Chapter 24: Conclusion – Military Lessons of the War

Having thus recorded a summary of events, mostly under my own personal supervision, during the years from 1846 to 1865, it seems proper that I should add an opinion of some of the useful military lessons to be derived therefrom.

That civil war, by reason of the existence of slavery, was apprehended by most of the leading statesmen of the half-century preceding its outbreak, is a matter of notoriety. General Scott told me on my arrival at New York, as early as 1850, that the country was on the eve of civil war; and the Southern politicians openly asserted that it was their purpose to accept as a *casus belli* the election of General Fremont in 1856; but, fortunately or unfortunately, he was beaten by Mr. Buchanan, which simply postponed its occurrence for four years. Mr. Seward had also publicly declared that no government could possibly exist half slave and half free; yet the Government made no military preparation, and the Northern people generally paid no attention, took no warning of its coming, and would not realize its existence till Fort Sumter was fired on by batteries of artillery, handled by declared enemies, from the surrounding islands and from the city of Charleston.

General Bragg, who certainly was a man of intelligence, and who, in early life, ridiculed a thousand times, in my hearing, the threats of the people of South Carolina to secede from the Federal Union, said to me in New Orleans, in February, 1861, that he was convinced that the feeling between the slave and free States had become so embittered that it was better to part in peace; better to part anyhow; and, as a separation was inevitable, that the South should begin at once, because the possibility of a successful effort was yearly lessened by the rapid and increasing inequality between the two sections, from the fact that all the European immigrants were coming to the Northern States and Territories, and none to the Southern.

The slave population in 1860 was near four millions, and the money value thereof not far from twenty-five hundred million dollars. Now, ignoring the moral side of the question, a cause that endangered so vast a moneyed interest was an adequate cause of anxiety and preparation, and the Northern leaders surely ought to have foreseen the danger and prepared for it. After the election of Mr. Lincoln in 1860, there was no concealment of the declaration and preparation for war in the South. In Louisiana, as I have related, men were openly enlisted, officers were appointed, and war was actually begun, in January, 1861. The forts at the mouth of the Mississippi were seized, and occupied by garrisons that hauled down the United States flag and hoisted that of the State. The United States Arsenal at Baton Rouge was captured by New Orleans militia, its garrison ignominiously sent off, and the contents of the arsenal distributed. These were as much acts of war as was the subsequent firing on Fort Sumter, yet no public notice was taken thereof; and when, months afterward, I came North, I found not one single sign of preparation. It was for this reason, somewhat, that the people of the South became convinced that those of the North were
pusillanimous and cowardly, and the Southern leaders were thereby enabled to commit their people to the war, nominally in defense of their slave property. Up to the hour of the firing on Fort Sumter, in April, 1861, it does seem to me that our public men, our politicians, were blamable for not sounding the note of alarm.

Then, when war was actually begun, it was by a call for seventy-five thousand “ninety-day” men, I suppose to fulfill Mr. Seward’s prophecy that the war would last but ninety days.

The earlier steps by our political Government were extremely wavering and weak, for which an excuse can be found in the fact that many of the Southern representatives remained in Congress, sharing in the public councils, and influencing legislation. But as soon as Mr. Lincoln was installed, there was no longer any reason why Congress and the cabinet should have hesitated. They should have measured the cause, provided the means, and left the Executive to apply the remedy.

At the time of Mr. Lincoln’s inauguration, viz., March 4, 1861, the Regular Army, by law, consisted of two regiments of dragoons, two regiments of cavalry, one regiment of mounted rifles, four regiments of artillery, and ten regiments of infantry, admitting of an aggregate strength of thirteen thousand and twenty-four officers and men. On the subsequent 4th of May the President, by his own orders (afterward sanctioned by Congress), added a regiment of cavalry, a regiment of artillery, and eight regiments of infantry, which, with the former army, admitted of a strength of thirty-nine thousand nine hundred and seventy-three; but at no time during the war did the Regular Army attain a strength of twenty-five thousand men.

To the new regiments of infantry was given an organization differing from any that had heretofore prevailed in this country—of three battalions of eight companies each; but at no time did more than one of these regiments attain its full standard; nor in the vast army of volunteers that was raised during the war were any of the regiments of infantry formed on the three-battalion system, but these were universally single battalions of ten companies; so that, on the reorganization of the Regular Army at the close of the war, Congress adopted the form of twelve companies for the regiments of cavalry and artillery, and that of ten companies for the infantry, which is the present standard.

Inasmuch as the Regular Army will naturally form the standard of organization for any increase or for new regiments of volunteers, it becomes important to study this subject in the light of past experience, and to select that form which is best for peace as well as war.

A cavalry regiment is now composed of twelve companies, usually divided into six squadrons, of two companies each, or better subdivided into three battalions of four companies each. This is an excellent form, easily admitting of subdivision as well as union into larger masses.

A single battalion of four companies, with a field-officer, will compose a good body for a garrison, for a separate expedition, or for a detachment; and, in war, three regiments would compose a good brigade, three brigades a division, and three divisions a strong cavalry corps, such as was formed and fought by Generals Sheridan and Wilson during the war.
In the artillery arm, the officers differ widely in their opinion of the true organization. A single company forms a battery, and habitually each battery acts separately, though sometimes several are united or “massed;” but these always act in concert with cavalry or infantry.

Nevertheless, the regimental organization for artillery has always been maintained in this country for classification and promotion. Twelve companies compose a regiment, and, though probably no colonel ever commanded his full regiment in the form of twelve batteries, yet in peace they occupy our heavy sea-coast forts or act as infantry; then the regimental organization is both necessary and convenient.

But the infantry composes the great mass of all armies, and the true form of the regiment or unit has been the subject of infinite discussion; and, as I have stated, during the civil war the regiment was a single battalion of ten companies. In olden times the regiment was composed of eight battalion companies and two flank companies. The first and tenth companies were armed with rifles, and were styled and used as “skirmishers;” but during the war they were never used exclusively for that special purpose, and in fact no distinction existed between them and the other eight companies.

The ten-company organization is awkward in practice, and I am satisfied that the infantry regiment should have the same identical organization as exists for the cavalry and artillery, viz., twelve companies, so as to be susceptible of division into three battalions of four companies each.

These companies should habitually be about one hundred men strong, giving twelve hundred to a regiment, which in practice would settle down to about one thousand men.

