

REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE**Form Approved**
OMB No. 0704-0188

Public reporting burden for this collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden to Washington Headquarters Service, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington, VA 22202-4302, and to the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reduction Project (0704-0188) Washington, DC 20503.

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1. REPORT DATE (DD-MM-YYYY) 15-03-2011		2. REPORT TYPE Master of Military Studies Research Paper		3. DATES COVERED (From - To) September 2010 - March 2011	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE The First Battle of Fredericksburg: Lessons of Strategic and Operational Command and Control				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER N/A	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER N/A	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER N/A	
6. AUTHOR(S) Major Shannon M. Shea				5d. PROJECT NUMBER N/A	
				5e. TASK NUMBER N/A	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER N/A	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) USMC Command and Staff College Marine Corps University 2076 South Street Quantico, VA 22134-5068				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER N/A	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) N/A				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S) N/A	
				11. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY REPORT NUMBER N/A	
12. DISTRIBUTION AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES N/A					
14. ABSTRACT The period November 1862 through the first Battle of Fredericksburg witnessed a notable shift in the Army of the Potomac's leadership during the Civil War. President Lincoln relieved Major General McClellan for inaction following the Antietam Campaign and replaced him with Major General Burnside. This transition proved to be of interest to the modern military leaders because it displayed a textbook example of how strategic guidance from the National level has a direct impact upon the operational and tactical outcomes of campaigns and battles. Major General Burnside was unsure of his abilities and lacked the necessary strategic guidance from the President and Major General Halleck (General-in-Chief). These facts, coupled with two insubordinate Grand Division commanders and the inability to effectively design an operation, led to poorly communicated operational plans, which resulted in thousands of casualties on the field on December 13, 1862.					
15. SUBJECT TERMS N/A					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT UU	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 35	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON Marine Corps University / Command and Staff College
a. REPORT Unclass	b. ABSTRACT Unclass	c. THIS PAGE Unclass			19b. TELEPHONE NUMBER (Include area code) (703) 784-3330 (Admin Office)

*United States Marine Corps
Command and Staff College
Marine Corp University
2076 South Street
Marine Corps Combat Development Command
Quantico, VA 22134-50068*

MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

TITLE:

The First Battle of Fredericksburg: Lessons of Strategic and Operational Command and Control

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

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Executive Summary

Title: The First Battle of Fredericksburg: Lessons of Strategic and Operational Command and Control

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Thesis: The Union defeat in the Battle of Fredericksburg was the culmination of a disjointed strategy communicated from President Lincoln to Major General Burnside, coupled with a poorly conceived and executed operational design by Major General Burnside and his Grand Division Commanders.

Discussion: The period November 1862 through the first Battle of Fredericksburg witnessed a notable shift in the Army of the Potomac's leadership during the Civil War. President Lincoln relieved Major General McClellan for inaction following the Antietam Campaign and replaced him with Major General Burnside. This transition proved to be of interest to the modern military leaders because it displayed a textbook example of how strategic guidance from the National level has a direct impact upon the operational and tactical outcomes of campaigns and battles. Major General Burnside was unsure of his abilities and lacked the necessary strategic guidance from the President and Major General Halleck (General-in-Chief). These facts, coupled with two insubordinate Grand Division commanders and the inability to effectively design an operation, led to poorly communicated operational plans, which resulted in thousands of casualties on the field on December 13, 1862.

Conclusion: Contemporary military leaders must ensure that they issue clear guidance before beginning the operational design of a campaign or battle. For if the design is not effectively nested in the strategy, it is likely to have adverse effects on the conduct of operations.

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Introduction

In November 1862 the Army of the Potomac entered into a new era during which leadership of the army would change four times within the next 8 months, from Major General George B. McClellan, to Major General Ambrose E. Burnside, to Major General Joseph Hooker, and finally Major General George G. Meade. Organizational change can be difficult and those difficulties become compounded as new personalities take the helm and apply their leadership in an effort to accomplish strategic goals. This turbulent era had its highs and lows, yet in the end the Army of the Potomac matured significantly in the realm of strategic and operational level command and control between President Abraham Lincoln and the field commanders charged with campaigning. The Army of the Potomac's transition of command from Major General George B. McClellan to Major General Ambrose E. Burnside on November 7, 1862 initiated this new direction and provides an intriguing study of command and control over a short period of time. The timeframe from November 7 through December 15, 1862 yields a significant amount of strategic and operational command and control insights, culminating with the first Battle of Fredericksburg from December 11-15, 1862. The strategic communication from President Abraham Lincoln and Major General Henry Halleck, his General-in-Chief, to Major General Burnside offers material for analysis that transcends time and can provide insight for current and future generations of military leaders. Of additional significance is the operational communication between Major General Burnside and his three Grand Division Commanders, Major General William B. Franklin (Left Grand Division), Major General Joseph Hooker (Center Grand Division), and Major General Edwin V. Sumner (Right Grand Division). Using the lenses of terrain, intelligence, logistics, maneuver, simplicity of orders, main effort/supporting effort, it is possible to discern the Army of the Potomac's strategic and

operational command and control, their effects on the conduct of the campaign and Battle of Fredericksburg, and the insights they present to military leaders.

Effective analysis begins with setting the stage for the timeframe covered. This discourse starts with Major General Burnside assuming command of the Army of the Potomac and continues through the Union withdrawal north of the Rappahannock River following the Battle of Fredericksburg on December 15, 1862. First, an examination of key leaders' personalities (both Union and Confederate) is vital to understanding command relationships and their effects on decisions that were made. Second, an examination of key decisions during this timeframe permits the reader to conceptualize the situation faced by the Army of the Potomac as they prepared for and executed the first Battle of Fredericksburg. This paper argues that the Union defeat at the Battle of Fredericksburg, epitomized by the slaughter at Marye's Heights, was the culmination of a disjointed strategy communicated from President Lincoln to Major General Burnside, followed by a poorly planned, coordinated, and executed operational design passed from Major General Burnside to his Grand Division Commanders. An effective operational design must begin with a clear strategy for without it the perils of warfare are immeasurable. The first Battle of Fredericksburg provides a detailed case study of how the Army of the Potomac proved this statement. Prior to this analysis, it is necessary to examine the background of this campaign to increase understanding of the time, place, and circumstances in which the assessment of the campaign and battle occurs.

Burnside Takes Charge

Following the Battle of Antietam in September 1862 President Lincoln urged Major General McClellan to pursue the retreating Army of Northern Virginia. Major General McClellan's over-cautiousness earned an admonition from President Lincoln in October 1862.¹ Lincoln was exhausted with the conservative approach with which Major General McClellan was fighting the war. On November 7, 1862 Brigadier General Catharinus P. Buckingham from the War Department delivered two orders from President Lincoln, one to Major General Burnside appointing him to command of the Army of the Potomac, the other to Major General McClellan relieving him of command.² The rank of the messenger is intriguing and is directly attributed to the realization in Washington that Major General Burnside was likely to refuse the appointment, as he had twice before, and he might require a strong argument to persuade him to accept.³ Additionally, Major General McClellan's patriotism and loyalty were in doubt and the rank of the messenger was meant to ensure it was understood that the full weight of the President's authority was behind the order.⁴ In sum, President Lincoln's decision to relieve Major General McClellan indicated an important strategic shift, which would lead to numerous operational adjustments that were quickly made by Major General Burnside.

Burnside was initially very concerned with his lack of knowledge on the positions and relative strength of the Army of the Potomac.⁵ His recognition of this fact led him to conclude that in order to reduce the confusion of managing so many separate army corps he would combine two corps into one grand division. This reorganization resulted in the following table of organization. First Corps and Sixth Corps became the Left Grand Division, commanded by Major General Franklin. Third Corps and Fifth Corps became the Center Grand Division, commanded by Major General Hooker. Second Corps and Ninth Corps became the Right Grand

Division, commanded by Major General Sumner. The three Grand Divisions and Eleventh Corps, in reserve near Washington, totaled approximately 130,000 infantry, cavalry, and artillery. Twelfth Corps stood detached at Harpers Ferry and was 15,000 strong.⁶ Following adjustments to the Army of the Potomac Major General Burnside was charged with reporting his plans to Major General Halleck, President Lincoln's General-in-Chief.

Burnside proposed to change the line of operations from moving southward against Major General Longstreet's corps using the rickety single-track Orange and Alexandria Railroad as a supply line. Instead, he wanted to move the Army of the Potomac east to Fredericksburg, where he could open a more secure supply line along the lower Potomac River and then by railroad through Fredericksburg toward Richmond (Map 1).⁷ This line of thinking led President Lincoln to the assumption that Major General Burnside was making Richmond vice the enemy army the primary strategic objective.⁸ Major General Halleck traveled to Major General Burnside's headquarters in Warrenton to discuss this plan in greater detail and this face-to-face communication turned out to be counterproductive. Major General Halleck reported back to President Lincoln that the Army of the Potomac would cross the Rappahannock River at fords above Fredericksburg and seize the heights from the rear, which the President approved. Lincoln stated his belief that this plan would succeed if Major General Burnside moved rapidly; otherwise, not.⁹ The Army of the Potomac executed a rapid movement; however, it was toward a location that differed from the plan briefed to President Lincoln.

