To what extend did Grant’s Overland Campaign expedite the end of the U.S. Civil War?

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Part A: Identification and Evaluation of Sources

This investigation’s focus will be “To what extent did Grant’s Overland Campaign expedite the end of the U.S. Civil War?” and will analyze the campaign’s effects in destroying the South’s ability to sustain the war. The *Complete Personal Memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant,* and *The Battle-Cry of Freedom* by James McPherson, are sources relevant to this investigation as the first provides intimate explanation of Grant’s strategy of attrition while the second provides academic analysis of the campaign’s effects upon expediting the war.

Source A

The first source evaluated is Ulysses S. Grant’s memoirs, dated 1885. The origin of this source is valuable as Grant was the commander of the Union army. As this source is a memoir, its purpose was to be read by large audiences. This purpose is valuable as Grant attempts to validate his strategy of attrition, the focus of this investigation. The source’s content providing an intimate account of Grant’s objectives and Union success during the campaign is valuable as it explicitly demonstrates the effects of the campaign upon the North and infers the campaign’s effects upon the South.

The origin is limited as Grant only provides a northern perspective upon the campaign. As the Union commander, relying upon incomplete intelligence reports and estimations of Southern strength, Grant was unaware of the exact effects upon Lee’s army. The content is inherently limited in scope as it only provides specific details pertaining to Union strength and strategies ignoring the effects upon the South. Grant’s purpose for the memoirs was to validate his actions and sell copies because of financial difficulties. His purpose limits the source as Grant’s memoirs were published years after the war, based off memories, and contained a possible desire to exaggerate Union triumphs to entice audiences to read his memoirs.

Source B

The second source evaluated is *The Battle-Cry of Freedom,* written by James McPherson in 1998. The origin has value as McPherson is a Civil War historian who extensively researched the time period. The origin has additional value as McPherson uses hindsight as this book was written over 100 years after the Civil War. The purpose of this book is to analyze and inform readers of the Civil War period. This is valuable as the source is objective and academic without personal bias towards either side. The source’s content has significant value to the investigation as it synthesizes facts from Grant’s Overland campaign with analysis to display the campaign’s effect upon expediting the war. The content’s inclusion of hindsight and multiple perspectives formulates arguments for and against the effectiveness of Grant’s campaign.

However, the origin limits the source as McPherson had no direct contact with people experiencing the war. He relied solely upon other secondary and primary sources for researching, limiting the source as it fails to provide an intimate account of the campaign found in primary sources. The purpose of the book is limiting as it is intended to cover the entire Civil War era rather than solely the Overland Campaign. Thus, the content limits the source as the extended time period limits the source’s detail specifically about the Overland Campaign. Furthermore, McPherson’s commentary on the campaign is inherently subjective to support his prevailing theses about the war.

Part B: Investigation

The Overland Campaign consisted of the bloodiest prolonged fighting during the Civil War. During the campaign’s trench warfare, both Grant and Lee each lost about 33% of their forces in the span of six weeks.1 The effectiveness of the campaign has been widely debated. While Southern apologists argue that the campaign was ineffective in ending the war; it is clear that Grant expedited the end of the Civil War by preventing Lee from seizing initiative required for defending Richmond, destroying Lee’s army through battles of attrition, and destroying morale in the South. This led to Grant maneuvering Lee into a siege at Petersburg: effectively dooming Richmond and the Confederacy.