Three such regiments would compose a brigade, three brigades a division, and three divisions a corps. Then, by allowing to an infantry corps a brigade of cavalry and six batteries of field-artillery, we would have an efficient corps d’armée of thirty thousand men, whose organization would be simple and most efficient, and whose strength should never be allowed to fall below twenty-five thousand men.

The corps is the true unit for grand campaigns and battle, should have a full and perfect staff, and every thing requisite for separate action, ready at all times to be detached and sent off for any nature of service. The general in command should have the rank of lieutenant-general, and should be, by experience and education, equal to any thing in war. Habitually with us he was a major-general, specially selected and assigned to the command by an order of the President, constituting, in fact, a separate grade.

The division is the unit of administration, and is the legitimate command of a major-general. The brigade is the next subdivision, and is commanded by a brigadier-general.

The regiment is the family. The colonel, as the father, should have a personal acquaintance with every officer and man, and should instill a feeling of pride and affection for himself, so that his officers and men would naturally look to him for personal advice and instruction. In war the
regiment should never be subdivided, but should always be maintained entire. In peace this is impossible.

The company is the true unit of discipline, and the captain is the company. A good captain makes a good company, and he should have the power to reward as well as punish. The fact that soldiers would naturally like to have a good fellow for their captain is the best reason why he should be appointed by the colonel, or by some superior authority, instead of being elected by the men.[ii]

In the United States the people are the “sovereign,” all power originally proceeds from them, and therefore the election of officers by the men is the common rule. This is wrong, because an army is not a popular organization, but an animated machine, an instrument in the hands of the Executive for enforcing the law, and maintaining the honor and dignity of the nation; and the President, as the constitutional commander-in-chief of the army and navy, should exercise the power of appointment (subject to the confirmation of the Senate) of the officers of “volunteers,” as well as of “regulars.”

No army can be efficient unless it be a unit for action; and the power must come from above, not from below: the President usually delegates his power to the commander-in-chief, and he to the next, and so on down to the lowest actual commander of troops, however small the detachment. No matter how troops come together, when once united, the highest officer in rank is held responsible, and should be consequently armed with the fullest power of the Executive, subject only to law and existing orders. The more simple the principle, the greater the likelihood of determined action; and the less a commanding officer is circumscribed by bounds or by precedent, the greater is the probability that he will make the best use of his command and achieve the best results.

The Regular Army and the Military Academy at West Point have in the past provided, and doubtless will in the future provide an ample supply of good officers for future wars; but, should their numbers be insufficient, we can always safely rely on the great number of young men of education and force of character throughout the country, to supplement them. At the close of our civil war, lasting four years, some of our best corps and division generals, as well as staff-officers, were from civil life; but I cannot recall any of the most successful who did not express a regret that he had not received in early life instruction in the elementary principles of the art of war, instead of being forced to acquire this knowledge in the dangerous and expensive school of actual war.

But the real difficulty was, and will be again, to obtain an adequate number of good soldiers. We tried almost every system known to modern nations, all with more or less success—voluntary enlistments, the draft, and bought substitutes[iii]—and I think that all officers of experience will confirm my assertion that the men who voluntarily enlisted at the outbreak of the war were the best, better than the conscript, and far better than the bought substitute. When a regiment is once organized in a State, and mustered into the service of the United States, the officers and men become subject to the same laws of discipline and government as the regular troops. They are in no sense “militia,” but compose a part of the Army of the United States, only retain their State title for convenience, and yet may be principally
recruited from the neighborhood of their original organization. Once organized, the regiment should be kept full by recruits, and when it becomes difficult to obtain more recruits the pay should be raised by Congress, instead of tempting new men by exaggerated bounties. I believe it would have been more economical to have raised the pay of the soldier to thirty or even fifty dollars a month than to have held out the promise of three hundred and even six hundred dollars in the form of bounty. Toward the close of the war, I have often heard the soldiers complain that the “stay-at-home” men got better pay, bounties, and food, than they who were exposed to all the dangers and vicissitudes of the battles and marches at the front. The feeling of the soldier should be that, in every event, the sympathy and preference of his government is for him who fights, rather than for him who is on provost or guard duty to the rear, and, like most men, he measures this by the amount of pay. Of course, the soldier must be trained to obedience, and should be “content with his wages;” but whoever has commanded an army in the field knows the difference between a willing, contented mass of men, and one that feels a cause of grievance. There is a soul to an army as well as to the individual man, and no general can accomplish the full work of his army unless he commands the soul of his men, as well as their bodies and legs.

The greatest mistake made in our civil war was in the mode of recruitment and promotion. When a regiment became reduced by the necessary wear and tear of service, instead of being filled up at the bottom, and the vacancies among the officers filled from the best non-commissioned officers and men, the habit was to raise new regiments, with new colonels, captains, and men, leaving the old and experienced battalions to dwindle away into mere skeleton organizations. I believe with the volunteers this matter was left to the States exclusively, and I remember that Wisconsin kept her regiments filled with recruits, whereas other States generally filled their quotas by new regiments, and the result was that we estimated a Wisconsin regiment equal to an ordinary brigade. I believe that five hundred new men added to an old and experienced regiment were more valuable than a thousand men in the form of a new regiment, for the former by association with good, experienced captains, lieutenants, and non-commissioned officers, soon became veterans, whereas the latter were generally unavailable for a year. The German method of recruitment is simply perfect, and there is no good reason why we should not follow it substantially.

On a road, marching by the flank, it would be considered “good order” to have five thousand men to a mile, so that a full corps of thirty thousand men would extend six miles, but with the average trains and batteries of artillery the probabilities are that it would draw out to ten miles. On a long and regular march the divisions and brigades should alternate in the lead, the leading division should be on the road by the earliest dawn, and march at the rate of about two miles, or, at most, two and a half miles an hour, so as to reach camp by noon. Even then the rear divisions and trains will hardly reach camp much before night. Theoretically, a marching column should preserve such order that by simply halting and facing to the right or left, it would be in line of battle; but this is rarely the case, and generally deployments are made “forward,” by conducting each brigade by the flank obliquely to the right or left to its approximate position in line of battle, and there deployed. In such a line of battle, a brigade of three thousand infantry would occupy a mile of “front;” but for a strong line of battle five thousand men with two batteries should be allowed to each mile, or a division would habitually constitute a double line with skirmishers and a reserve on a mile of “front.”
The “feeding” of an army is a matter of the most vital importance, and demands the earliest attention of the general entrusted with a campaign. To be strong, healthy, and capable of the largest measure of physical effort, the soldier needs about three pounds gross of food per day, and the horse or mule about twenty pounds. When a general first estimates the quantity of food and forage needed for an army of fifty or one hundred thousand men, he is apt to be dismayed, and here a good staff is indispensable, though the general cannot throw off on them the responsibility. He must give the subject his personal attention, for the army reposes in him alone, and should never doubt the fact that their existence overrides in importance all other considerations. Once satisfied of this, and that all has been done that can be, the soldiers are always willing to bear the largest measure of privation. Probably no army ever had a more varied experience in this regard than the one I commanded in 1864–’65.