The Army of the Potomac marched 40 miles in two days and the first infantry units began occupying the heights north of the Rappahannock River in Falmouth on November 17, 1862. At this location the river was too deep to ford.¹⁰ This had been Burnside's plan all along; in fact, this plan tied directly into the logistics support he requested from Major General Halleck in the

form of pontoon bridges. He realized that he would need these bridges if the army were to cross the river at that site. Halleck misinterpreted their use and failed to act quickly. He understood that the bridging materials would be used to open up a more direct supply line once the Army of the Potomac had control of Fredericksburg.¹¹ Regardless of where the blame lies, the Army of the Potomac was staged en masse north of the Rappahannock River and Major General Burnside, recognizing that inaction was part of the reason his predecessor was relieved, continued to push for action. The pontoon bridges did not arrive until November 27, 1862.¹² By that time Lieutenant General Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia had reacted to the Union movement.

Confederate Dispositions

Prior to the Army of the Potomac's movement east, the Army of Northern Virginia had two corps; one bivouacked near Culpepper and the other near Winchester (Map 1). Together they numbered approximately 75,000 men. The Confederate cavalry totaled approximately 8000 men and guarded the fords south of the Union Army.¹³ The two corps commanders were Lieutenant General James Longstreet and Lieutenant General Thomas J. Jackson. Once the Army of the Potomac began to move, Lieutenant General Lee ordered Lieutenant General Longstreet to begin occupying Fredericksburg. The initial force was significantly reinforced once Lee realized that the Army of the Potomac was massed in Falmouth. By November 23, 1862 Lieutenant General Longstreet's corps occupied the Fredericksburg Heights and Lieutenant General Lee ordered Lieutenant General Jackson's corps to relocate east from the Blue Ridge Mountains.¹⁴ The Army of Northern Virginia did not initially plan to give battle along the ridges of Fredericksburg; Lee's plan was to fight along the North Anna River, where he believed the terrain was more in his favor. President Jefferson Davis did not approve this plan and

fortunately the slow progress made by the Army of the Potomac allowed the Army of Northern Virginia to prepare and await an attack.

Union Logistical Issues

Despite continuing logistical problems, specifically, the delay in the arrival of the pontoon bridges, Burnside continued to make slow progress as the Army of Northern Virginia continued to reinforce. The Army of the Potomac was determined to cross the Rappahannock River and considered several options. On December 9, 1862 Burnside issued preliminary orders outlining his plan. Ultimately, the Right Grand Division would cross bridges and move directly into the city of Fredericksburg, the Left Grand Division would cross downstream onto the plain, and the Center Grand Division would remain in reserve near Falmouth (Map 3). Major General Franklin's Left Grand Division would attack the Confederate right at Hamilton's Crossing and Major General Sumner's Right Grand Division would assault the heights beyond the town of Fredericksburg.¹⁵ The main effort rested with Franklin, as a breakthrough on the Confederate right would cause concern and require Longstreet's corps to react. Although this plan had many variables, Burnside was prepared to act and on December 10, 1862 the Army of the Potomac began laying bridges to cross the Rappahannock River. Before reviewing the execution of the battle, it is important to consider Burnside's purpose, method, and end state.

The purpose of the first Battle of Fredericksburg was to open a line of communication along the Richmond, Fredericksburg, & Potomac Railroad, from Fredericksburg to the Pamunkey River (Map 4). Supported by a new base of supply from this location, the Army of the Potomac could continue to advance onto Richmond. The method by which Burnside decided to conduct the battle was ultimately a frontal assault. The Army of the Potomac had superior

numbers in both infantry and artillery and remained blind to the actual Confederate strength south of the Rappahannock River.¹⁶ The end state of the battle from the Union perspective was ultimately that the Confederate Army would retreat and reinforce its defenses around Richmond. As the battle unfolded, it became more and more evident that this end state would not be reached.

Action In Fredericksburg

On December 11, 1862, the initial crossing of the Rappahannock River met several hours of Confederate resistance at the upper crossing into the city. However, the real struggle had yet to begin. On December 12, 1862 the Army of the Potomac continued moving the Left and Right Grand Divisions across the pontoon bridges and prepared for an attack. The additional time spent crossing allowed the Army of Northern Virginia to increase the strength of its defensive line from 18 regiments to 18 brigades.¹⁷ On December 13, 1862 Burnside issued orders for frontal assaults, one south of Fredericksburg along Prospect Hill (Franklin) and the other directly beyond the town of Fredericksburg along Marye's Heights (Sumner). The Army of the Potomac was staged to attack.

At 0900 Major General Meade's Division of the Left Grand Division began advancing and immediately came under fire from Major John Pelham's horse artillery, which did an effective job of delaying the advance for an hour. The division advanced upon a marshy area, near Hamilton's Crossing, which was not well defended and created a 600-yard gap in the Confederate lines (Map 5). The gap was intentional, as the ground was considered impassable. It was this gap that Meade was able to exploit. However, this success was short-lived, as Franklin did not reinforce the breakthrough.¹⁸ In fact, Franklin reported to Major General

Burnside that the enemy was thought to be reinforcing their lines along the Union left, which led him to issue the attack order to Sumner along the heights beyond the city.¹⁹ Unbeknownst to both men was the destructive path along which the Army of the Potomac had chosen to advance.

Major General Sumner ordered Major General French's division forward into the Confederate defenses that had been reinforced for three weeks by Lieutenant General Longstreet's corps. The Federal advance was directed into the strength of the Confederate lines, with infantry lined up behind the retaining wall along Sunken Road, supported by artillery along Marye's Heights (Map 6). Burnside was aware of the strength of the artillery along the heights, but failed to realize the advantage the infantry maintained behind the stone wall. Their inability to recognize these formidable defenses led to the failed attempts of seven divisions. As night fell on December 13, 1862 Burnside considered leading an assault the next morning with the 9th Corps, his old unit. However, the next morning Sumner, his trusted subordinate, revealed the universal skepticism that existed among all officers, himself included, on the likelihood of a successful assault on the heights.²⁰ On December 15, 1862 the Army of the Potomac withdrew all of its forces north of the Rappahannock River. The estimated casualties from the battle amounted to 12,653 for the Union and less than 5400 for the Confederates.²¹ With knowledge of the facts of the battle let us analyze the battle in more detail, beginning with the personalities who had a direct impact on command relationships.

Leadership Along the Rappahannock

Command relationships have a significant impact on the execution of military operations, and the first Battle of Fredericksburg provides an interesting opportunity to analyze key military leader personalities. This analysis will mainly focus on key leaders in the Union Army.

However, key Confederate leaders will also be considered due to the impact that they had on the battle. The leaders will be examined through life experiences, interpreted command philosophy, and important decisions made related to the first Battle of Fredericksburg. The command philosophy of a leader is an integral piece of knowledge that permits others to understand thought processes and the decisions leaders make. The senior officers in the Union Army will be the first examined.

Major General Halleck, the General-in-Chief of the Union Army, was an accomplished soldier, lawyer, statesman, and businessman. His breadth of abilities made him an excellent asset to President Lincoln and he knew he would command respect in Washington.²² Of additional significance was his writing of *Elements of Military Art and Science*, in large part a translation of Jomini's writings where he stressed the importance of interior lines of operation.²³ The Jominian theory of war was widely known and applied by officers during the Civil War and Major General Halleck was an expert in this regard. His command philosophy can be summed up with a direct quote when he told his subordinate Major General Pope, "I will not embarrass you with instructions."²⁴ Major General Halleck believed that the commander on the scene was directly responsible for the decisions required on the ground, as they were best able to understand the conditions the unit faced. He provided field commanders guidance before an engagement and supported them with reinforcements and supplies during execution.²⁵ This mindset set him at odds with the way President Lincoln envisioned his role as General-in-Chief. President Lincoln even referred to him as a first rate clerk, undoubtedly a severe assessment of a man with the abilities and experience such as Halleck.²⁶ Despite Halleck's command philosophy of providing field commanders with the supplies they required, he failed in providing the Army of the Potomac with the pontoon bridges they required to cross the Rappahannock River in a

timely manner. This delay proved to be of significant consequence as it gave the Army of Northern Virginia time to reinforce its lines along the Fredericksburg Heights. Halleck was also integral in the realm of strategic communication between President Lincoln and Burnside. Let us now move to consider the Army of the Potomac's commander, Major General Burnside.

Major General Burnside had the unique opportunity to be offered command of the Army of the Potomac three times. The first two times he refused, as he doubted that anyone but McClellan owned the organizational capacity to manage the largest army ever to walk the continent.²⁷ He accepted the third time after being threatened that Major General Hooker would be offered command if he refused.²⁸ That said, he recognized that he lacked the experience to lead an army of that size. His command philosophy is not as readily apparent as Major General Halleck's. His decision to maintain his headquarters at the Phillips House, vice closer to the action during the Battle of Fredericksburg, is an interesting decision. He trusted his Grand Division commanders to execute their orders without much supervision. He was not a man of ego, which was a far cry from the man he succeeded in command, McClellan. Burnside's decision process prior to and during the Battle of Fredericksburg can be linked to two recent events. First, was his recent lack of aggressiveness at Antietam, which contributed to the failure to achieve a decisive outcome. Second, the relief of McClellan due to a lack of offensive action taken following the Battle of Antietam, despite direction from Lincoln. Burnside's drive for action at Fredericksburg was made in haste, without the details of operational design required to succeed. Major General Burnside's Grand Division commanders are also important to consider.