Seizing the Initiative

Grant’s Overland Campaign expedited the end of the Civil War by allowing Grant to seize and maintain the initiative from Lee by forcing Lee to stay between the Union army and Richmond. Previous campaigns taught Grant and Lincoln that attacking simultaneously along all fronts to force Lee into fighting a reactionary campaign against superior Union forces was critical to Union victory. 2 Grant’s strategy of continuously extending his lines South and Eastward prevented Lee’s army from fighting outside of its defensive trenches and reinforcing other Southern commanders opposing Union campaigns elsewhere. Whereas Lee could not move “without exposing Richmond,” Grant freely shifted his forces to extend his lines throughout the campaign to exploit developing weaknesses in the Confederate lines.3 Unlike prior campaigns such as McClellan’s Peninsular Campaign, this strategy prevented Lee from outmaneuvering Grant to escape or entrap Union forces. By extending his lines, Grant maintained the initiative and forced Lee to slowly fight a war of attrition that he could not hope to win against numerically superior Union forces. Grant’s comment that “I am satisfied the enemy are very shaky … keeping them entrenched in every position they take” in his memoirs highlights the effectiveness of this strategy.4 The Union had a history retreat after being defeated (such as at Chancellorsville). However, during the Overland Campaign Grant did not retreat after tactical defeats (such as the Wilderness and Spotsylvania). Historians such as Gregory Mertz argue that Grant’s execution of the campaign was marked by tactical blunders (such as the aforementioned examples) that unnecessarily extended the war; however, Grant’s insistence on “[Fighting] it out” despite tactical defeats forced Lee to exclusively fight in trenches to compensate for the attrition depleting his army.5 This attrition doomed Richmond and led to the collapse of the South by forcing Lee’s army to inevitably retreat into a siege at Petersburg. At Petersburg, Lee ran “out of space” to maneuver and defend against Grant, dooming the Confederacy.6 Lee’s statement that “it will be a mere question of time” once Grant besieged Petersburg evidences this assertion.7 The campaign’s culmination in the siege of Petersburg directly forced the Confederacy to abandon Richmond and hastened the end of the war. Grant’s focus on forcing Lee to stay between Grant and Richmond through continuous engagement expedited the war’s conclusion as it prevented Lee attacking the Union or aiding other Confederate forces to prolong the fighting.

Campaign of Attrition

Grant’s strategy of attrition during the campaign facilitated the war’s end by depleting the South’s manpower at an unsustainable rate. Lee’s 33,000 casualties during the campaign “were a permanent debt” from which the South could not recover.8 During the campaign, Lee lost irreplaceable veteran troops needed against Union forces already enjoying a 2:1 numerical superiority. Thus, despite losing fewer men in each battle of the Overland Campaign, Lee lost higher percentages of his forces.9 Many historians and southern generals such as Jubal Early argue that Grant’s strategy of attrition lengthened the war by forcing him to fight a yearlong campaign of trench warfare.10 While this argument has merit as Union tactical blunders prolonged the campaign (E.g. Cold Harbor), it fails to consider that Grant’s strategy depleted Lee’s resources at a faster rate than Grant’s. Grant pressured Lee’s army until it could no longer retreat and thus broke due to lack of manpower culminating in Lee’s surrender at Appomattox Courthouse.11Thus, Grant’s strategy accomplished what all previous Union strategies had failed to do: destroy Lee’s army and expedite the war’s end. Additionally, the campaign caused Lee to lose experienced officers such as J.E.B. Stuart. In 20 days of fighting at Spotsylvania Courthouse, Lee lost 20 general officers.12 These losses forced the Confederate army to fight defensively behind trench lines as Lee was forced to rely upon inexperienced officers who could not be trusted with offensives to exploit local Union blunders. Grant’s strategy of attrition expedited the war by directly killing irreplaceable troops and officers necessary for Lee’s offensive-defensive strategy to succeed.

Destroying Southern Morale

Due to the campaign’s effects upon Southern manpower, the campaign quickly ended the war by destroying all preexisting Southern hopes for victory. Grant’s steady advance forward boosted Union morale while weakening Southern morale. Southerners became demoralized and incapable of sustaining the war due to the shortages of materials and their extreme lack of manpower. This loss of morale is evidenced in Mary Chesnut’s diary entry stating that the Confederacy’s populace “slip by with no songs and no shouts now. They have given the thing up”.13 Mary Chesnut’s diary provides evidence that the psychological shock at the destruction caused by the Overland Campaign directly crushed Southern will to prolong the war. This perspective illustrates how Grant’s campaign facilitated the war’s end through destroying the South’s will to continue fighting. The utter destruction caused by Grant’s advance thoroughly destroyed Southern resolve, dissuading it from turning to guerilla tactics to prolong the war.14 A comparison to the Paraguayan War of 1870 in which Paraguay lost over half of its population but continued fighting for seven years through guerilla warfare allows one to infer the extent to which Southern guerilla tactics could have prolonged the American Civil War.15