Our base of supply was at Nashville, supplied by railways and the Cumberland River, thence by rail to Chattanooga, a “secondary base,” and thence forward a single-track railroad. The stores came forward daily, but I endeavored to have on hand a full supply for twenty days in advance. These stores were habitually in the wagon-trains, distributed to corps, divisions, and regiments, in charge of experienced quartermasters and commissaries, and became subject to the orders of the generals commanding these bodies. They were generally issued on provision returns, but these had to be closely scrutinized, for too often the colonels would make requisitions for provisions for more men than they reported for battle. Of course, there are always a good many non-combatants with an army, but, after careful study, I limited their amount to twenty-five per cent. of the “effective strength,” and that was found to be liberal. An ordinary army-wagon drawn by six mules may be counted on to carry three thousand pounds net, equal to the food of a full regiment for one day, but, by driving along beef-cattle, a commissary may safely count the contents of one wagon as sufficient for two days’ food for a regiment of a thousand men; and as a corps should have food on hand for twenty days ready for detachment, it should have three hundred such wagons, as a provision-train; and for forage, ammunition, clothing, and other necessary stores, it was found necessary to have three hundred more wagons, or six hundred wagons in all, for a corps d’armée.

These should be absolutely under the immediate control of the corps commander, who will, however, find it economical to distribute them in due proportion to his divisions, brigades, and even regiments. Each regiment ought usually to have at least one wagon for convenience to distribute stores, and each company two pack-mules, so that the regiment may always be certain of a meal on reaching camp without waiting for the larger trains.

On long marches the artillery and wagon-trains should always have the right of way, and the troops should improvise roads to one side, unless forced to use a bridge in common, and all trains should have escorts to protect them, and to assist them in bad places. To this end there is nothing like actual experience, only, unless the officers in command give the subject their personal attention, they will find their wagon-trains loaded down with tents, personal baggage, and even the arms and knapsacks of the escort. Each soldier should, if not actually “sick or wounded,” carry his musket and equipments [sic] containing from forty to sixty rounds of ammunition, his shelter-tent, a blanket or overcoat, and an extra pair of pants, socks, and drawers, in the form of a scarf, worn from the left shoulder to the right side in lieu of knapsack,
and in his haversack he should carry some bread, cooked meat, salt, and coffee. I do not believe a soldier should be loaded down too much, but, including his clothing, arms, and equipment, he can carry about fifty pounds without impairing his health or activity. A simple calculation will show that by such a distribution a corps will thus carry the equivalent of five hundred wagon-loads—an immense relief to the trains.

Where an army is near one of our many large navigable rivers, or has the safe use of a railway, it can usually be supplied with the full army ration, which is by far the best furnished to any army in America or Europe; but when it is compelled to operate away from such a base, and is dependent on its own train of wagons, the commanding officer must exercise a wise discretion in the selection of his stores. In my opinion there is no better food for man than beef-cattle driven on the hoof, issued liberally, with salt, bacon, and bread. Coffee has also become almost indispensable, though many substitutes were found for it, such as Indian-corn, roasted, ground, and boiled as coffee; the sweet-potato, and the seed of the okra-plant prepared in the same way. All these were used by the people of the South, who for years could procure no coffee, but I noticed that the women always begged of us some real coffee, which seems to satisfy a natural yearning or craving more powerful than can be accounted for on the theory of habit. Therefore I would always advise that the coffee and sugar ration be carried along, even at the expense of bread, for which there are many substitutes. Of these, Indian-corn is the best and most abundant. Parched in a frying-pan, it is excellent food, or if ground and boiled with meat of any sort, it makes a most nutritious meal. The potato, both Irish and sweet, forms an excellent substitute for bread, and at Savannah we found the rice also suitable, both for men and animals. For the former it should be cleaned of its husk in a hominy block, easily prepared out of a log, and sifted with a coarse corn bag; but for horses it should be fed in the straw. During the Atlanta campaign we were supplied by our regular commissaries with all sorts of patent compounds, such as desiccated vegetables, and concentrated milk, meat-biscuit, and sausages, but somehow the men preferred the simpler and more familiar forms of food, and usually styled these “desecrated vegetables and consecrated milk.” We were also supplied liberally with lime-juice, sauerkraut, and pickles, as an antidote to scurvy, and I now recall the extreme anxiety of my medical director, Dr. Kittoe, about the scurvy, which he reported at one time as spreading and imperiling the army. This occurred at a crisis about Kenesaw, when the railroad was taxed to its utmost capacity to provide the necessary ammunition, food, and forage, and could not possibly bring us an adequate supply of potatoes and cabbage, the usual antiscorbutics, when providentially the blackberries ripened and proved an admirable antidote, and I have known the skirmish-line, without orders, to fight a respectable battle for the possession of some old fields that were full of blackberries. Soon, thereafter, the green corn or roasting-ear came into season, and I heard no more of the scurvy. Our country abounds with plants which can be utilized for a prevention to the scurvy; besides the above are the persimmon, the sassafras root and bud, the wild-mustard, the “agave,” turnip-tops, the dandelion cooked as greens, and a decoction of the ordinary pine-leaf.