Major General Sumner commanded the Right Grand Division during the Battle of Fredericksburg and was one of the oldest soldiers in the field during the Civil War, with service dating back to 1819. Of additional significance, Major General Sumner was a devoted lieutenant

to Major General Burnside, contrary to the other Grand Division commanders.²⁹ Major General Sumner's leadership philosophy was to provide as much input as possible to the plan, yet whether or not his input had any effect he would valiantly follow the orders of his superior. His recommendation to Major General Burnside concerning the operational maneuver of the Army of the Potomac, in retrospect, was sound and, although considered by his commander, was eventually disregarded. His scheme of maneuver was to mass all of the Union forces on the plain below the town, cross the Rappahannock, and turn the right flank of the Confederate line. This would avoid a frontal assault against fortified positions along key terrain.³⁰ Major General Sumner's loyalty to Major General Burnside was costly and the end state of his Grand Division following the Battle of Fredericksburg proved that had he been sterner in his conviction regarding the operational design, the outcome could have been different. Major General Franklin commanded the Left Grand Division during the battle and his loyalty to Major General Burnside was problematic.

Major General Franklin was a staunch opponent of Major General Burnside and his personal feelings towards his commander directly affected his action during the Battle of Fredericksburg. His previous military career was impressive; he graduated first in his class from West Point in 1843. His disdain for Major General Burnside can be directly attributed to his failed attack on the Confederate right, on December 13, 1862, and his negative leadership philosophy can be directly tied to the statement he made to the Joint Congressional Committee on the Conduct of the War, during testimony shortly following the Battle of Fredericksburg. Specifically, he alluded to the fact that there was not a man in his command who did not believe that everything Major General Burnside would undertake would fail.³¹ Understanding this command climate and not taking action to counter it is irresponsible. During the Battle of

Fredericksburg, Major General Franklin was given verbal orders from Major General Burnside on December 12, 1862, at which time he understood that his unit was the main effort of the attack the following day. On the morning of December 13th, Burnside followed up his verbal orders with a written order that led Franklin to understand that his mission was now more of a diversion (supporting effort), vice an all out attack on the Confederate right.³² His actions that morning reflected his understanding of his orders and although Meade's attack initially broke the Confederate lines, Franklin failed to exploit the advance with reinforcements and the Confederates quickly repulsed the attack. Confusion on the battlefield is common. However, it is incumbent upon leaders to ensure that they are clear on the actions they are ordered to take. Franklin was not clear regarding his assigned tasks and their purposes, and he failed to ask. Another Union leader that was opposed to Major General Burnside commanding the Army of the Potomac was Major General Hooker.

Major General Hooker was an ambitious leader who readily spoke out directly against his superiors. This was common during his service under Major General McClellan and it continued under Major General Burnside. He exuded confidence and inspired his men. However, his lack of tact was consistently working against his aspirations to attain command of the Army of the Potomac. He commanded the Center Grand Division during the Battle of Fredericksburg and was charged with protecting the bridges and acting as a reserve during the battle. Late in the day on December 13th he was ordered to send his men towards Marye's Heights. He initially balked; however, he reluctantly sent his men in until he determined that he lost as many men as his orders required of him.³³ Following the battle he spoke out against Major General Burnside and made a statement to *The New York Times* saying that nothing would go right until the North had a dictator, and the sooner the better. This quote was referenced in a letter by President Lincoln to

Major General Hooker following his appointment to command of the Army of the Potomac in January 1863, stating that only successful generals can set up dictatorship, which he was willing to risk.³⁴ The last Union general that will be discussed is Major General Meade, due to his involvement at the Battle of Fredericksburg and how it may have shaped his future post as commander of the Army of the Potomac at Gettysburg.

Major General Meade was a division commander under Major General Sumner in the Left Grand Division. His division was the main effort against the Confederate right on December 13th. Major General Meade's actions that day were unsupported and following the battle he stated, "did they think my division could whip Lee's whole army?"³⁵ His command philosophy can be viewed as leadership through counsel. He would gather subordinates and guide a discussion that would eventually lead to the action that would be taken. His use of this technique at Gettysburg was remarkable and ensured that all subordinates understood the overall plan, allowing each unit to quickly reinforce another if need be, unlike his experience at Fredericksburg.³⁶ The Confederate leaders that had a direct impact upon the Battle of Fredericksburg are as follows.

Lieutenant General Robert E. Lee is the most famous Confederate general of the Civil War. His statesman-like persona, coupled with his prowess on the battlefield, made him a force to be reckoned with. His long and action filled career enabled him to have a depth of experience uncommon to the others. Once he realized the Army of the Potomac was on the move towards Fredericksburg he notified Confederate President Jefferson Davis that he wanted to give battle along the North Anna River, for he believed that the terrain offered more of a military advantage (Map 2). President Davis did not want to sacrifice Confederate land for this advantage and directed the Army of Northern Virginia to give battle in Fredericksburg. Lee realized that it was

likely that his defenses along the heights beyond the town of Fredericksburg would hold, but he also realized that he would be unable to exploit a Union failure due to the military advantage the Union Army maintained along the Stafford Heights. Lieutenant General Lee formed a formidable line in Fredericksburg and from his command post was able to see and control the entire battle. He stated to Lieutenant General Longstreet, commander of the 1st Corps, "it is well that war is so terrible, lest we should grow too fond of it."³⁷ Lieutenant General Longstreet was instrumental in preparing the defensive line prior to the Battle of Fredericksburg.

Lieutenant General Longstreet was a leader of strategic and tactical competence. He was adept at the employment of the operational offense along with the tactical defense, and this was clearly displayed in the Battle of Fredericksburg.³⁸ Also of note is that Lieutenant General Longstreet was adept at the use of his robust staff, and their utilization was exceptional in keeping subordinate commanders informed of their mission and his location if he was needed.³⁹ One of Lieutenant General Longstreet's artillery officers, when asked if more cannons were required upon Marye's Heights stated, "a chicken could not live on that field when we open up on it."⁴⁰ This statement proved truthful against the Union advances on December 13, 1862.

Lieutenant General Jackson commanded the Army of Northern Virginia's 2nd Corps and occupied the Confederate right at the Battle of Fredericksburg. His unit was last to take the field and was not fully up until the morning of December 13, 1862, which proved to be just in time according to the Union attack timeline. His men revered Lieutenant General Jackson and they knew that although he would drive them hard he had their best interests in mind. Contrary to his counterpart in the 1st Corps, his use of the staff was not nearly as elaborate, in large part due to his secretive and uncommunicative nature.⁴¹ This trait did not hinder success in the Battle of Fredericksburg. His men, although tired, held the line and did not allow the Federal Left Grand

Division to turn the flank of the Confederate line. Now that the key leaders involved in the Battle of Fredericksburg have been highlighted, it is important to understand the key decisions that were taken by the leaders of the Army of the Potomac.

Union Key Decisions

Military leaders are paid to make decisions and this statement could not be more truthful for Union leadership, particularly during the Battle of Fredericksburg. The focus of the decisions reviewed in this discourse is at the strategic and operational levels of war. President Lincoln and Major General Halleck provided strategic direction to Major General Burnside and he in turn provided operational direction to his Grand Division commanders. It is in this transition from strategy to operations where the author believes there was significant failure. This failure became completely clear on December 13, 1862 when Union casualties mounted and all of the Grand Division commanders were opposed to Major General Burnside continuing the attack. Leading up to and during the battle, a litany of communication breakdowns took place, which may have been avoidable had clear orders and guidance emanated from Washington.

Lack of Confidence... and Guidance

The decision to place Major General Burnside in command of the Army of the Potomac was a miscue that could have been salvaged had he immediately been given clear strategic guidance. A leader reluctant to accept a role that increases his responsibility requires two things. The first is to not be granted the opportunity at all and the second is clear guidance with over the shoulder supervision if he is still deemed suitable for command. Understandably, in modern days of mission orders this mindset may be seen as micromanaging, but knowing your subordinates is an imperative for all leaders. Major General Burnside, to his credit, made it

known that he did not believe he was fit to command the Army of the Potomac, so much so that he only accepted the responsibility the third time it was offered, with the threat of a man he loathed taking command if he declined, Major General Hooker. Once he accepted this post he was directed to apprise Major General Halleck of his operational plans.⁴² This is where the command philosophy of Major General Halleck, one of leaving decisions to commanders in the field, was to the Army of the Potomac's detriment. Both President Lincoln and Major General Halleck's failure to recognize that Major General Burnside needed direction permitted the Army of the Potomac to chart a course toward disaster at Fredericksburg. President Lincoln's overall strategy was clear, particularly one of pursuing a hard war against both Confederate Armies and southern civilians, and he was determined to find generals who would successfully carry out this strategy.⁴³ President Lincoln's perspective was that the gloves were off, but Major General Halleck did not embrace the role of being the bridge between this strategy and the operations on the ground, despite his proximity to the frontlines. To Major General Burnside's credit he acted decisively and quickly decided on a course of action. This is where Major General Halleck continued to falter in the execution of his duties.

