

### Lee & Grant: Profiles in Leadership From the Battlefields of Virginia

William D. Bushnell

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

---

#### Recommended Citation

Bushnell, William D. (2006) "Lee & Grant: Profiles in Leadership From the Battlefields of Virginia," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 8 : Iss. 2 .

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol8/iss2/10>

## Review

Bushnell, William D.

Spring 2006

**Bowery, Charles R., Jr.** *Lee & Grant: Profiles in Leadership from the Battlefields of Virginia*. AMACOM, \$24.00 ISBN 814408192

*Major Charles R. Bowery, Jr., is an aviation officer in the U.S. Army and has served as a history instructor at West Point. He has written many articles and reviews for military history encyclopedias and journals, including Gettysburg Magazine. He is stationed in Ansbach, Germany, where he serves the First Infantry Division, and is currently deployed in Iraq.* Interview with Major Charles R. Bowery, Jr.

Interviewed by Frank Winter Hardie

***Civil War Book Review (CWBR): Your book is structured on a detailed, chronological history of the Overland Campaign from the viewpoint of the two generals. How did you decide to use this campaign as a case study on leadership applicable to modern society?***

Major Charles R. Bowery, Jr. (CRB): The idea came to me in 2002, while I was serving as a military history instructor at the U.S. Military Academy in West Point, New York. The Civil War Eastern Theater has been my research and writing focus for a number of years, and the Overland Campaign seemed like a natural fit when Amacom Publishing solicited our department for manuscript proposals. This campaign brought together on the same stage two of the most compelling figures in military history, and it offers the modern reader a number of leadership and management principles, as well as an exciting historical narrative.

***CWBR: Lee and Grant had different but successful styles of managing their forces 140 years ago. Which style, or aspects of their styles, do you think are most suitable for leadership in today's business arena and today's warfare?***

CRB: From the leadership toolbox of Robert E. Lee, I would offer the decentralized, delegating style that he most often employed in battle. This leadership style allows capable subordinates in any arena, be it business or the military, to flourish and develop their own skills while they help the organization achieve its objectives. Any reader familiar with Lee's campaigns will note that this leadership style sometimes got Lee into trouble--the first day at Gettysburg comes to mind--but the fact remains that any endeavor involving far-flung subordinates and a fluid, quickly changing environment demands it.

Ulysses S. Grant was an outstanding leader because of his ability to apply resources to an overarching vision, and then to see that vision through to the end without being deterred by temporary setbacks. Once he attained the position of Commanding General in 1864, Grant capitalized upon his immense influence and credibility, harnessed the warmaking power of the Union, designed a strategy that accounted for both, and saw it through to victory with dogged persistence. Even in the darkest days of the Overland Campaign, when the Army of the Potomac was suffering unprecedented casualties and northern newspapers were beginning to label him a butcher, Grant forged ahead and proposed to fight it out on this line if it takes all summer. He retained ultimate faith both in his own judgment and the capabilities of his men.

Business and warfare today are of course much different from the 19th century, but certain threads of continuity apply regardless of time or place. Subordinates will always follow and work hard for a leader who demonstrates skill at his or her job, true concern for subordinates' welfare, and an ability to balance institutional and personal needs. Lee and Grant embodied those threads of continuity, so I think their stories are as relevant today as ever.

***CWBR: Do any particular decisions of Lee's or Grant's stick out in your mind as their best or worst?***

CRB: Because the Overland Campaign subjected both generals and both armies to incredible stresses and strains, I will focus on each general's worst decisions. These mistakes stemmed from the campaign's ferocity, and are insights into each general's character.

Robert E. Lee did a generally sound job of reacting to Grant's offensive moves, but Lee got into real trouble when he attempted to predict his adversary's intentions. Historian Gordon C. Rhea has written that, contrary to popular belief,

Lee was not very good during this campaign at predicting what Grant would do. The best example occurred on May 12 during the Battle of Spotsylvania, when Lee removed his artillery from the Mule Shoe salient, believing that Grant was once again about to move around the Confederate right flank. This proved not to be the case, and before Lee could return the guns, Grant launched a crushing attack that almost splintered the southern position. This faulty decision stemmed from Lee's overconfidence in his ability to divine his opponent's next move. This worked well against less-capable Union generals, but not against Grant. After this bad decision, Lee had to exercise a skill that was undoubtedly one of his best, reacting to an enemy strike and cleaning up the damage. This Lee and the Army of Northern Virginia did with skill and ferocity, restoring the Spotsylvania position to its impregnable best.