For the more delicate and costly articles of food for the sick we relied mostly on the agents of the Sanitary Commission. I do not wish to doubt the value of these organizations, which gained so much applause during our civil war, for no one can question the motives of these charitable and generous people; but to be honest I must record an opinion that the Sanitary Commission should limit its operations to the hospitals at the rear, and should never appear at the front. They were
generally local in feeling, aimed to furnish their personal friends and neighbors with a better class of food than the Government supplied, and the consequence was, that one regiment of a brigade would receive potatoes and fruit which would be denied another regiment close by. Jealousy would be the inevitable result, and in an army all parts should be equal; there should be no “partiality, favor, or affection.” The Government should supply all essential wants, and in the hospitals to the rear will be found abundant opportunities for the exercise of all possible charity and generosity. During the war I several times gained the ill-will of the agents of the Sanitary Commission because I forbade their coming to the front unless they would consent to distribute their stores equally among all, regardless of the parties who had contributed them. The sick, wounded, and dead of an army are the subjects of the greatest possible anxiety, and add an immense amount of labor to the well men. Each regiment in an active campaign should have a surgeon and two assistants always close at hand, and each brigade and division should have an experienced surgeon as a medical director. The great majority of wounds and of sickness should be treated by the regimental surgeon, on the ground, under the eye of the colonel. As few should be sent to the brigade or division hospital as possible, for the men always receive better care with their own regiment than with strangers, and as a rule the cure is more certain; but when men receive disabling wounds, or have sickness likely to become permanent, the sooner they go far to the rear the better for all. The tent or the shelter of a tree is a better hospital than a house, whose walls absorb fetid and poisonous emanations, and then give them back to the atmosphere. To men accustomed to the open air, who live on the plainest food, wounds seem to give less pain, and are attended with less danger to life than to ordinary soldiers in barracks.

Wounds which, in 1861, would have sent a man to the hospital for months, in 1865 were regarded as mere scratches, rather the subject of a joke than of sorrow. To new soldiers the sight of blood and death always has a sickening effect, but soon men become accustomed to it, and I have heard them exclaim on seeing a dead comrade borne to the rear, “Well, Bill has turned up his toes to the daisies.” Of course, during a skirmish or battle, armed men should never leave their ranks to attend a dead or wounded comrade—this should be seen to in advance by the colonel, who should designate his musicians or company cooks as hospital attendants, with a white rag on their arm to indicate their office. A wounded man should go himself (if able) to the surgeon near at hand, or, if he need help, he should receive it from one of the attendants and not a comrade. It is wonderful how soon the men accustom themselves to these simple rules. In great battles these matters call for a more enlarged attention, and then it becomes the duty of the division general to see that proper stretchers and field-hospitals are ready for the wounded, and trenches are dug for the dead. There should be no real neglect of the dead, because it has a bad effect on the living; for each soldier values himself and comrade as highly as though he were living in a good house at home.

The regimental chaplain, if any, usually attends the burials from the hospital, should make notes and communicate details to the captain of the company, and to the family at home. Of course it is usually impossible to mark the grave with names, dates, etc., and consequently the names of the “unknown” in our national cemeteries equal about one-half of all the dead.

Very few of the battles in which I have participated were fought as described in European textbooks, viz., in great masses, in perfect order, manœuvring by corps, divisions, and brigades. We were generally in a wooded country, and, though our lines were deployed according to tactics,
the men generally fought in strong skirmish-lines, taking advantage of the shape of ground, and of
every cover. We were generally the assailants, and in wooded and broken countries the
“defensive” had a positive advantage over us, for they were always ready, had cover, and always
knew the ground to their immediate front; whereas we, their assailants, had to grope our way
over unknown ground, and generally found a cleared field or prepared entanglements that held us
for a time under a close and withering fire. Rarely did the opposing lines in compact order come
into actual contact, but when, as at Peach-Tree Creek and Atlanta,\[vi\] the lines did become
commingled, the men fought individually in every possible style, more frequently with the
musket clubbed than with the bayonet, and in some instances the men clinched like wrestlers,
and went to the ground together. Europeans frequently criticized our war, because we did not
always take full advantage of a victory; the true reason was, that habitually the woods served as a
screen, and we often did not realize the fact that our enemy had retreated till he was already
miles away and was again intrenched, having left a mere skirmish-line to cover the movement, in
turn to fall back to the new position.

Our war was fought with the muzzle-loading rifle. Toward the close I had one brigade
(Walcutt’s\[vii\]) armed with breech-loading “Spencer’s;” the cavalry generally had breach-
loading [sic] carbines, “Spencer’s” and “Sharp’s,” both of which were good arms.
The only change that breech-loading arms will probably make in the art and practice of war
will be to increase the amount of ammunition to be expended, and necessarily to be carried
along; to still further “thin out” the lines of attack, and to reduce battles to short, quick, decisive
conflicts. It does not in the least affect the grand strategy, or the necessity for perfect
organization, drill, and discipline. The companies and battalions will be more dispersed, and
the men will be less under the immediate eye of their officers, and therefore a higher order of
intelligence and courage on the part of the individual soldier will be an element of strength.
When a regiment is deployed as skirmishers, and crosses an open field or woods, under heavy
fire, if each man runs forward from tree to tree, or stump to stump, and yet preserves a good
general alignment, it gives great confidence to the men themselves, for they always keep their
eyes well to the right and left, and watch their comrades; but when some few hold back, stick too
close or too long to a comfortable log, it often stops the line and defeats the whole object.
Therefore, the more we improve the fire-arm the more will be the necessity for good
organization, good discipline and intelligence on the part of the individual soldier and officer.
There is, of course, such a thing as individual courage, which has a value in war, but familiarity
with danger, experience in war and its common attendants, and personal habit, are equally
valuable traits, and these are the qualities with which we usually have to deal in war. All men
naturally shrink from pain and danger, and only incur their risk from some higher motive, or
from habit; so that I would define true courage to be a perfect sensibility of the measure of
danger, and a mental willingness to incur it, rather than that insensibility to danger of which I
have heard far more than I have seen. The most courageous men are generally unconscious of
possessing the quality; therefore, when one professes it too openly, by words or bearing, there is
reason to mistrust it. I would further illustrate my meaning by describing a man of true courage
to be one who possesses all his faculties and senses perfectly when serious danger is actually
present.