Poorly Translated Plans

Major General Burnside decided to change the avenue of advance that Major General McClellan had charted for the Army of the Potomac. He decided to change the line of operations from a southward move against Lieutenant General Longstreet's corps using the single track Orange Alexandria Railroad as his supply line. Instead he chose to shift towards Fredericksburg where he could open a more secure supply route via the lower Potomac and the Fredericksburg-Richmond Railroad (Map 1).⁴⁴ In spite of Major General Halleck's dislike of this plan he brought the operations to President Lincoln for approval. The problem was that Major General

Burnside's actual plan was lost in translation somewhere between his conversation with Major General Halleck and Halleck's conversation with President Lincoln. The plan described to President Lincoln consisted of the majority of the Army of the Potomac crossing the Rappahannock River above the town of Fredericksburg and seizing the heights from the rear, when in actuality, Major General Burnside requested the pontoon bridges specifically to cross in the vicinity of Fredericksburg. Hence, President Lincoln assented to an erroneous plan when he counseled Burnside to move rapidly, which he did.⁴⁵ It is at this point that a failure in communication between two men, Major General's Halleck and Burnside, left the Army of the Potomac stranded north along Stafford Heights, allowing time for the Confederates to build up their defenses along the heights beyond the town of Fredericksburg. The logistics involved in bridging operations is a daunting task even in modern times. During the Civil War the task was much more difficult. Therefore, the fact that this significant logistical requirement was lost in translation between the two leaders is even more disconcerting; especially since it is clearly articulated in a letter from Major General Burnside to Major General Halleck dated November 9, 1862.⁴⁶ Fortunately for both men, President Lincoln was disinterested in assigning blame and more concerned with continuing operations prior to winter.⁴⁷ That said, President Lincoln did provide strategic guidance to Major General Burnside, yet the guidance was conflicting.

Conflicting Guidance

Occasionally, strategic guidance has the propensity to be vague. However, when it is conflicting, problems can emerge that are difficult to overcome. On November 26, 1862, President Lincoln stated to Major General Burnside that he wanted to prevent the enemy from falling back, accumulating strength as he went into his entrenchments at Richmond.⁴⁸ The President went further and outlined a complicated operational plan where two auxiliary forces

would move with gunboat support to the head of navigation on the Rappahannock and Pamunkey Rivers south of Fredericksburg to trap Lieutenant General Lee in a pincers movement as he retreated from Major General Burnside's main attack at Fredericksburg (Map 7).⁴⁹ Both Major Generals Halleck and Burnside deterred President Lincoln from this course of action due to the time it would take to assemble the auxiliary forces and the fact that it was too intricate a plan. The President conceded and told Major General Burnside not to think that he must be hasty about fighting his legions.⁵⁰ This strategic meeting between President Lincoln and Major General Burnside, in hindsight, leaves a cause for concern. The President recognized the fact that the pontoon bridges significantly delayed the timeline for the Army of the Potomac to advance; therefore, he offered his thoughts on an operational design. In doing this, he failed to realize the magnitude of his words. When a general in the field receives operational plans from his superior that is a signal that action must be taken. The fact that the President closed the conversation by stating not to take action in haste did not matter. Major General Burnside likely did not even consider that guidance in the least, whereas, President Lincoln could not have been more sincere. The two parted ways in a disconnected fashion and Major General Burnside continued to strive for an attack before winter was too far advanced. President Lincoln should have ensured that his commander was clear on the point that he should not rush into an attack, just as Burnside should have requested clarity on the President's statement regarding haste. The insight that this situation offers is that it is incumbent upon military leaders to ensure that they comprehend the guidance of their superiors, for if they do not, it can lead to a series of actions which are not in line with the higher headquarters intent. Burnside continued to plan and on December 9-10, 1862 he issued preliminary orders to subordinates. However, not all key leaders were present when the final decision on the operational design was made.

Council of War, Partial

Major General Burnside frequently spoke with subordinate generals regarding the operational design that the Army of the Potomac planned to take during December 1862. Of interest is the fact that during several planning meetings Major Generals Hooker and Franklin were not present. Therefore, all key leaders did not agree upon decisions made and some were simply briefed after the meeting of the action that the Army of the Potomac would take. At a minimum the three Grand Division commanders should have been present for all meetings concerning key decisions of operational design. Major General Burnside further alienated himself from two of his key subordinate leaders when he did not ensure that they were involved in the planning process. Commanders must understand their command climate, Major General Burnside did, but he failed to set the Army of the Potomac up for success by getting his key leaders involved, especially those key leaders who did not think too highly of him. Of his three top subordinates Major General Burnside could only trust Major General Sumner.⁵¹ Major General Franklin's action on December 13, 1862 might have been different if he had been more involved in the plan prior to its execution. Interestingly, when the actions in the field at Fredericksburg progressed President Lincoln raised his concern to Major General Halleck.

Word from Haupt

On December 12, 1862 President Lincoln was waiting for word from the field and Brigadier General Herman Haupt returned from Fredericksburg with some interesting news. At 9 pm Brigadier General Haupt informed President Lincoln that the situation was dangerous and Major General Burnside would only maim his army by charging the Confederate fortifications.⁵² The President and Brigadier General Haupt immediately went to Major General Halleck's

residence and informed him of the report from the front lines in Fredericksburg. President Lincoln ordered his General-in-Chief to telegraph Major General Burnside and order him to withdraw the Army of the Potomac to the north side of the Rappahannock River.⁵³ Halleck's subsequent behavior failed to live up to what Lincoln needed from his General-in-Chief. After a brief deliberation, Halleck informed the President that he refused to issue that order and that if President Lincoln wanted to stop the attack he must direct Major General Burnside himself.⁵⁴ The situation, which evolved from unclear strategic guidance, had turned dire. President Lincoln knew it, but he did not stop it. This situation offers an example of mission creep. The mission continued to evolve following the President's meeting with Burnside on November 26, 1862 and it had progressed past the point of reconsideration, despite the President's lack of confidence in success. At the same time the President was in doubt of the Army of the Potomac's fate, Major General Burnside was issuing verbal orders to Major General Franklin, commander of the Left Grand Division.

Dilemma: Verbal or Written Orders

Orders can be issued in various forms, specifically verbal and written. Either method is fine as long as the commander expected to execute the plan understands them. Major General Burnside provided clear verbal orders to Major General Franklin, specifically, ordering him to conduct an all-out assault on the Confederate right.⁵⁵ The commander of the Left Grand Division became confused the morning of December 13, 1862 when he received written orders from Major General Burnside that seemed to reduce his role in the plan of attack. The specifics of the order that led to the confusion were that Major General Franklin was to position his entire command for rapid movement down the Old Richmond Road, and immediately send out a division at least to pass below Smithfield, to seize if possible, the height near Captain

Hamilton's, on this side of the Massaponax River; the order closed with keep your whole command in readiness to move at once, as soon as the fog lifts.⁵⁶ Major General Franklin never questioned this order, even though he felt it was in stark contrast with the verbal orders he discussed with Major General Burnside the previous evening. He executed the attack in the manner he deemed appropriate but at the crucial time, specifically during Major General Meade's breakthrough, he failed to reinforce and exploit progress. The failure to exploit was exacerbated by the telegraph message that Brigadier General Hardie sent back to Major General Burnside outlining the situation faced by the Left Grand Division.

Loss of Control

Brigadier General Hardie was sent forward to Major General Franklin's headquarters on the morning of December 13, 1862. He was the messenger with the written order from Major General Burnside. Additionally, his orders were to remain with the Left Grand Division in order to telegraph news of their progress back to Major General Burnside.⁵⁷ Rather than assess the situation himself, he permitted Major General Franklin to dictate the situation reports that were sent back to the Army of the Potomac's commander. The reports sent back to Major General Burnside provided news that the Confederates were massing on the Union left and that it seemed as if an attack were imminent.⁵⁸ These dispatches caused Major General Burnside to believe that the Confederates were reinforcing their extreme right from the men in front of Major General Sumner along the heights behind Fredericksburg. Major General Burnside ordered the Right Grand Division to advance based on poor intelligence from Brigadier General Hardie and the Army of the Potomac paid dearly. Following that, additional orders were sent to Major General Franklin ordering him to attack with his whole force due to the fact that the Right Grand Division was hard pressed. Despite these instructions, the commander of the Left Grand

Division took no action.⁵⁹ This is an example of a commander losing control of his units and it all started with poor operational communication that caused a subordinate commander (Franklin) to become confused regarding his orders, which differed from the night before. Once this confusion set in, Burnside was ineffective in getting the Left Grand Division to advance.

