

# Edwin Stanton Prolongs the War

by Don Thomas

I am prefacing this article with its bibliography because I wish for interested readers to read the source materials and realize for themselves what took place. This account of the race for Spotsylvania and Edwin Stanton's actions to prevent the fall of Petersburg in 1864 is constructed from the following:

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- Humphreys, Andrew A. *The Virginia Campaign of 1864 and 1865: The Army of the Potomac and the Army of the James*. New York: Jack Brussel Publisher, 1903.
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- Bearss, Edwin C. *Fields of Honor: Pivotal Battles of the Civil War*. Washington: National Geographic, 2006.
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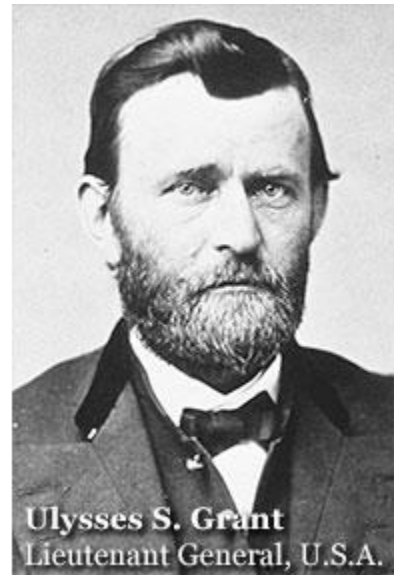
## Washington, 1864

After the battle of Gettysburg and the fall of Vicksburg, the South lost any chance that England and France would establish trading relations with the Confederate government. Being unable to score a Southern victory in the north, and after the South lost control of the Mississippi River there would be no way Europe would recognize the Confederacy as an independent nation and in turn diplomatically challenge Lincoln's naval blockade. After July 3, 1863, Southern independence became a hopeless cause, and would remain so for as long as the northern public would tolerate a long and bloody war of attrition.

At the end of 1863, Lincoln wanted the Union restored as soon as possible, and was offering amnesty for the Confederate leaders along with a return to Congress if they would give up their bid for independence. In reaction to the President's plan for amnesty, a faction within his own party, the Radicals, held their own convention in

Chicago (separate from the Republican Party) to nominate someone other than Lincoln for the 1864 presidential race. Lincoln had dropped his Radical Republican Vice President, Hannibal Hamlin, and chose the Tennessee Democrat Andrew Johnson to be his running mate. More than a year before Lincoln's assassination, the President's rivals within the Union were vigorously campaigning to prevent him from serving a second term.

By early 1864, the Confederate states still showed no intention of surrendering. On March 12, Lincoln promoted Ulysses S. Grant to Lieutenant General and appointed him Chief of the Armies of the United States. Grant's chief priority was to bring an end to the war by formulating a new plan to capture Richmond. Previous attempts by former Chief Generals had attacked the Confederate capital overland from the north, but every incursion failed. For his 1864 spring offensive, Grant considered the opposite approach, to attack from the south, but Washington had always maintained that the Federal forces should never leave the Union Capitol exposed.



By April 1864, the combined armies of the United States totaled almost 1,000,000 men, with production of military supplies at full capacity. Grant's overall invasion strategy was a massive, five-prong operation across the entire eastern theater, which involved an assault on two major Confederate cities from every direction. Atlanta, Georgia, was to be attacked from two points: the south from New Orleans and the west from Chattanooga. At the same time a separate offensive would advance on Richmond from the Union-occupied regions of Winchester and Culpepper, Virginia, then merge with Union forces approaching from Virginia's Eastern Shore on the Chesapeake Bay.

General Grant had the means to form a completely new army, comprised of 40,000 troops, supported by a large, heavily armed armada stationed at Fort Monroe. This new force would be named "The Army of the James," and Grant appointed Major General Benjamin F. Butler its commander. Butler's role was to use the James River to threaten Richmond and Petersburg from the southeast.



In 1864, Grant escalated Lincoln's war strategy of attrition by depleting southern manpower. While the naval blockade was depriving the southern states of manufactured goods, General Grant called for an end to the military prisoner exchange program to deprive the southern army from reenlisting paroled Confederate prisoners.