Modern wars have not materially changed the relative values or proportions of the several arms
of service: infantry, artillery, cavalry, and engineers. If any thing, the infantry has been increased
in value. The danger of cavalry attempting to charge infantry armed with breech-loading rifles was fully illustrated at Sedan, and with us very frequently. So improbable has such a thing become that we have omitted the infantry-square from our recent tactics. Still, cavalry against cavalry, and as auxiliary to infantry, will always be valuable, while all great wars will, as heretofore, depend chiefly on the infantry. Artillery is more valuable with new and inexperienced troops than with veterans. In the early stages of the war the field-guns often bore the proportion of six to a thousand men; but toward the close of the war one gun, or at most two, to a thousand men, was deemed enough. Sieges, such as characterized the wars of the last century, are too slow for this period of the world, and the Prussians recently almost ignored them altogether, penetrated France between the forts, and left a superior force “in observation,” to watch the garrison and accept its surrender when the greater events of the war ahead made further resistance useless;[viii] but earth-forts, and especially field-works, will hereafter play an important part in wars, because they enable a minor force to hold a superior one in check for a time, and time is a most valuable element in all wars. It was one of Prof. Mahan’s[ix] maxims that the spade was as useful in war as the musket, and to this I will add the axe. The habit of entrenching certainly does have the effect of making new troops timid. When a line of battle is once covered by a good parapet, made by the engineers or by the labor of the men themselves, it does require an effort to make them leave it in the face of danger; but when the enemy is entrenched, it becomes absolutely necessary to permit each brigade and division of the troops immediately opposed to throw up a corresponding trench for their own protection in case of a sudden sally. We invariably did this in all our recent campaigns, and it had no ill effect, though sometimes our troops were a little too slow in leaving their well-covered lines to assail the enemy in position or on retreat. Even our skirmishers were in the habit of rolling logs together, or of making a lunette of rails, with dirt in front, to cover their bodies; and, though it revealed their position, I cannot say that it worked a bad effect; so that, as a rule, it may safely be left to the men themselves. On the “defensive,” there is no doubt of the propriety of fortifying; but in the assailing army the general must watch closely to see that his men do not neglect an opportunity to drop his precautionary defenses, and act promptly on the “offensive” at every chance.

I have many a time crept forward to the skirmish-line to avail myself of the cover of the pickets’ “little fort,” to observe more closely some expected result; and always talked familiarly with the men, and was astonished to see how well they comprehended the general object, and how accurately they were informed of the state of facts existing miles away from their particular corps. Soldiers are very quick to catch the general drift and purpose of a campaign, and are always sensible when they are well commanded or well cared for. Once impressed with this fact, and that they are making progress, they bear cheerfully any amount of labor and privation. In camp, and especially in the presence of an active enemy, it is much easier to maintain discipline than in barracks in time of peace. Crime and breaches of discipline are much less frequent, and the necessity for courts-martial far less. The captain can usually inflict all the punishment necessary, and the colonel should always. The field-officers’ court is the best form for war, viz., one of the field-officers—the lieutenant-colonel or major—can examine the case and report his verdict, and the colonel should execute it. Of course, there are statutory offenses which demand a general court-martial, and these must be ordered by the division or corps commander; but the presence of one of our regular civilian judge-advocates in an army in the field would be a first-class nuisance, for technical courts always work mischief. Too many courts-martial in any command are evidence of poor discipline and inefficient officers.
For the rapid transmission of orders in an army covering a large space of ground, the magnetic
telegraph is by far the best, though habitually the paper and pencil, with good mounted orderlies,
answer every purpose. I have little faith in the signal-service by flags and torches, though we
always used them; because, almost invariably when they were most needed, the view was cut off
by intervening trees, or by mists and fogs. There was one notable instance in my experience,
when the signal-flags carried a message of vital importance over the heads of Hood’s army,
which had interposed between me and Allatoona, and had broken the telegraph-wires—as
recorded in Chapter XIX, but the value of the magnetic telegraph in war cannot be
exaggerated, as was illustrated by the perfect concert of action between the armies in Virginia
and Georgia during 1864. Hardly a day intervened when General Grant did not know the exact
state of facts with me, more than fifteen hundred miles away as the wires ran. So on the field a
thin insulated wire may be run on improvised stakes or from tree to tree for six or more miles in
a couple of hours, and I have seen operators so skillful, that by cutting the wire they would
receive a message with their tongues from a distant station. As a matter of course, the ordinary
commercial wires along the railways form the usual telegraph-lines for an array, and these are
easily repaired and extended as the army advances, but each army and wing should have a small
party of skilled men to put up the field-wire, and take it down when done. This is far better than
the signal-flags and torches. Our commercial telegraph-lines will always supply for war enough
skillful operators.

The value of railways is also fully recognized in war quite as much as, if not more so than, in
peace. The Atlanta campaign would simply have been impossible without the use of the railroads
from Louisville to Nashville—one hundred and eighty-five miles—from Nashville to
Chattanooga—one hundred and fifty-one miles—and from Chattanooga to Atlanta—one
hundred and thirty-seven miles. Every mile of this “single track” was so delicate, that one man
could in a minute have broken or moved a rail, but our trains usually carried along the tools and
means to repair such a break. We had, however, to maintain strong guards and garrisons at each
important bridge or trestle—the destruction of which would have necessitated time for rebuild-
ing. For the protection of a bridge, one or two log block-houses, two stories high, with a piece of
ordnance and a small infantry guard, usually sufficed. The block-house had a small parapet and
ditch about it, and the roof was made shot-proof by earth piled on. These points could usually be
reached only by a dash of the enemy’s cavalry, and many of these block-houses successfully
resisted serious attacks by both cavalry and artillery. The only block-house that was actually
captured on the main was the one described near Allatoona.