Grant's worst moment during the campaign is commonly held to be his decision to attack at Cold Harbor, a decision based once again on his overconfident, unsubstantiated belief that Lee's army was on its last legs. I would like to propose another moment and another decision, one that had lasting negative effects on the Army of the Potomac. On May 7-8, Philip H. Sheridan's Union cavalry fought with elements of Jeb Stuart's rebel cavalry for possession of a key crossroads at Todd's Tavern, on the Brock Road a short distance north of Spotsylvania. Sheridan mismanaged this battle, allowing Fitzhugh Lee's troopers the opportunity to effectively bar the way for the Army of the Potomac's move south. On May 8, Meade and Sheridan had a heated shouting match at the tavern about the employment of Union cavalry, after which Meade rightfully complained to Grant. When Meade made the comment that Sheridan proposed taking the army's cavalry on a raid to draw out and destroy Jeb Stuart, Grant responded by siding with Sheridan, over Meade's objections, and ordering the raid.

In making this decision, Grant damaged the operational capabilities of his army and seriously degraded its command climate. Without cavalry, Meade's army was like a boxer groping in the dark, unable to capitalize on opportunities for maneuver around Spotsylvania. By siding with a subordinate, and a new one at that, over the commanding general of the Army of the Potomac, Grant compounded Meade's fears that he was being marginalized and created a rupture in their relationship that never really healed. This personnel move exacerbated a perceived rift in the army's high command between the established eastern leaders and the westerners who joined the army under Grant's tutelage. Sheridan's raid did result in the mortal wounding of Stuart at Yellow Tavern, but

the Southern cavalry was not by any means destroyed, and Lee's remaining cavalry generals, led eventually by Wade Hampton, were as effective as ever. This decision points to Grant's occasional lack of sensitivity to interpersonal issues within his high command, and highlights his tendency to make overly aggressive decisions without considering second and third order effects.

***CWBR: In your book, you say that one of Grant's signal weaknesses was his overconfidence, but that at times, this confidence became his strongest asset. What is your key to determining the difference between confidence and overconfidence?***

CRB: An excellent question that gets to the heart of good leadership, and the fine line that can separate success and failure. I would say that a leader must continually examine his or her plans for the second and third order effects they will produce. This process of introspection and self-examination can help to head off potential disasters, and can introduce a healthy bit of skepticism into one's thinking.

As an Operations Officer, I am responsible for my unit's Tactical Operations Center (TOC) when we deploy or conduct combat operations. Military TOCs frequently display a sign board with three questions: What Happened? What Are We Doing About It? Who Else Needs to Know? These are examples of the sorts of questions a leader can ask to avoid the pitfalls of overconfidence. When things seem to be going the most smoothly, small problems or mistakes can go unnoticed.

***CWBR: By all accounts, Lee had a reserved and non-confrontational personality. How was he so successful in a world defined by confrontation and conflict?***

CRB: In general, Lee had no need for confrontational, in your face leadership because he inspired his army with his better qualities. The officers and men of the Army of Northern Virginia had absolute faith in Lee's judgment and leadership abilities; Lee was a good man as well as a great man, and proves that this method can work in any environment. This is the essence of Transformational Leadership, an ideal toward which both generals moved their legions during the course of the war.

***CWBR: Having served as an instructor at West Point, and an officer in active duty, your career has parallels to several Civil War officers. Is there one with whom you identify, or share similar commanding styles?***

CRB: Because I am a Virginia native, and because I have studied and read about him for my whole life, I would say that I identify more with Robert E. Lee than with Grant, even though my admiration for Grant's generalship has grown as I have learned more about him. In my daily duties, I try to emulate Lee's reserved demeanor, sense of humor, and willingness to lead by personal example at critical moments. These qualities, when combined with Lee's ability to lead and guide subordinates without micromanaging, seem to resonate with the military personnel I lead.

***CWBR: How has your experience in Iraq enhanced your understanding of Lee and Grant's relevancy to today's world?***

CRB: As a field grade officer, and in effect third-in-command of a battalion of 300 soldiers in Iraq, I learned a great deal about organizational leadership from my study of Lee and Grant. During the Overland Campaign, both generals employed goal-setting, good followership, management of resources, communication of shared visions, and political savvy. Those skills served me very well in Iraq. I will certainly never be in the same league with either general, and the chances of my occupying those rarefied heights of power are minimal at best, but I can always strive to emulate their examples and avoid their failures. In doing so, I hope to make a positive difference when and where I serve the nation.