Conclusion

Following the Battle of Fredericksburg, Major General Burnside stated that the President, Secretary of War, and Major General Halleck ultimately left the whole management of the campaign in his hands, without giving him orders, therefore, he was responsible for the actions of the Army of the Potomac during the Battle of Fredericksburg.⁶⁰ The fact that Major General Burnside accepted responsibility for the actions the Army of the Potomac took at Fredericksburg is laudable, while at the same time disturbing. He basically stated that strategic guidance from President Lincoln was non-existent and that the actions of the army were left entirely up to him. This is an interesting point considering that Major General Burnside was the first one to recognize his inability to effectively lead an army of that size, a fact which he made known on numerous occasions to his superiors. Whether he was the right man for the job is irrelevant. The relevance lies in the fact that without a clear strategy, operational design suffers. Further, the conduct of the battle is riddled with command, control, and communications problems. Initially, the Army of the Potomac faced logistical miscues, specifically the absence of the pontoon bridges, which significantly impeded their ability to quickly maneuver south of the Rappahannock River. Next, Major General Burnside failed to effectively command and control the Army of the Potomac, during both the planning and execution of the battle. The orders from Major General Burnside to his Grand Division commanders, specifically Major General Franklin, proved to be cumbersome and confusing, leading to a weak effort along the

Confederate right. Following that, poor intelligence plagued Major General Burnside and gave him a false understanding of what was actually occurring on the front lines. Military leaders cannot allow the control of their unit to slip from their grasp. Burnside put forth his best effort, but his subordinate commanders, specifically Hooker and Franklin, did not support the plan they were executing, which ultimately led to a terrible defeat in Fredericksburg. The Battle of Fredericksburg is an essential case study for military leaders. It is filled with issues, specifically: the effects of national strategy (or lack thereof), poor command relationships, miscommunications, terrain, logistics, and intelligence. All of which play an essential role in the military operations of today.

Notes

- ¹ McPherson, James. *Tried By War*. (New York: Penguin Books, 2008), 136.
- ² Waugh, John C. *Lincoln and McClellan: The Troubled Partnership Between A President and His General*. (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), 180.
- ³ Marvel, William. *The Battle of Fredericksburg Civil War Series*. P2
- ⁴ Waugh, John C. *Lincoln and McClellan: The Troubled Partnership Between A President and His General*. (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), 180.
- ⁵ Waugh, John C. *Lincoln and McClellan: The Troubled Partnership Between A President and His General*. (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), 182.
- ⁶ Marvel, William. *The Battle of Fredericksburg Civil War Series*. (Eastern National, 2007), 3.
- ⁷ McPherson, James. *Tried By War*. (New York: Penguin Books, 2008), 142.
- ⁸ McPherson, James. *Tried By War*. (New York: Penguin Books, 2008), 143.
- ⁹ McPherson, James. *Tried By War*. (New York: Penguin Books, 2008), 143.
- ¹⁰ McPherson, James. *Tried By War*. (New York: Penguin Books, 2008), 143.
- ¹¹ McPherson, James. *Tried By War*. (New York: Penguin Books, 2008), 143.
- ¹² Marvel, William. *The Battle of Fredericksburg Civil War Series*. (Eastern National, 2007), 5.
- ¹³ Marvel, William. *The Battle of Fredericksburg Civil War Series*. (Eastern National, 2007), 4.
- ¹⁴ Marvel, William. *The Battle of Fredericksburg Civil War Series*. (Eastern National, 2007), 7.
- ¹⁵ Marvel, William. *The Battle of Fredericksburg Civil War Series*. (Eastern National, 2007), 8.
- ¹⁶ Ballard, Ted *Fredericksburg Staff Ride*. (U.S. Army Center of Military History), i.
- ¹⁷ Marvel, William. *The Battle of Fredericksburg Civil War Series*. (Eastern National, 2007), 17.
- ¹⁸ Marvel, William. *The Battle of Fredericksburg Civil War Series*. (Eastern National, 2007), 28.
- ¹⁹ Marvel, William. *The Battle of Fredericksburg Civil War Series*. (Eastern National, 2007), 33.
- ²⁰ Marvel, William. *The Battle of Fredericksburg Civil War Series*. (Eastern National, 2007), 50.
- ²¹ Marvel, William. *The Battle of Fredericksburg Civil War Series*. (Eastern National, 2007), 53.
- ²² Ambrose, Stephen E. *Halleck: Lincoln's Chief of Staff*. (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 10.
- ²³ Ambrose, Stephen E. *Halleck: Lincoln's Chief of Staff*. (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 7.
- ²⁴ Ambrose, Stephen E. *Halleck: Lincoln's Chief of Staff*. (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 38.
- ²⁵ Ambrose, Stephen E. *Halleck: Lincoln's Chief of Staff*. (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 38.

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- ²⁶ Waugh, John C. *Lincoln and McClellan: The Troubled Partnership Between A President and His General*. (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), 165.
- ²⁷ Marvel, William. *The Battle of Fredericksburg Civil War Series*. (Eastern National, 2007), 2.
- ²⁸ Hebert, Walter H. *Fighting Joe Hooker*. (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1944), 152.
- ²⁹ Marvel, William. *The Battle of Fredericksburg Civil War Series*. (Eastern National, 2007), 8.
- ³⁰ Marvel, William. *The Battle of Fredericksburg Civil War Series*. (Eastern National, 2007), 8.
- ³¹ Hebert, Walter H. *Fighting Joe Hooker*. (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1944), 161.
- ³² Marvel, William. *The Battle of Fredericksburg Civil War Series*. (Eastern National, 2007), 22.
- ³³ Hebert, Walter H. *Fighting Joe Hooker*. (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1944), 159.
- ³⁴ McPherson, James. *Tried By War*. (New York: Penguin Books, 2008), 164.
- ³⁵ Sauers, Richard A. *Meade: Victor of Gettysburg*. (Washington, DC: Brassey's Inc, 2003), 37.
- ³⁶ Stackpole, Edward J. *They Met at Gettysburg*. (Harrisburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1956), 197.
- ³⁷ McPherson, James M. *Battle Cry of Freedom*. (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 572.
- ³⁸ DiNardo, R.L., ed. "James Longstreet, the Modern Soldier, A Broad Assessment" *James Longstreet: The Man, the Soldier, the Controversy*. (Pennsylvania: Combined Publishing, 1998), 25.
- ³⁹ DiNardo, R.L., ed. "Longstreet and Jackson Compared." *James Longstreet: The Man, the Soldier, the Controversy*. (Pennsylvania: Combined Publishing, 1998), Chpt 5.
- ⁴⁰ McPherson, James M. *Battle Cry of Freedom*. (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 571.
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- ⁴² Waugh John C. *Lincoln and McClellan: The Troubled Partnership Between A President and His General*. (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), 180.
- ⁴³ Gienapp, William E. *Abraham Lincoln and Civil War America*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 121.
- ⁴⁴ McPherson, James M. *Tried By War*. (New York: Penguin Books, 2008), 143.
- ⁴⁵ McPherson, James M. *Tried By War*. (New York: Penguin Books, 2008), 143.
- ⁴⁶ *War of the Rebellion Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, Series I. Vol. 21*. (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1971), 100.
- ⁴⁷ McPherson, James M. *Tried By War*. (New York: Penguin Books, 2008), 144.
- ⁴⁸ McPherson, James M. *Tried By War*. (New York: Penguin Books, 2008), 144.
- ⁴⁹ McPherson, James M. *Tried By War*. (New York: Penguin Books, 2008), 144.
- ⁵⁰ Marvel, William. *The Battle of Fredericksburg Civil War Series*. (Eastern National, 2007), 7.

⁵¹ Marvel, William "Making of a Myth: Ambrose Burnside and the Union High Command at Fredericksburg." *The Fredericksburg Campaign*. (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 4.

⁵² Ambrose, Stephen E. *Halleck: Lincoln's Chief of Staff*. (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 96.

⁵³ Ambrose, Stephen E. *Halleck: Lincoln's Chief of Staff*. (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 97.

⁵⁴ Ambrose, Stephen E. *Halleck: Lincoln's Chief of Staff*. (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 97.

⁵⁵ Marvel, William. *The Battle of Fredericksburg Civil War Series*. (Eastern National, 2007), 22.

⁵⁶ *War of the Rebellion Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, Series I. Vol. 21*. (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1971), 71. "General Hardie will carry this dispatch to you, and remain with you during the day. The general commanding directs that you keep your whole command in position for a rapid movement down the old Richmond road, and you will send out at once a division at least to pass below Smithfield, to seize, if possible, the height near Captain Hamilton's, on this side of the Massaponax, taking care to keep it well supported and its line of retreat open. He has ordered another column of a division or more to be moved from General Sumner's command up the Plank road to its intersection with the Telegraph road, where they will divide, with a view to seizing the heights on both of these roads. Holding these two heights, with the heights near Captain Hamilton's, will, he hopes, compel the enemy to evacuate the whole ridge between these points. He makes these moves by columns distant from each other, with a view of avoiding the possibility of a collision of our own forces, which might occur in a general movement during the fog. Two of General Hooker's divisions are in your rear, at the bridges, and will remain there as supports. Copies of instructions given to Generals Sumner and Hooker will be forwarded to you by an orderly very soon. You will keep your whole command in readiness to move at once, as soon as the fog lifts. The watchword, which, if possible, should be given to every company, will be "Scott." I have the honor to be, general, your obedient servant."