Our trains from Nashville forward were operated under military rules, and ran about ten miles an
hour in gangs of four trains of ten cars each. Four such groups of trains daily made one hundred
and sixty cars, of ten tons each, carrying sixteen hundred tons, which exceeded the absolute
necessity of the army, and allowed for the accidents that were common and inevitable. But, as I
have recorded, that single stem of railroad, four hundred and seventy-three miles long, supplied
an army of one hundred thousand men and thirty-five thousand animals for the period of one
hundred and ninety-six days, viz., from May 1 to November 12, 1864. To have delivered
regularly that amount of food and forage by ordinary wagons would have required thirty-six
thousand eight hundred wagons of six mules each, allowing each wagon to have hauled two tons
twenty miles each day, a simple impossibility in roads such as then existed in that region of
country. Therefore, I reiterate that the Atlanta campaign was an impossibility without these
railroads; and only then, because we had the men and means to maintain and defend them, in addition to what were necessary to overcome the enemy. Habitually, a passenger-car will carry fifty men with their necessary baggage. Box-cars, and even platform-cars, answer the purpose well enough, but they should always have rough board-seats. For sick and wounded men, box-cars filled with straw or bushes were usually employed. Personally, I saw but little of the practical working of the railroads, for I only turned back once as far as Resaca; but I had daily reports from the engineer in charge, and officers who came from the rear often explained to me the whole thing, with a description of the wrecked trains all the way from Nashville to Atlanta. I am convinced that the risk to life to the engineers and men on that railroad fully equaled that on the skirmish-line, called for as high an order of courage, and fully equaled it in importance. Still, I doubt if there be any necessity in time of peace to organize a corps specially to work the military railroads in time of war, because in peace these same men gain all the necessary experience, possess all the daring and courage of soldiers, and only need the occasional protection and assistance of the necessary train-guard, which may be composed of the furloughed men coming and going, or of details made from the local garrisons to the rear.

For the transfer of large armies by rail, from one theatre of action to another by the rear—the cases of the transfer of the Eleventh and Twelfth Corps—General Hooker, twenty-three thousand men—from the East to Chattanooga, eleven hundred and ninety-two miles in seven days, in the fall of 1863; and that of the Army of the Ohio—General Schofield, fifteen thousand men—from the valley of the Tennessee to Washington, fourteen hundred miles in eleven days, en route to North Carolina in January, 1865, are the best examples of which I have any knowledge, and reference to these is made in the report of the Secretary of War, Mr. Stanton, dated November 22, 1865.

Engineer troops attached to an army are habitually employed in supervising the construction of forts or field works of a nature more permanent than the lines used by the troops in motion, and in repairing roads and making bridges. I had several regiments of this kind that were most useful, but as a rule we used the infantry, or employed parties of freedmen, who worked on the trenches at night while the soldiers slept, and these in turn rested by day. Habitually the repair of the railroad and its bridges was committed to hired laborers, like the English navvies, under the supervision of Colonel W. W. Wright, a railroad-engineer, who was in the military service at the time, and his successful labors were frequently referred to in the official reports of the campaign.

For the passage of rivers, each army corps had a pontoon-train with a detachment of engineers, and, on reaching a river, the leading infantry division was charged with the labor of putting it down. Generally the single pontoon-train could provide for nine hundred feet of bridge, which sufficed; but when the rivers were very wide two such trains would be brought together, or the single train was supplemented by a trestle-bridge, or bridges made on crib-work, out of timber found near the place. The pontoons in general use were skeleton frames, made with a hinge, so as to fold back and constitute a wagon-body. In this same wagon were carried the cotton canvas cover, the anchor and chains, and a due proportion of the balks, chesses, and lashings. All the troops became very familiar with their mechanism and use, and we were rarely delayed by reason of a river, however broad. I saw, recently, in Aldershot, England, a very complete pontoon-train; the boats were sheathed with wood and felt, made very light; but I think these
were more liable to chafing and damage in rough handling than were our less expensive and rougher boats. On the whole, I would prefer the skeleton frame and canvas cover to any style of pontoon that I have ever seen.

In relation to guards, pickets, and vedettes, I doubt if any discoveries or improvements were made during our war, or in any of the modern wars in Europe. These precautions vary with the nature of the country and the situation of each army. When advancing or retreating in line of battle, the usual skirmish-line constitutes the picket-line, and may have “reserves,” but usually the main line of battle constitutes the reserve; and in this connection I will state that the recent innovation introduced into the new infantry tactics by General Upton [xiv] is admirable, for by it each regiment, brigade, and division deployed, sends forward as “skirmishers” the one man of each set of fours, to cover its own front, and these can be recalled or reënforced at pleasure by the bugle-signal.

For flank-guards and rear-guards, one or more companies should be detached under their own officers, instead of making up the guard by detailing men from the several companies. For regimental or camp guards, the details should be made according to existing army regulations; and all the guards should be posted early in the evening, so as to afford each sentinel or vedette a chance to study his ground before it becomes too dark.

In like manner as to the staff. The more intimately it comes into contact with the troops, the more useful and valuable it becomes. The almost entire separation of the staff from the line, as now practised by us, and hitherto by the French, has proved mischievous, and the great retinues of staff-officers with which some of our earlier generals began the war were simply ridiculous. I don’t believe in a chief of staff at all, and any general commanding an army, corps, or division, that has a staff-officer who professes to know more than his chief, is to be pitied. Each regiment should have a competent adjutant, quartermaster, and commissary, with two or three medical officers. Each brigade commander should have the same staff, with the addition of a couple of young aides-de-camp, habitually selected from the subalterns of the brigade, who should be good riders, and intelligent enough to give and explain the orders of their general.

The same staff will answer for a division. The general in command of a separate army, and of a corps d’armée, should have the same professional assistance, with two or more good engineers, and his adjutant-general should exercise all the functions usually ascribed to a chief of staff, viz., he should possess the ability to comprehend the scope of operations, and to make verbally and in writing all the orders and details necessary to carry into effect the views of his general, as well as to keep the returns and records of events for the information of the next higher authority, and for history. A bulky staff implies a division of responsibility, slowness of action, and indecision, whereas a small staff implies activity and concentration of purpose. The smallness of General Grant’s staff throughout the civil war forms the best model for future imitation. So of tents, officers’ furniture, etc., etc. In real war these should all be discarded, and an army is efficient for action and motion exactly in the inverse ratio of its impedimenta. Tents should be omitted altogether, save one to a regiment for an office, and a few for the division hospital. Officers should be content with a tent fly, improvising poles and shelter out of bushes. The tente d’abri, or shelter-tent, carried by the soldier himself, is all-sufficient. Officers should never seek for houses, but share the condition of their men.
A recent message (July 18, 1874) made to the French Assembly by Marshal MacMahon, President of the French Republic, submits a projé de loi, with a report prepared by a board of French generals on “army administration,” which is full of information, and is as applicable to us as to the French.[xv] I quote from its very beginning: “The misfortunes of the campaign of 1870 have demonstrated the inferiority of our system. . . . Two separate organizations existed with parallel functions—the ‘general’ more occupied in giving direction to his troops than in providing for their material wants, which he regarded as the special province of the staff, and the ‘intendant’ (staff) often working at random, taking on his shoulders a crushing burden of functions and duties, exhausting himself with useless efforts, and aiming to accomplish an insufficient service, to the disappointment of everybody. This separation of the administration and command, this coexistence of two wills, each independent of the other, which paralyzed both and annulled the dualism,” was condemned. It was decided by the board that this error should be “proscribed” in the new military system. The report then goes on at great length discussing the provisions of the “new law,” which is described to be a radical change from the old one on the same subject. While conceding to the Minister of War in Paris the general control and supervision of the entire military establishment primarily, especially of the annual estimates or budget, and the great depots of supply, it distributes to the commanders of the corps d’armée in time of peace, and to all army commanders generally in time of war, the absolute command of the money, provisions, and stores, with the necessary staff-officers to receive, issue, and account for them. I quote further: “The object of this law is to confer on the commander of troops whatever liberty of action the case demands. He has the power even to go beyond the regulations, in circumstances of urgency and pressing necessity. The extraordinary measures he may take on these occasions may require their execution without delay. The staff-officer has but one duty before obeying, and that is to submit his observations to the general, and to ask his orders in writing. With this formality his responsibility ceases, and the responsibility for the extraordinary act falls solely on the general who gives the order. The officers and agents charged with supplies are placed under the orders of the general in command of the troops, that is, they are obliged both in war and peace to obey, with the single qualification above named, of first making their observations and securing the written order of the general.”

