing the Rapidan.97 After Cold Harbor, Grant found himself in essentially the same situation as McClellan at the end of the Peninsula Campaign; both generals faced an aggressive Robert E. Lee, had incurred significant losses, and maintained functioning operational-level supply lines. Yet, in 1862, McClellan, plagued by a timid and unsure nature, responded to the status quo by retreating down the James River. On the other hand, refusing to accept defeat, Grant recognized the difficulty of fighting in his current location, made an aggressive decision, and crossed the James River to continue the fight. While the AoP failed to destroy Lee's ANV during the Overland Campaign, Grant adapted to the situation and confronted the enemy, this time at Petersburg.

**Conclusion**

As with the Peninsula Campaign, I approached Grant's Overland Campaign with the thought that operational-level logistics and Clausewitz's peculiarities of war would serve as four competing hypotheses for determining commander decision making. Once again, rather than acting as four equal factors, Grant's mental individuality, specifically his aggressive nature and

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96 King et al, *Staff Ride*, 86.
faith in maneuver-style warfare, filtered the effects of operational-level logistics, uncertain intelligence, and enemy reactions in his decision-making processes. For General Grant, logistics enabled his tenacious pursuit of General Lee in the Overland Campaign. Rather than letting logistical realities dictate his campaign, Grant consistently adapted his supply lines, dictating his logistical situation, to fit his course of action. Additionally, Grant faced an aggressive General Lee and less than perfect intelligence, but he viewed these facts as minor obstacles in the pursuit of his greater goal. Grant adapted to both Lee's actions and the AoP's faulty intelligence and boldly continued his course of action, seeking to destroy the Army of Northern Virginia at every possible opportunity. Though operational-level logistics, the enemy's reaction, and questionable intelligence affected campaign decisions, Grant's mental individualities ultimately determined his decisions in the Overland Campaign.

Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

This paper opened with a quote by Admiral Rickover claiming that, “Bitter experience in war has taught the maxim that the art of war is the art of the logistically feasible.” How does this quote hold up to this paper's primary question, that is, compared to Clausewitz's peculiarities of war, what role do operational-level logistics play in campaign decisions made by commanders? After examining the decisions made by General McClellan and General Grant, I can affirm Admiral Rickover's statement; operational-level logistics represent the sine qua non of military campaigns. Without a sound supply chain, waging a campaign proves impossible.

98 “About Logistics Quotes.”
Without a firm link between his initial depot at Fort Monroe and further depots up the York and Pamunkey Rivers, McClellan would not have been able to advance his AoP up the Peninsula. Similarly, without continuously advancing supply depots utilizing the region's numerous waterways, Grant could not have sustained his troops during their overland march.

To military observers, the above conclusion regarding logistics confirms elementary knowledge; logistics is key. However, to return to this paper's hypotheses, the value of the above analysis lies in how operational-level logistics actually interacts with Clausewitz's three peculiarities of war- individual mental capacities, the “living reaction” of the enemy commander, and the uncertainty of intelligence inherent to battle - to affect commanders' decision making; I summarize these findings in Figure 2:

Figure 2

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Operational-level Logistics and</th>
<th>Living Reaction of the Enemy and</th>
<th>Mental Capacities/Individualities</th>
<th>Lead To</th>
<th>COMMANDER'S DECISION</th>
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<td>Uncertainty of Intelligence</td>
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I originally viewed these factors as four competing hypotheses, but, as stated, human nature does not often lend itself to clear-cut hypotheses. It would be academically irresponsible to suggest that any one of the first four hypotheses fully described the commander decision-making model. Therefore, modifying the above hypotheses, I conclude the following: depending on the mental individualities of a commander, operational-level logistics may be employed as either a constraint or an enabler in campaign decision making. For General McClellan- a systematic and
cautious officer schooled in siege warfare- maintaining operational-level supply lines dictated the pace of his campaign; that is, logistics constrained his campaign as it unfolded. Protecting his supply line simply served as a convenient excuse for retreat, befitting McClellan's mental individualities. On the other hand, for General Grant- an aggressive and bold officer schooled in maneuver warfare- logistics enabled his tenacious pursuit of General Lee in the Overland Campaign. Rather than letting logistical realities dictate his campaign, Grant consistently adapted his supply lines to fit his desired course of action.

Clausewitz's second and third peculiarities- the living reaction of opposing commanders and the uncertainty of intelligence in battle- interact with commanders' mental individualities in a fashion similar to the way operational-level logistics interact; depending on the commander, these two peculiarities act as either constraints that dictate a campaigns course of action or obstacles to overcome. The former situation best describes McClellan on the Peninsula. In the culminating battles of the campaign, McClellan faced an aggressive Robert E. Lee and lacked sound intelligence. Rather than overcoming these realities, McClellan let them dictate his campaign, leading to a retreat to the James River. Grant also faced an aggressive General Lee and less than perfect intelligence; but, he simply viewed these facts as minor obstacles in the pursuit of his greater goal. Grant adapted to both Lee's actions and the AoP's faulty intelligence and boldly continued his course of action, seeking to destroy the Army of Northern Virginia at every possible opportunity.

This paper's findings lead to two significant policy implications. First, U.S. policymakers must recognize the intractable nature of logistical supply lines and war. Once again, to a military
observer this is a rather obvious statement. However, for policymakers unschooled in the military arts, undertaking a nation-building operation in a landlocked country, with supply lines outsourced through Uzbekistan and Pakistan, may not have been wise. The NATO force in Afghanistan receives 580 daily truckloads of fuel and supplies from Karachi, Pakistan via a series of routes in the Khyber Pass. Consequently, when Pakistan decides to shut these routes down or combatants decide to oppose them, military activity in Afghanistan is severely constrained. A war cannot be waged without sound logistical capacities; in the future, policymakers should recognize this reality before utilizing America's military might.

Next, as Congress continues its job of approving flag- and general-officer promotion, policymakers ought to recognize the role that officers' mental individualities, specifically military pedigree, play in commanders' decision-making processes. As America currently faces two insurgencies, policymakers should hesitate to promote too many officers schooled in maneuver warfare. However, a thin line must be walked here. While America's current threat involves asymmetric warfare, this will not always be the case. The United States has reached a point where the majority of its junior officers have cut their military teeth in counterinsurgency campaigns. Consequently, America may be in danger down the line of having an applicant pool of flag and general officers with limited to no maneuver warfare experience. Unfortunately, America cannot simply invent a maneuver-style war to remedy this situation. While no clear solution may exist to this problem, policymakers must account for the role that commanders' military history play in decision making while recognizing that, regardless of an individual's history, the ability to adapt to situations will always remain a critical characteristic of successful policymakers.
commanders, a characteristic aptly demonstrated by Ulysses S. Grant.
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