On April 28, 1864, Grant shared with Butler his preliminary plan to invade southern Virginia from the James River. Butler was to begin his

campaign on May 4 by first taking City Point and the surrounding vicinity, east of Richmond, with the ultimate objective being the Confederate capital. His orders were to operate on the south side of the James River, holding close to the bank, while advancing to secure a footing as far up the river as possible.

Grant further stated that if Lee should fall back upon Richmond from the north, then both the Army of the James and the Army of the Potomac would form a junction. However, if Butler's Army should become able to lay siege on the south side of Richmond, he must maintain his left flank on the James, while maneuvering forces northeast of the city to meet Grant (Humphreys, p. 138).

**The Army of the Potomac**  
(Lee & Grant, May 5-11, 1864)

**Overview of Eastern Virginia**  
(with early 1860s rail lines)

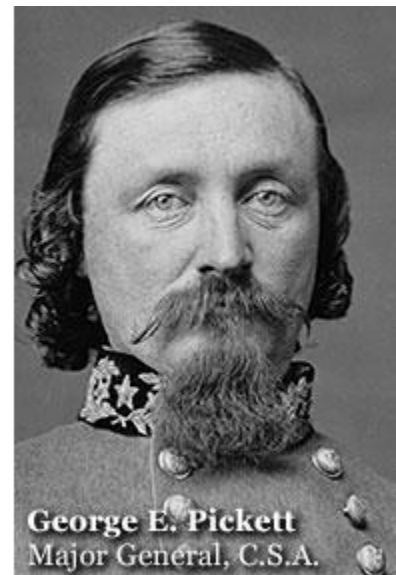
**The Army of the James**  
(Butler, May 7-9, 1864)

*Coming  
Soon*



*Coming  
Soon*

On May 5, 120 vessels, comprised of gunboats, barges and troop transport carriers, steamed up the James River and landed on a peninsula called Bermuda Hundred. Throughout the first day and late into the night, Butler began unloading his Federal troops directly between Petersburg and Richmond. Simultaneously a Union cavalry division under Brigadier General August V. Kautz galloped overland from Portsmouth and severed the railroad south of Petersburg, ending any threat of a rapid Confederate response. The Confederate forts and signal towers were caught completely by surprise, and every key Confederate position was captured without a single casualty. Only about 5,000 poorly organized defenders stood between Butler and the two Virginia cities, one being its capital.



Major General George E. Pickett was the commander of the Confederate forces protecting Petersburg and the southeast of Richmond, but on the day Butler landed, Pickett was in the process of relinquishing his command. The nearest Confederate Army to Butler was in Weldon, North Carolina, under General P. G. T. Beauregard, the overall Commander of North Carolina and Southern Virginia.

To the north of Richmond, Grant's Army of the Potomac under Major General Meade was engaged in battle with Lee's Army of Northern Virginia at a place called the Wilderness. Lieutenant General Grant did not choose to sit behind a desk in Washington, but directed his entire operation through the War Department's telegraph service while on the battlefield against Lee.

### **Edwin M. Stanton Prolongs the War**

Grant's standing order to Butler was that if he should hear that General Lee was falling back to Richmond from the north, then both the Army of the James and the Army of the Potomac would form a junction.

This section of Grant's order is the part Stanton would use to pull Butler away from taking Petersburg. The Republican National Convention was less than two months away, and a major military victory in or around Richmond would ensure that Lincoln would win the nomination. Stanton need to prevent Lincoln from scoring such a decisive victory, one that would undoubtedly secure his nomination for a second term. The Secretary of War's mission (as a supporter of a Radical candidate for president against Lincoln) was to deceive Butler into believing Grant was advancing on Richmond, and that Butler should abandon Petersburg and vigorously attack Richmond and form a junction with Grant above the city (Humphreys, p. 138).



Two days after Butler landed at Bermuda Hundred (May 7), Grant ordered Meade to move his army south and take a new position between Lee and Richmond at Spotsylvania Courthouse (Grant, pp. 421-23). Meanwhile, Butler was well entrenched and strategically located between Richmond and Petersburg with a massively superior force, eagerly awaiting orders on what action he should take next. By May 8, Butler was fully aware of the strength of the enemy forces in front of him. He wrote:

***The enemy are in our front with scarcely 5,000 men, and it is a disgrace that we are cooped up here.*** (Robertson, p. 109)

Butler called a meeting with his two corps commanders, and they decided to assault Petersburg on May 10. Both corps would attack the Confederate General Johnson at Swift Creek, drawing all the available Confederate forces into one engagement. This would allow Brigadier General Edward Hincks to advance into Petersburg from City Point, virtually unopposed (Robertson, p. 119).