With us, to-day, the law and regulations are that, no matter what may be the emergency, the commanding general in Texas, New Mexico, and the remote frontiers, cannot draw from the arsenals a pistol-cartridge, or any sort of ordnance-stores, without first procuring an order of the Secretary of War in Washington. The commanding general—though intrusted with the lives of his soldiers and with the safety of a frontier in a condition of chronic war—cannot touch or be trusted with ordnance-stores or property, and that is declared to be the law! Every officer of the old army remembers how, in 1861, we were hampered with the old blue army-regulations,[xvi] which tied our hands, and that to do any thing positive and necessary we had to tear it all to pieces—cut the red-tape, as it was called—a dangerous thing for an army to do, for it was calculated to bring the law and authority into contempt; but war was upon us, and overwhelming necessity overrides all law.

This French report is well worth the study of our army-officers, of all grades and classes, and I will only refer again, casually, to another part, wherein it discusses the subject of military correspondence: whether the staff-officer should correspond directly with his chief in Paris,
submitting to his general copies, or whether he should be required to carry on his correspondence through his general, so that the latter could promptly forward the communication, indorsed with his own remarks and opinions. The latter is declared by the board to be the only safe rule, because “the general should never be ignorant of any thing that is transpiring that concerns his command.”

In this country, as in France, Congress controls the great questions of war and peace, makes all laws for the creation and government of armies, and votes the necessary supplies, leaving to the President to execute and apply these laws, especially the harder task of limiting the expenditure of public money to the amount of the annual appropriations. The executive power is further subdivided into the seven great departments, and to the Secretary of War is confided the general care of the military establishment, and his powers are further subdivided into ten distinct and separate bureaus.

The chiefs of these bureaus are under the immediate orders of the Secretary of War, who, through them, in fact commands the army from “his office,” but cannot do so “in the field”—an absurdity in military if not civil law.

The subordinates of these staff-corps and departments are selected and chosen from the army itself, or fresh from West Point, and too commonly construe themselves into the élite, as made of better clay than the common soldier. Thus they separate themselves more and more from their comrades of the line, and in process of time realize the condition of that old officer of artillery who thought the army would be a delightful place for a gentleman if it were not for the d—d soldier; or, better still, the conclusion of the young lord in “Henry IV.,” who told Harry Percy (Hotspur) that “but for these vile guns he would himself have been a soldier.”[xvii] This is all wrong; utterly at variance with our democratic form of government and of universal experience; and now that the French, from whom we had copied the system, have utterly “proscribed” it, I hope that our Congress will follow suit. I admit, in its fullest force, the strength of the maxim that the civil law should be superior to the military in time of peace; that the army should be at all times subject to the direct control of Congress; and I assert that, from the formation of our Government to the present day, the Regular Army has set the highest example of obedience to law and authority; but, for the very reason that our army is comparatively so very small, I hold that it should be the best possible, organized and governed on true military principles, and that in time of peace we should preserve the “habits and usages of war,” so that, when war does come, we may not again be compelled to suffer the disgrace, confusion, and disorder of 1861.

The commanding officers of divisions, departments, and posts, should have the amplest powers, not only to command their troops, but all the stores designed for their use, and the officers of the staff necessary to administer them, within the area of their command; and then with fairness they could be held to the most perfect responsibility. The President and Secretary of War can command the army quite as well through these generals as through the subordinate staff-officers. Of course, the Secretary would, as now, distribute the funds according to the appropriation bills, and reserve to himself the absolute control and supervision of the larger arsenals and depots of supply. The error lies in the law, or in the judicial interpretation thereof, and no code of army regulations can be made that meets the case, until Congress, like the French Corps Législatif, utterly annihilates and “proscribes” the old law and the system which has grown up under it.
It is related of Napoleon that his last words were, “Tête-d’armée!” Doubtless, as the shadow of
death obscured his memory, the last thought that remained for speech was of some event when
he was directing an important “head of column.” I believe that every general who has handled
armies in battle must recall from his own experience the intensity of thought on some similar
occasion, when by a single command he had given the finishing stroke to some complicated
action; but to me recurs another thought that is worthy of record, and may encourage others who
are to follow us in our profession. I never saw the rear of an army engaged in battle but I feared
that some calamity had happened at the front—the apparent confusion, broken wagons, crippled
horses, men lying about dead and maimed, parties hastening to and fro in seeming disorder, and
a general apprehension of something dreadful about to ensue; all these signs, however, lessened
as I neared the front, and there the contrast was complete—perfect order, men and horses full of
confidence, and it was not unusual for general hilarity, laughing, and cheering. Although cannon
might be firing, the musketry clattering, and the enemy’s shot hitting close, there reigned a
general feeling of strength and security that bore a marked contrast to the bloody signs that had
drifted rapidly to the rear; therefore, for comfort and safety, I surely would rather be at the front
than the rear line of battle. So also on the march, the head of a column moves on steadily, while
the rear is alternately halting and then rushing forward to close up the gap; and all sorts of
rumors, especially the worst, float back to the rear. Old troops invariably deem it a special
privilege to be in the front—to be at the “head of column”—because experience has taught them
that it is the easiest and most comfortable place, and danger only adds zest and stimulus to this
fact.

