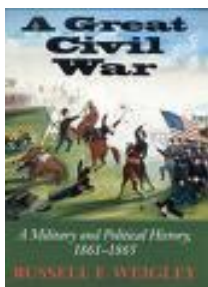


2001 LINCOLN PRIZE WINNER RUSSELL WEIGLEY FOR *A GREAT CIVIL WAR: A
MILITARY AND POLITICAL HISTORY*



LINCOLN PRIZE ACCEPTANCE SPEECH

In accepting the Lincoln Prize for 2001 I feel myself an interloper, even while I also experience the deepest gratitude that this most fervently sought-after award for any historian of nineteenth-century America should have proven to be within my grasp as my career in history came full circle back to its Civil War origins.

I have to regard myself as something of an interloper in this assemblage of Lincoln and Civil War historians and students, and in the company of other Lincoln Prize winners, because I have spent most of my career in military history at large and removed from the Civil War, sometimes even removed from writing about American history to focus on Europe instead. My writings on the entire history of the United States Army and of American military strategy dealt with the Civil War as a chronologically small part, though a disproportionately important part, of a far larger story, whose principal themes seemed to reach a climax in the Second World War and led me for a while to become something of a specialist, in my teaching as well as my research, in the history of the latter war.

My World War II emphasis carried me in turn back to the roots of modern warfare in both Europe and America, to study the whole evolution of war in the modern world, the better to comprehend how war in the twentieth century came to break loose from restraints upon its horrors previously constructed by Western Civilization over many centuries, and how as we enter the new millennium the restraints might possibly be restored. That project to review the whole history of modern war is not complete and is the work to which I am now returning.

First, however, I have felt obliged to go back to where I began as a historian, and it is that interruption, albeit only a partial interruption, of my project on the history of warfare that has produced my book [A Great Civil War](#)

and my receiving the Lincoln Prize. Always while I was studying warfare at large I felt strongly drawn back toward the Civil War. I say “back” toward the Civil War because with that conflict I began, on several levels.

First, whenever I have been asked why I became a military historian, my standard answer has been that my parents took me to the battlefield of Gettysburg when I was eight years old, and I never got over it. There have certainly been other influences - - growing up during World War II was one of them- - and obviously I did not understand much about the battle of Gettysburg or about Abraham Lincoln’s great address delivered at the Soldiers’ National Cemetery at Gettysburg when I was eight. But Gettysburg has a most powerful ambiance and aura that gripped me forever on that early visit, never let go, and eventually drew me back to write my history of the Civil War.

Second, when I was a boy many Civil War veterans were still living. Some of them rode in cars along the route of the Memorial Day parade that was the biggest patriotic celebration of the year when I grew up. (Marching in the parade, not riding, was reserved for the more vigorous of the veterans of the War with Spain, and for the relatively young men who were the veterans of the First World War.) The parade led to a Civil War monument and Civil War graves for its final ceremonies, despite the other conflicts that had occurred since. It was easy therefore to think of the Civil War as still the pivotal American war, the pivotal American event, an impression that the early visit to Gettysburg seemed to confirm.

Apparently confirming the impression also were family recollections, still vivid in some older relatives’ minds and retelling, of the grief for my great-grandfather’s older brother, Francis Weigley of the 7th Pennsylvania Cavalry, who was captured by the Confederates near Lovejoy’s Station, Georgia in September 1864 and never returned from his imprisonment at either Camp Sumter at Andersonville, Georgia or Florence, South Carolina. Having Francis Weigley’s letters to my great-grandfather, Jacob Weigley, passed on to me sealed a sense of obligation to help preserve the histories of all those men in blue whom I had seen in the parades, and of all their comrades and rivals.

All that enthrallment by the Civil War era led to graduate work at the University of Pennsylvania under Professor Roy F. Nichols, a great gentleman as well as a distinguished scholar. Roy Nichols in every way merited those particular words of praise, hackneyed though they may seem to be. He was of course mainly a political historian of the Civil War era rather than a military historian of the war itself, but with characteristic generosity he

allowed me to focus on the military events, and he proved full of wisdom and insights concerning those events. A complex series of influences subsequently carried me away from the Civil War into my chronologically wider exploration of military history; the climate of the Cold War era was probably near the heart of those influences. But Roy F. Nichols was so exemplary a mentor that recalling him always tugged me back toward Civil War scholarship.