⁵⁷ Marvel, William "Making of a Myth: Ambrose Burnside and the Union High Command at Fredericksburg." *The Fredericksburg Campaign*. (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 11.

⁵⁸ *War of the Rebellion Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, Series I. Vol. 21*. (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1971), 91.

⁵⁹ *War of the Rebellion Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, Series I. Vol. 21*. (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1971), 91.

⁶⁰ *War of the Rebellion Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, Series I. Vol. 21*. (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1971), 67.

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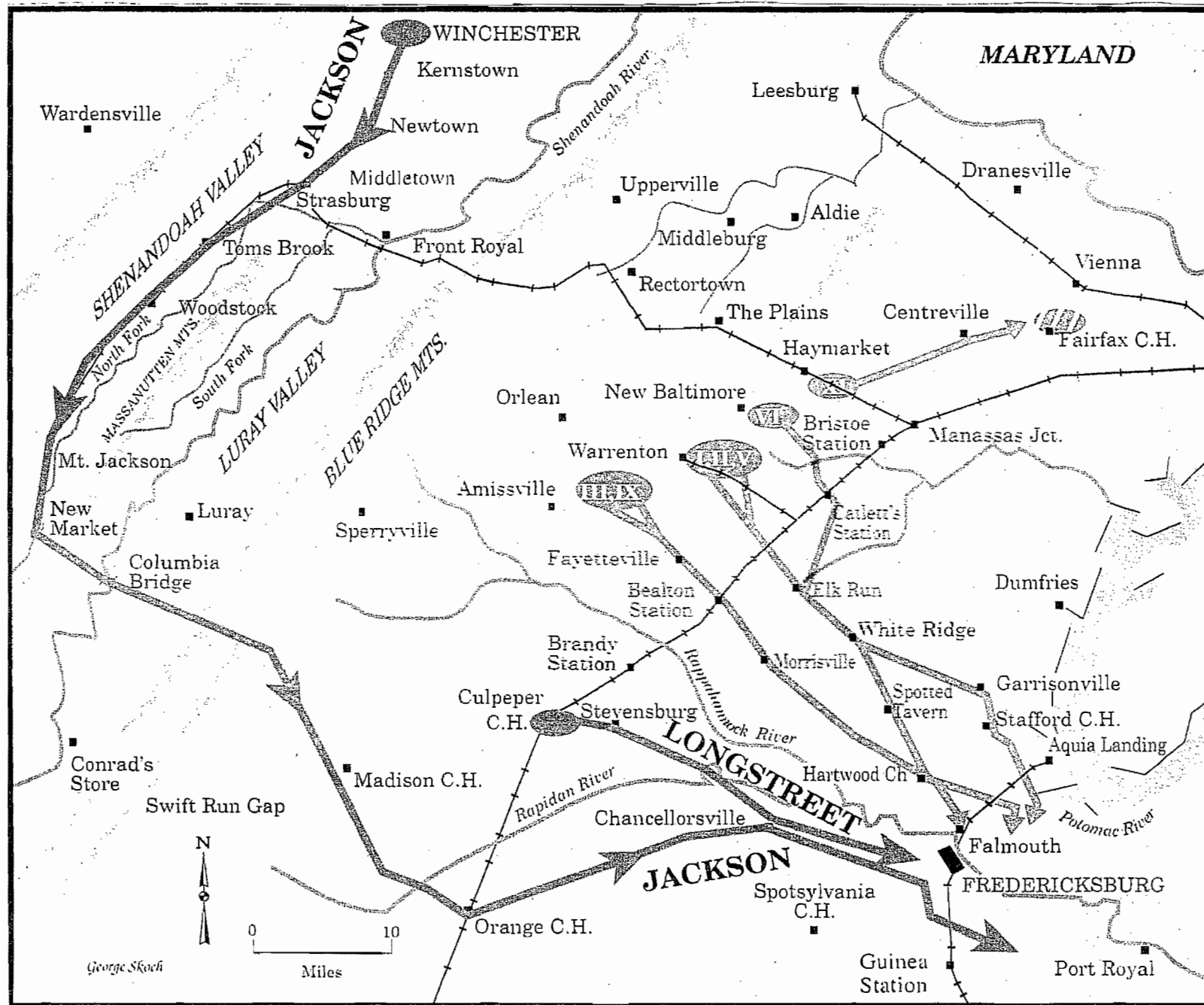
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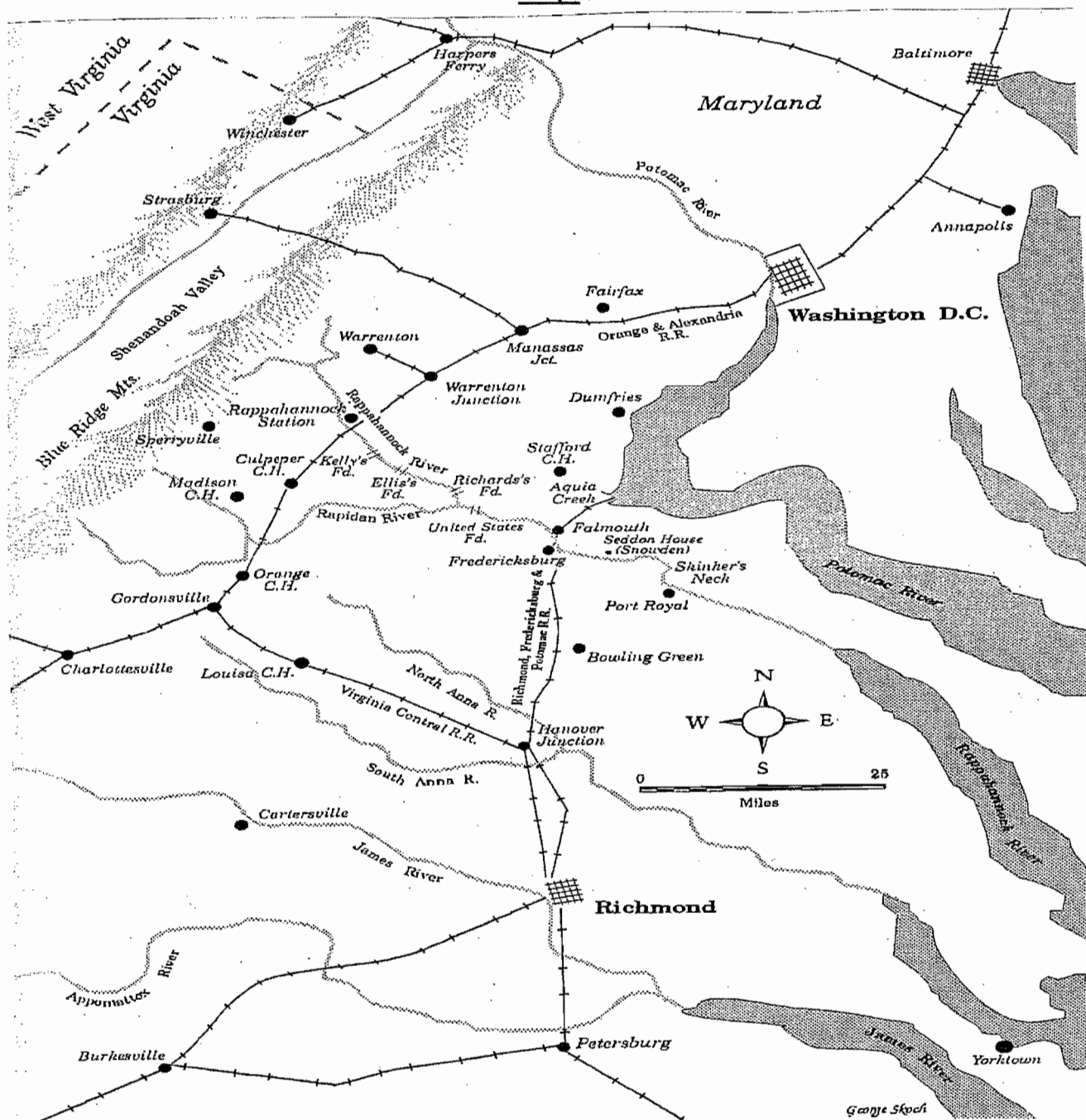
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Maps