Stanton could not allow this initiative by Butler to take place, and he and his telegraph officer, Major Thomas Eckert, had to quickly scramble up a plan to call off Butler's attack. Late afternoon of May 9, Stanton telegraphed Butler twice, informing him he had just received encrypted dispatches from General Grant, stating:

***Grant is on the march with his whole Army to form a junction with you. Another dispatch from him is being translated.*** (Butler, Part 2, Appendix 35, 36)

Stanton's two telegrams prompted Butler to act on Grant's standing order. These telegrams were designed to convince Butler that Lee was retreating for Richmond, and that Butler should forget about Petersburg and vigorously turn his attention toward forming a junction with Grant.

After reading the War Department's two dispatches, Butler sent orders to General Hincks, calling off the next morning assault on Petersburg. Later that night, Butler received a dispatch from his two Corps commanders who were suggesting an alternate attack plan on Swift Creek. Butler was furious to find out his Corps Commanders had made a revision so late before the next morning's scheduled attack, but by then Stanton had already convinced him to cancel the entire operation.

Stanton's two dispatches to Butler saved the defenseless Petersburg from Union occupation, just hours before being captured. Days later, Petersburg was fortified, and the long siege of Petersburg would drag the war on for 11 more months.





## To the North of Richmond

After reviewing Grant's account of the campaign north of Richmond, it is beyond any doubt that Stanton's dispatches to Butler were nothing less than a complete fabrication. Grant recorded the entire campaign in his personal memoirs, stating that his objective in moving to Spotsylvania was two-fold: first, prevent Lee from getting back to Richmond and crushing Butler before Grant could reach The Army of the James; second, if possible, get between Lee and Richmond, or at least draw Lee's army into an open field engagement. (Grant, p. 423)

Grant was able to intercept Lee's communications to Richmond (Grant, p. 411), and learned Lee's attention was on the strategic crossroads junction at Spotsylvania Courthouse, which was not at that time in the engagement. Grant directed his generals to make "a night march [toward] Spottsylvania Court House," with their individual positions as merely a preliminary [southerly] movement, dependent partly upon the course that General Lee should take."□ (Humphreys, p. 57)

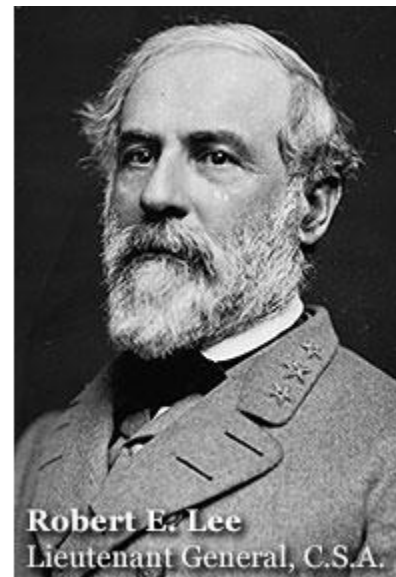
## Lee's Course of Action

After two days of very heavy fighting in the Wilderness, Lee chose R. H. Anderson to replace the wounded General Longstreet. But in contrast, throughout the morning of May 7, the Federal line had not so much as exchanged picket fire (LL, pp. 374-75). At 7:00 AM, Jubal Early's Confederates reported that the Federal army had mysteriously evacuated their line, making no effort to bury the dead or collect abandoned firearms. The Confederates correctly assumed Grant's Army had begun a move (LL, p.376; REL page 298).

Without definitive evidence, Lee considered the probability of Grant moving his army to Spotsylvania, and directed General Pendleton to cut a road through the pine forest from Orange to Spotsylvania in anticipation of a dash for the Courthouse (REL, p. 300).