Writing a military and political history of the Civil War thus became a project that I took up sporadically over the years, only to put it aside several times for the sake of what seemed more urgent tasks. In the 1990s, however, the time appeared appropriate to return to the Civil War because my review of the history of modern warfare had carried me through the Napoleonic Wars, and the next leap forward was to be from 1815 through 1918. I had found that the early experiences of modern war in Europe had come to emphasize efforts to make war decisive, at costs in lives and resources that were not altogether excessive, by means of fighting climactic battles that might destroy enemy armies in a day or a week and thus bring conflict to a quick resolution.

The Emperor Napoleon I's spectacular battlefield victories over the Austrians and the Russians at Austerlitz on December 2, 1805 and over the Prussians at Jena and Auerstadt on October 14, 1806 represented the apex of this search for climactic, decisive battle. Spectacular though they were, however, these Napoleonic battlefield triumphs failed to keep the Emperor's enemies subdued permanently; they inconveniently persisted in rising up again. Partly for that reason, partly because of changes in the technology of war and the sociology of armies, the era of war as a quest for the decisive battle gave way to an era of war's degeneration into a prolonged siege, a sometimes apparently endless endurance contest.

The First World War became the supreme manifestation of this dismal tendency, which made 1815-1918 the evident periodization for my next step in exploring the history of war. Since the American Civil War falls within that time span, however, and since the Civil War's final year of attrition in the trenches of Spotsylvania, Cold Harbor, Petersburg, and Atlanta embodied a long stride away from Austerlitz and Jena-Auerstadt in the direction of Verdun and the Somme, preparing for my own march toward 1918 came to seem the obvious time to take up again my much-deferred history of 1861-1865. Doing so would remedy my long unease over abandoning the Civil War while also contributing to my eventual return to the fuller history of warfare.

That larger study of war meanwhile had contributed to my insights presented in the military portions of A Great Civil War. I came to note the absence from American military thought of the Civil War era the concept of an operational art of war as a category of military activity intermediate between tactics, the employment of military forces on the battlefield to win victory on that field, and strategy, the use of battles in combination to win the entire war. By the time of the American Civil War, the Prussians were developing the germ of the idea of operations, an idea that would flower under the Germans and the Soviets in the twentieth century but that the Americans would be slow to adopt and develop even then. In the Civil War, I came to believe, the absence on both sides of a category of military thinking that looked beyond immediate success on the battlefield but did not abruptly leap all the way to considerations of winning the whole war tended to blind leaders to opportunities that thinking in terms of an operational art might have helped them to perceive.

In particular, the leaders of both the Union and Confederate armies were slow to grasp opportunities that would have involved thinking in terms of theaters of war beyond the local battlefield but short of the whole North-South balance. Two rare exceptions to this constriction of thought and vision occurred, surprisingly, very early in the war, with Confederate thought that encompassed Virginia in general as a theater of war: the Confederate use of the Manassas Gap Railroad to bring Brigadier-General Joseph E. Johnston's troops from the Shenandoah Valley to reinforce Brigadier-General Pierre Gustave Toutant Beauregard's forces at Manassas Junction and along Bull Run; and General Robert E. Lee's work while he was military adviser to President Jefferson Davis in the spring of 1862 to help Major-General Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson devise his Valley Campaign, designed to save Richmond in southeastern Virginia by applying pressure against Federal forces in northwestern and central Virginia to deny reinforcements to the Federal advance against the Confederate capital. Once Lee on June 1, 1862, however, took field command of the forces directly defending Richmond, which he soon denominated the Army of Northern Virginia, he came to concentrate his attention on that army and on its particular battlefields, to the detriment of Virginia-wide thinking and planning. So, for example, his preoccupation with the defense of Richmond against Lieutenant-General Ulysses S. Grant's armies in June 1864 obscured his perception of the Union threat to Petersburg, within the Virginia theater but at the time removed from his own battlegrounds.