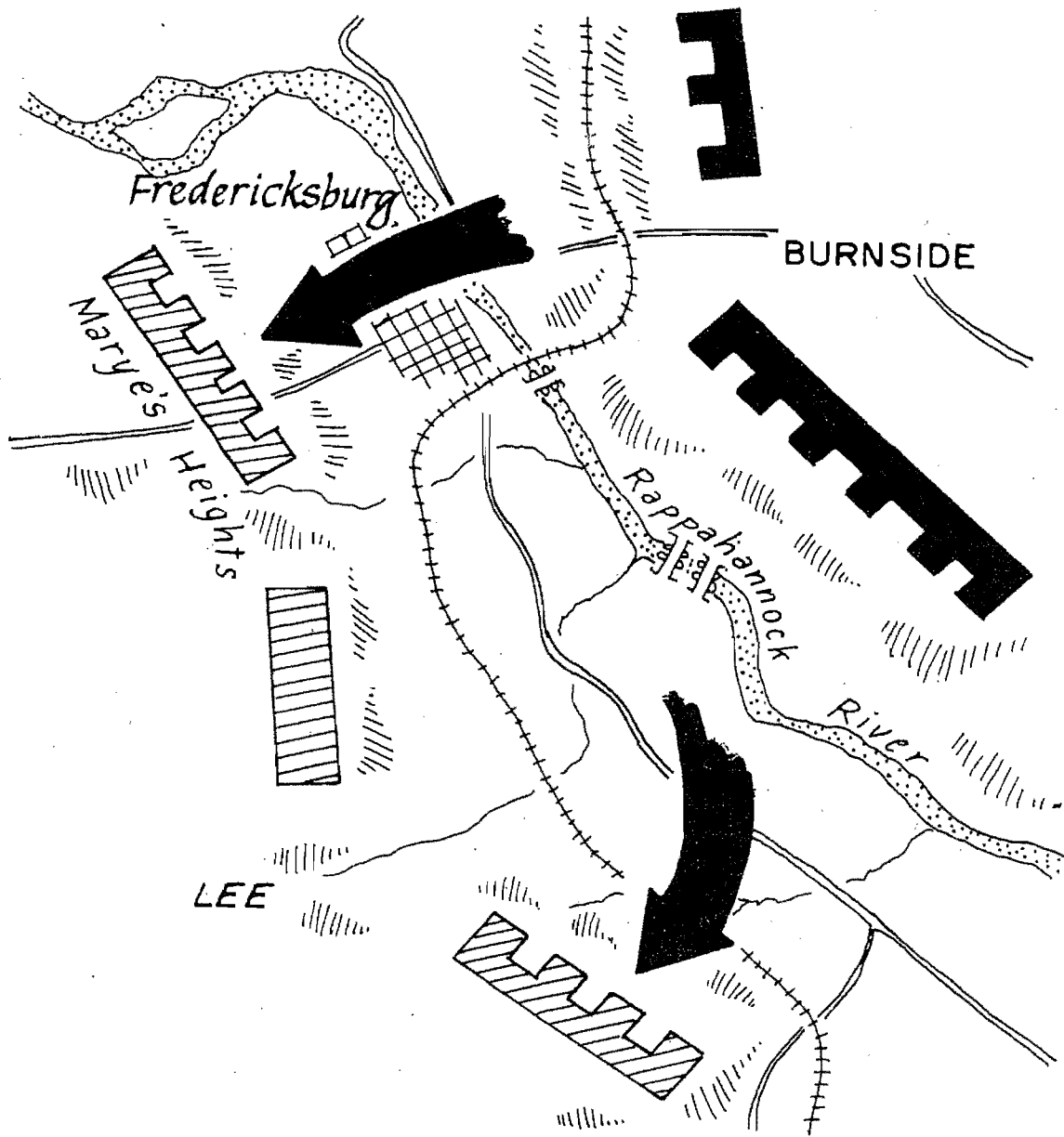
Map 1. Union and Confederate Movement to Fredericksburg
(Marvel, William. *The Battle of Fredericksburg Civil War Series*. (Eastern National, 2007), 6.)

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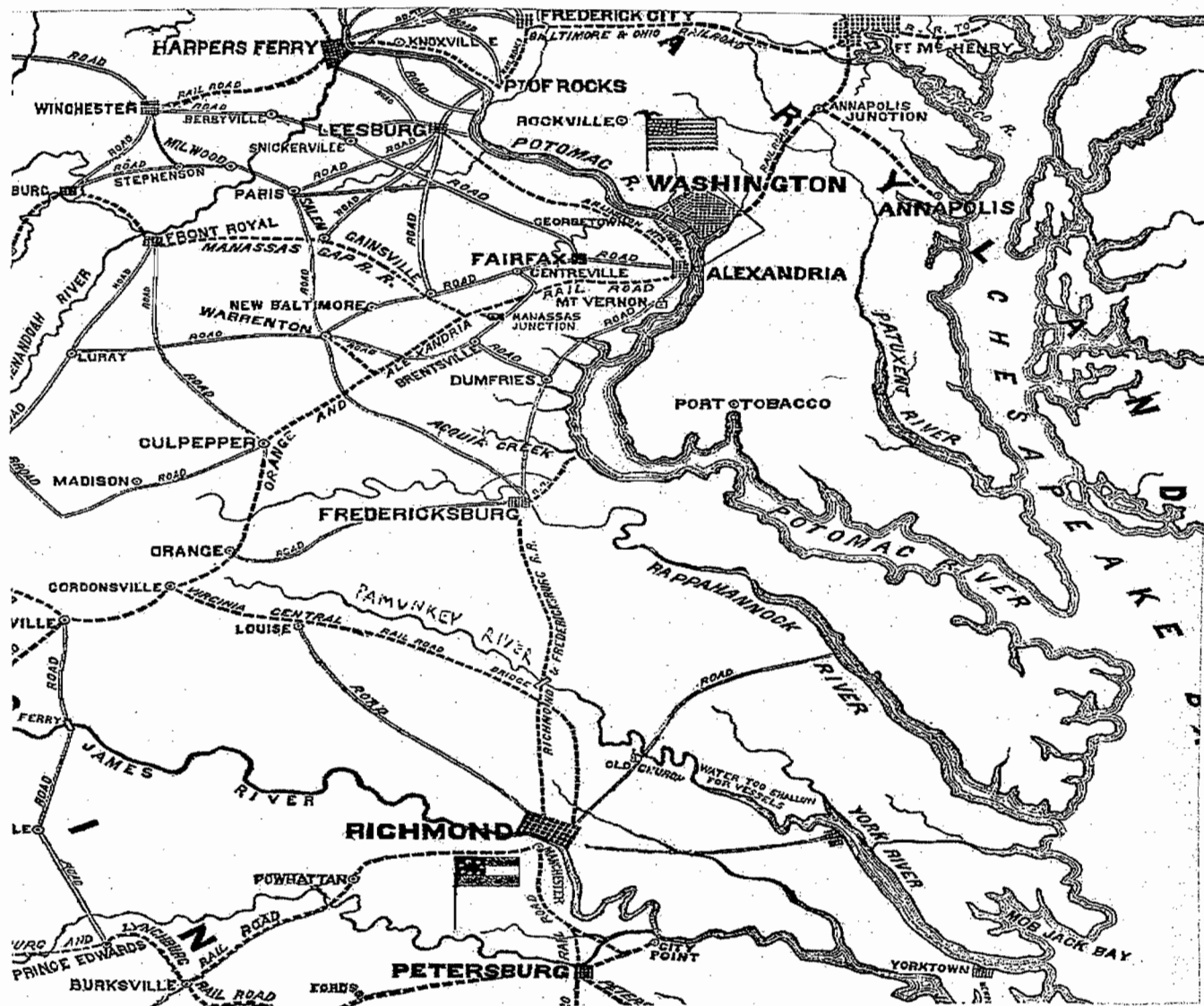
Map 2. North Anna River View
 (Marvel, William. *The Fredericksburg Campaign*. (Chapel Hill and London: The University of N.C. Press, 1995), 31.)