No army can survive without a supply line, and in a war of attrition the Army with the most supplies wins. The Federal supply depot at Germanna Ford had been abandoned, and Lee assumed either Fredericksburg to the east or the RF&P Railroad from Fredericksburg, running south, would be Grant's new supply line alternative. Grant tried to deceive Lee by sending a wagon train and some troops north toward Culpepper, but Lee maintained confidence that the Federals were racing south to Spotsylvania. (LL, p. 377; Grant, p. 423)

## Grant's Course of Action



Grant chose General G. K. Warren to head the first column, moving south from the Wilderness trenches, leaving Winfield Hancock to protect the remainder of the Federal position against a possible assault from Lee. Grant recalled that on May 7, Lee ordered General Early "to move by the very road we had marched upon," and based on that action Grant incorrectly assumed Lee had not yet become acquainted with the Federal move toward Spotsylvania.

Grant was not aware early that day that Confederates with strong marine glasses spotted his heavy artillery moving toward the south, and throughout the morning, until 3:00 PM that afternoon, Confederate cavalry reconnaissance gave more evidence that Grant was moving toward Spotsylvania Courthouse. Late afternoon of May 7, Jeb Stuart and Fitzhugh Lee's cavalry began dropping trees across the road and putting up barriers to slow the



Union army's southern advance. That evening, Lee ordered his new Corps Commander, Anderson, to withdraw from the line after nightfall and start for Spotsylvania before 3:00 AM (May 8th). (LL, p.378; REL p. 302; see also Palmer).

Anderson was to move his men to a point of rest, but without any noise or campfires. Lee also directed General Pendleton to assign an officer to guide Anderson along the newly cut road. Anderson began his move early (11:00 PM), but the new road was narrow and full of stumps, and the woods were burning in every direction after two days of fighting. There was no suitable place to rest, so Anderson decided to push on to his objective without stopping. (LL, p. 380)

Just after daybreak, as the Confederate troops approached Spotsylvania from the northwest, a Federal division was advancing toward the same location from the northeast. Lee's new Corps commander found Jeb Stuart and Fitz Lee's cavalry in danger of being overrun as his troops reached the Blockhouse Bridge, west of Spotsylvania. Anderson quickly sent the desperate Confederate Cavalry two brigades to help stave off the advancing Union army. Just as Confederate Reinforcements arrived a cavalryman shouted to the leading regiment, "run for the rail piles," which were already in place, thrown together the day before by Fitz Lee's men. (REL, p. 306; Grant, p. 424)



Anderson was dug in so quickly that Grant correctly supposed in his memoirs that the entrenchments were made before the Confederates ever reached their position. Grant's two Generals, Warren and Cutler, launched an attack on the barricaded Confederates, but were repelled and could only form a line opposite the rail piles. Federal troops continued rallying to the battle, but could not coordinate an organize attack, and the best they could accomplish was to expand their line westward, opposite Anderson's left. (REL, p. 306)

About 5:00 PM, after two failed Federal assaults, General Ewell's Confederate reinforcements arrived, and the Federals began to retreat, pushed back by Ewell's division commander Rodes. The Confederates advanced 600 yards and struck the westward line, but the exhausted Confederates could go no further, and the first day of battle for Spotsylvania came to an end. (LL, p. 387)



On May 8, Grant realized that his objective to get between Lee and Richmond would be compromised if he could not hold Spotsylvania. Grant conceded that Lee's General Anderson got to Spotsylvania first, but only by accident. He listed a series of excuses for not outpacing Lee's army, and said if luck had not been with Lee, the Federal army would have won the race to reach Richmond, because they had a shorter line to travel. "But," he wrote, "accident often decides the fate of battle" (Grant, p. 424).



However, it was no accident that decided the fate of Petersburg. By the afternoon of May 8, both armies were in an all-out dash to control Spotsylvania. The Confederate General Jubal Early caught up with Hancock's division at Todd's Tavern, while moving south behind Warren's division, and the ensuing battle detained both commanders (Hancock and Early) from reaching Spotsylvania for that entire day. (Grant, p. 425)

Grant had not been able to get between Lee and Richmond, but he was determined to overwhelm the smaller, but entrenched Confederate army by using his superior numbers and supplies.