Southern historians such as Edward Pollard argue that the Overland Campaign’s brutal casualties hurt the Union war effort by reducing Union morale. These Southern apologists turn towards evidence such as Northern media such as New York Times war correspondent William Swinton labeling Grant as a butcher for Union casualties in assaults such as Cold Harbor and increasing Union desertion rates during the campaign as Union soldiers became disillusioned by the brutality of trench warfare to criticize the campaign’s effectiveness.16 This counter-argument fails to consider the corresponding effects upon the South. Diaries and memoirs show that Union soldiers felt that they were winning the war and thus experienced higher morale than Confederate soldiers.17 Southerners’ spirits were crushed from constantly fighting fresh waves of Union troops. The disparity between Mary Chesnut’s statements “It’s all over. The game is up” 18 and Grant’s in his memoirs such as “Lee’s army is really whipped” and “Our men feel that they have gained morale over the enemy … I feel that our success … is already assured” evidence the campaign’s effect in destroying Southern morale while eventually building Union morale.19 While the campaign’s bloody nature weakened Union morale in the short-term; Grant’s strategy infused the North with newfound resilience to end the war. Renewed Northern resolve complimented the South’s desire to cease hostilities, facilitating the war’s end.

Conclusion

The Overland Campaign was significant in undermining the Confederacy’s war effort. Due to Grant’s attrition of Lee’s forces and morale by seizing the initiative, Grant positioned the Union army to effectively capitalize on its greater manpower for the first time during a sustained campaign in the Civil War. Southern apologists’ perspective that Grant prolonged the Union war effort through undermining morale and depleting resources is erroneous as it does not consider the campaign’s corresponding effects on the South. Instead, the campaign directly expedited the war’s end by thoroughly crushing the main Confederate army and the South’s morale to ensure that neither traditional military nor guerilla warfare could prolong the war.

Part C: Reflection

This investigation has helped me understand how national identity and cultural beliefs cause historians to come to different conclusions about history. The Civil War is a contentious topic among Americans. While researching, I had to evaluate where the authors of my sources were from as I noticed patterns in how Southern historians chose to emphasize that the overwhelming resources of the North contributed to the South’s defeat rather than Grant’s campaign’s individual brilliance. Through analyzing the disparity between regional historians’ evaluations of the Overland Campaign, I combined both perspectives to develop the argument that Grant’s campaign expedited the war’s end through Grant’s application of his understanding that a strategy of attrition was necessary to utilize overwhelming Northern resources to decisively defeat the South. Overall, regional zeitgeists influencing sources demonstrated that it is implausible for one source to display definitive ‘truths’ about history. Historical research is limited as records require interpretation which leads to subjective arguments. I attempted to overcome this limitation by incorporating various subjective perspectives into the investigation to objectively create a rational argument in defense of my claim.

The methods that historians must use are vastly limited by the time and place in which the event occurred. Researching the Civil War period was a unique challenge as it was one of the first wars to involve battlefield photography. Through displaying the carnage from battles, the novelty of photography shocked the public leading to better informed public opinion about the war. Battlefield photography made the home-front much more important than it had been in prior wars (as voters had a direct effect on the war’s conclusion through reelecting Lincoln). This created the challenge of quantifying the campaign’s effects on home-front morale. To do this, I examined a variety of well-informed sources such as Mary Chesnut’s diary to compare the two side’s relative morale levels.

However, the prevalence of informed opinions on the war due to battlefield photography presented an opportunity for researching as more observers became involved in the war. This created diverse accounts that allowed detailed analysis of change in public morale due to the campaign. Ultimately, this allowed the expansion of my conclusion as the investigation was not limited by a scarcity of well-informed perspectives upon the campaign as historians researching earlier events may be.

Endnotes

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15. Keegan, *The American Civil War,* 345.

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