The Union side suffered similarly from a dearth of theater-wide, operational thinking. When Grant took the field in Virginia in the spring of 1864, apart from his command of all the Armies of the United States he was in effect an army group commander in the Virginia theater, because the Union fielded there two principal forces, Major-General George G. Meade's Army of the Potomac and also Major-General Benjamin F. Butler's Army of the James. Yet Grant did not coordinate the two armies to try to win success above the tactical level of the battlefield until almost the end of the war. Through much of the first month of his 1864 campaign he allowed Butler's army to remain bottled up at Bermuda Hundred, doing nothing with it to aid Meade's army until the Cold Harbor phase of the campaign in early June. During the long siege of Petersburg, the Army of the James occupied the Union lines mainly north of the James River outside Richmond, while the Army of the Potomac lay south of the James facing Petersburg. Periodically Grant punched at Lee with one army or the other to compel Lee to shift troops and weaken part of his lines, but it was not until the end of March 1865 as the climactic weeks of the war began that Grant finally rose above the tactics of the battlefield to strike with both armies operationally.

If my general study of warfare contributed to my history of the Civil War, now the latter will send me back to the broader warfare studies with an enriched perspective. When in the past, for example, I wrote of the impact of the Civil War on subsequent American military strategy, I stressed that the Union Army's final campaigns of the war, and especially Grant's Virginia Campaign of 1864-1865, created a legacy such that American strategic thought thereafter tended to favor the employment of overwhelming force against the enemy through a direct confrontation with him, in a strategy on annihilation aimed at the destruction of the enemy's armed forces to create complete malleability in American hands. Thus it was a natural extension of the strategic inheritance from the Civil War and particularly from General Grant that in World War II the United States consistently sought a cross-Channel invasion of Europe as early as possible to confront the Germans head-on where they were strongest in the West, to overwhelm their strength and bring all the rest of their empire crashing down. I stressed also, however, that the American direct strategy of confrontation for the sake of annihilation has proven less appropriate to world conditions and less workable since 1945 than it was in 1864-1865 and 1941-1945.

This interpretation of American strategic history relied too much on perceptions of reality rather than on reality itself. In suggesting it, I myself was too much a captive of received perceptions. Revisiting the Civil War for its own sake instead of for its place in strategic history, I found it disquieting that the perception of Grant as

the exemplar of a direct, confrontational strategy of annihilation so much relegated to undeserved shadows the Grant of the 1863 campaign against Vicksburg, one of the great campaigns of saving lives through maneuver warfare waged in all military history - - waged by one of the great commanders of maneuver warfare.

Even in regard to Grant's 1864-1865 campaign, revisiting the Civil War reminded me that Grant's strategy of annihilating Lee's Army of Northern Virginia by means of attrition was only a second-best strategy in Grant's own eyes. He hoped to destroy Lee's army as he had destroyed Lieutenant-General John C. Pemberton's Army of Vicksburg in 1863, by outmaneuvering it until its geographic position was untenable and it could be eliminated by compelling it to surrender. Unfortunately for Grant, Robert E. Lee was not John C. Pemberton, and Lee proved too skillful to be maneuvered into an impossible position. So Grant had to settle for destroying Lee's army by trading casualties with it. But if American military literature were to be more perceptive in discerning that the Grant of the bloodbaths in the Wilderness and at Spotsylvania was also the Grant of the Vicksburg Campaign of maneuver and who hoped to defeat Lee through adroit maneuver, then that literature could point American military thought toward more flexible strategic paths better suited to the complexities of the post-1945, and the post-2000, world.

Perhaps the greatest satisfaction in receiving an award such as the Lincoln Prize lies in its validation of the historian's career path through the judgment of peers and critics. Therefore all the more heartily I must thank the Lincoln Prize Jury for 2001, Douglas L. Wilson, Chair; Carol Reardon; and Nina S. Silber; and the Board of Trustees of the Lincoln Prize at Gettysburg College, particularly the Chairman, Professor Gabor S. Boritt. I hope I will be able to repay your decision to grant me this award by using its stimulus to enrich my ongoing application of the study of the American Civil War to the study of the critical issues of war and peace worldwide.