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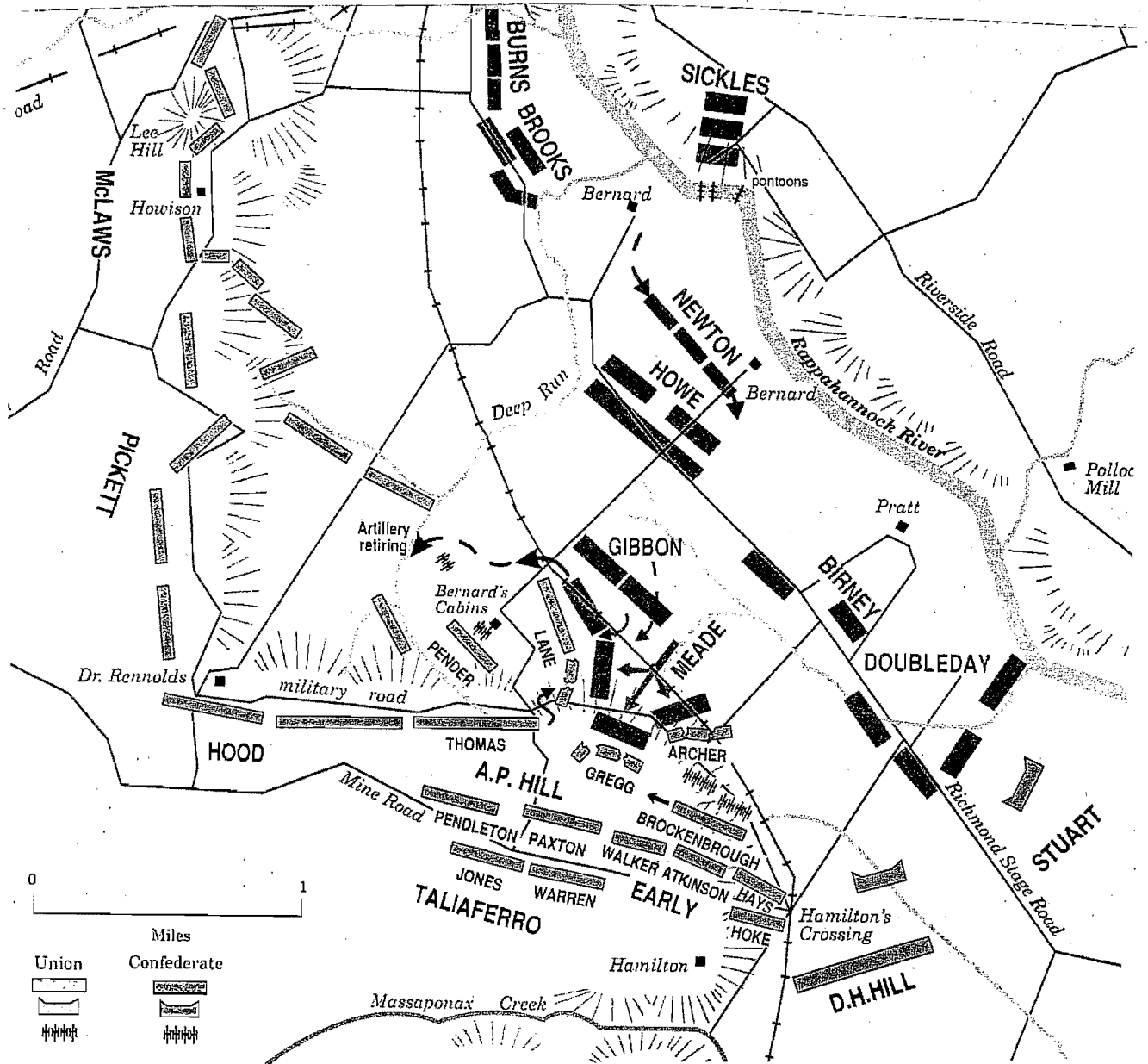
Map 3. Burnside's Frontal Assault
(Hattaway, Herman, and Jones, Archer. *How The North Won*. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 307.)

Maps



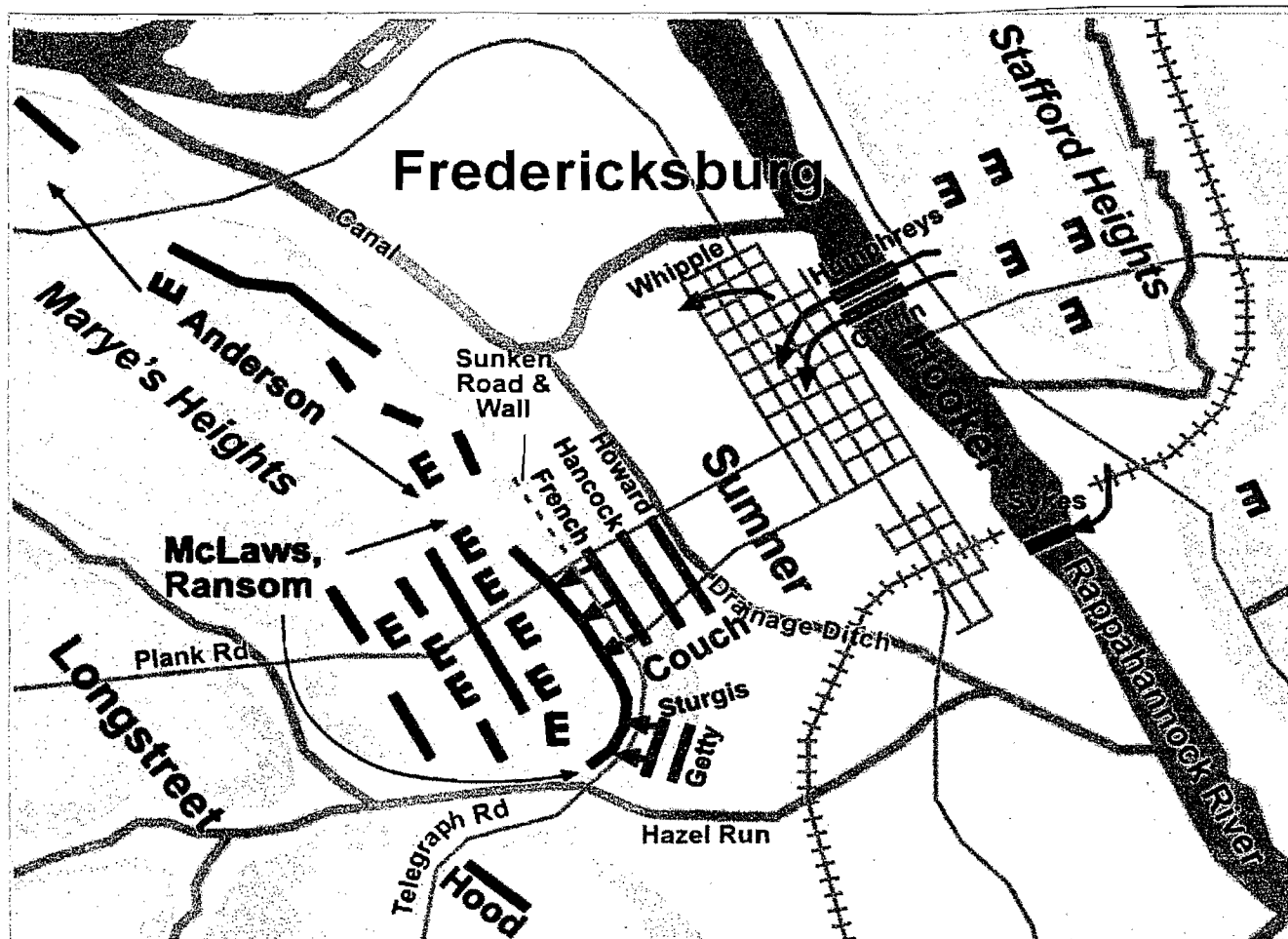
Map 4. Pamunkey River & Railroad Union Line of Advance
http://www.brotherswar.com/Map_of_Eastern_Virginia_Maryland.htm

Maps



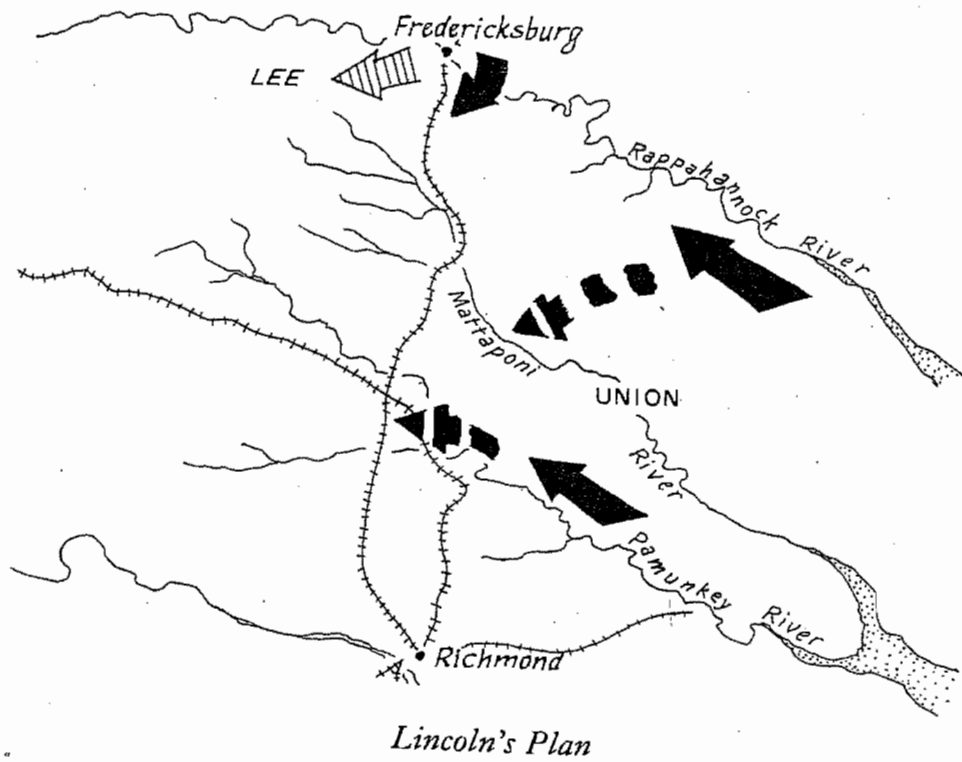
Map 5. Meade's Breakthrough on Confederate Right
(Marvel, William. *The Battle of Fredericksburg Civil War Series*. (Eastern National, 2007), 29.)

Maps



Map 6. Sumner's Advance on Marye's Heights
(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Fredericksburg)

Maps



Map 7. Lincoln's Operational Design
(Hattaway, Herman, and Jones, Archer. *How The North Won*. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 329.)