The hardest task in war is to lie in support of some position or battery, under fire without the
privilege of returning it; or to guard some train left in the rear, within hearing but out of danger;
or to provide for the wounded and dead of some corps which is too busy ahead to care for its
own.

To be at the head of a strong column of troops, in the execution of some task that requires brain,
is the highest pleasure of war—a grim one and terrible, but which leaves on the mind and
memory the strongest mark; to detect the weak point of an enemy’s line; to break through with
vehemence and thus lead to victory; or to discover some key-point and hold it with tenacity; or to
do some other distinct act which is afterward recognized as the real cause of success. These all
become matters that are never forgotten. Other great difficulties, experienced by every general,
are to measure truly the thousand-and-one reports that come to him in the midst of conflict; to
preserve a clear and well-defined purpose at every instant of time, and to cause all efforts to
converge to that end.

To do these things he must know perfectly the strength and quality of each part of his own army,
as well as that of his opponent, and must be where he can personally see and observe with his
own eyes, and judge with his own mind. No man can properly command an army from the rear,
he must be “at its front;” and when a detachment is made, the commander thereof should be
informed of the object to be accomplished, and left as free as possible to execute it in his own
way; and when an army is divided up into several parts, the superior should always attend that
one which he regards as most important. Some men think that modern armies may be so
regulated that a general can sit in an office and play on his several columns as on the keys of a
piano; this is a fearful mistake. The directing mind must be at the very head of the army—must
be seen there, and the effect of his mind and personal energy must be felt by every officer and man present with it, to secure the best results. Every attempt to make war easy and safe will result in humiliation and disaster.

Lastly, mail facilities should be kept up with an army if possible, that officers and men may receive and send letters to their friends, this maintaining the home influence of infinite assistance to discipline. Newspaper correspondents with an army, as a rule, are mischievous. They are the world’s gossips, pick up and retail the camp scandal, and gradually drift to the headquarters of some general, who finds it easier to make reputation at home than with his own corps or division. They are also tempted to prophesy events and state facts which, to an enemy, reveal a purpose in time to guard against it. Moreover, they are always bound to see facts colored by the partisan or political character of their own patrons, and thus bring army officers into the political controversies of the day, which are always mischievous and wrong. Yet, so greedy are the people at large for war news, that it is doubtful whether any army commander can exclude all reporters, without bringing down on himself a clamor that may imperil his own safety. Time and moderation must bring a just solution to this modern difficulty.

Notes
i James Harrison Wilson (1837–1925) served successfully under Grant in the West and then commanded cavalry under Sherman. In the spring of 1865, Wilson’s three-division cavalry corps undertook a successful campaign from Tennessee, through Georgia, and into Alabama, routing Nathan Bedford Forrest’s cavalry and capturing both Selma and Montgomery.

ii The practice of having enlisted men elect officers was common in both North and South during the early phase of the war. Although this democratic approach could heighten unit cohesion, it soon became clear that many elected officers were poorly qualified, and both militaries began phasing out the practice by 1862, an important step toward full professionalization of the army.

iii The Confederate Congress enacted a draft law in the spring of 1862, the U.S. Congress in the spring of 1863. Both conscription acts allowed for men whose names were called to hire substitutes to fight in their place, a form of exemption that seemed to allow the wealthy to avoid service. Facing public opposition to the practice, the South repealed substitution in December 1863, the North in July 1864.

iv Dr. Edward Dominicus Kittoe (1814–1887), of Galena, Illinois, held a series of appointments during the war, eventually rising to chief medical inspector for the Army of the Cumberland and then the Army of the Tennessee.

v This phrase, governing the prosecution of courts-martial, dates to the Articles of War drafted in the 1776 journals of the Continental Congress, and became standard language in American military regulations.

vi The Battle at Peachtree Creek (July 20, 1864) was a last-ditch attempt by the Confederates, under Gen. John Bell Hood, to protect Atlanta from advancing federal armies under Gen. Sherman, George Thomas, and John Schofield. The fighting, in heavily wooded terrain, was fierce but confused, and resulted in heavy Southern losses. On July 22, from just outside Atlanta, Hood attacked again, but to little effect.

vii Brig. General Charles C. Walcutt (1838–1898), commander of the 2nd Brigade, 1st Division, XV Corps, Army of the Tennessee.

viii In the Franco-Prussian War (1870–1871), German forces captured Napoleon III and 100,000 men at the Battle of Sedan in September 1870, forced the surrender of the garrison of Marshal Bazaine in October, and laid siege to Paris, which capitulated in January 1871.

ix Dennis Hart Mahan (1802–1871), Professor of Tactics and Engineering at the United States Military Academy.

x In Chapter 19 (“The Capture of Atlanta”), Sherman discusses Confederate Gen. John Hood’s unsuccessful attempts to resist the Union occupation of Atlanta, including the destruction of railroads and disruption of communication lines.

xi John McAllister Schofield (1831–1906), after assisting Sherman in the Tennessee-Georgia campaign, especially with a major victory at the battle of Franklin, travelled to Wilmington in January 1865 to take command of the Department of North Carolina.
xi William Wierman Wright (1824–1882), a specialist in railroad construction and repair, assisted Sherman as head of the U.S. Military Railroad Construction Corps during Sherman’s 1865 operations.

xiii Balks and chesses were the timbers and planks used in a pontoon bridge.

xiv Emory Upton (1839–1881), former Union brigadier general, instructor at West Point, and author of *A New System of Infantry Tactics, Double and Single Rank, Adapted to American Topography and Improved Fire-arms* (1866).

xv The monarchist and field marshal Marie Edmé Patrice de MacMahon (1808–1893) became President of the Third Republic in 1873, two years after France’s ruinous defeat in the Franco-Prussian war.

xvi The United States Army Regulations of 1861 (revised in 1863) comprised 52 articles governing the details of military life and the conduct of both officers and enlisted men.

xvii Shakespeare, *The First Part of King Henry the Fourth*, Act I, scene iii, lines 63–64.