## Stanton's Course of Action

While Grant was engaged with Lee, Butler was about to execute his plan to capture the undefended city of Petersburg, but Stanton telegraphed Butler on May 9, at 3:20 and 4:00 PM:

***On Friday night [May 6] Lee's army fell back, and yesterday [May 8] were in full retreat for Richmond, Grant pursuing with his army. Hancock passed Spotsylvania Courthouse before daylight yesterday morning [May 8]. Grant is on the march with his whole army to form a junction with you.*** □

In truth, Lee's army was *never* in retreat, but following along the same route as the Federal army, and initiating attacks against Grant's forces heading south. (Humphreys, pp. 64-65)

War Department knew very well the day before Stanton's telegrams that Grant had no plan to form a junction with Butler, that Lee's army was between Grant and Richmond, and Hancock had not even reached Spotsylvania Courthouse, but was engaged against General Early at Todd's Tavern. Even by the 10th, Hancock had still not reached Spotsylvania and was forced to abandon his attempt to cross the Po River because of strongly-entrenched Confederates holding the high ground.

On the 8th Grant told his Cavalry commander Sheridan to cut loose from the Army of the Potomac, pass around the left of Lee's army, and attack his cavalry and

communication lines. (Grant, pp. 429-30) At no time would Grant have sent the War Department a dispatch claiming Lee was in retreat or that he expected to form a junction with Butler. Grant's orders to Sheridan at 1:00 PM included instructions for him to attack until his supplies were exhausted, then travel to the James River and re-supply his cavalry from Butler, and then *return*. (Humphreys, p. 66)

Sheridan's raid destroyed 10 miles of railroad and telegraph between Lee and Richmond, one and a half million rations, and most of the medical stores for Lee's army. (Grant, pp. 432-33)

After six days of very heavy fighting, both armies had unprecedented losses. Grant reported to the War Department that eleven general officers and over 20,000 men were killed, wounded or missing. Grant telegraphed his Chief of Staff in Washington, on May 11 at 8:30 AM, that he was sending to Belle Plan all his wagons to be re-supplied with fresh provisions and ammunition, and that he would "fight on this line if it takes all summer." □ Grant ordered Major General Halleck, "to send reinforcements as fast as possible and in great numbers." □ (Grant, pp. 433-34)

Grant further stated in his memoirs that he had received information from the War Department that Butler's cavalry under Kautz had cut the railroad south of Petersburg, separating Beauregard from Richmond, that Butler needed no help, and could maintain himself. (Grant, p. 432-33) But during the last hour of May 9, Stanton reported to Butler that, "***[Lee's] only hope was in heavy reinforcements from Beauregard***" □ (Butler, Part 2, Appendix 37)



In his memoirs, Grant specified that he was telegraphed by the War Department about the Federal cavalry burning the railroad bridge at Stony Creek south of Petersburg, bringing Beauregard's reinforcements to a temporary halt. This is documented proof (in Grant's own words) that Stanton knew the truth, while deliberately giving Butler false information. (Grant, pp. 432-33; REL, p. 308)

By the evening of May 8, the War Department was very familiar with the whole situation, and knew that Grant had lost the race to Spotsylvania. There was no misunderstanding that Lee was entrenched. In fact the Army of the Potomac intended to fight Lee at that spot "if it took all summer." □ (Bearss, p. 313; Memoirs, p. 432) At no time did General Grant have Lee's army in retreat.

After reviewing Stanton's first two deceptive telegrams, Butler called off his attack on Petersburg and waited for the next dispatch, which Stanton claimed was being translated. But another dispatch did not come until 11:55 PM, and it was falsely dated to look as if it had been sent ten hours earlier, at 10:00 AM. This last message to Butler made little sense, but implied that Lee's army was about to fall. This information,

according to Stanton, "was reported yesterday (May 8) by a deserter," □ though Stanton had a direct line to Grant.

At the time of Stanton's telegrams to Butler, the War Department knew Grant had no intentions of forming a junction with The Army of the James, and knew that Lee was not relying on help from Beauregard. (Butler, p. 646)

- Stanton needed to divert Butler's attention away from the defenseless city of Petersburg and get Butler occupied with making preparations for joining with Grant to capture the grand prize of Richmond. The cunning and calculating Stanton knew that, if he gave Beauregard enough time he could rally an adequate force to successfully defend both Richmond and Petersburg.
- Before the dispatches were sent to Butler, the War Department had already notified Grant that Beauregard's rail line had been cut, and assured Grant that the Army of the James was in no danger from a Confederate counterattack from Beauregard. (Grant, p. 432-33)
- Grant had no plan or reason to form a junction with Butler, and Butler had no reason to pull away from Petersburg, other than the two communiqués containing Stanton's concocted misinformation.

Grant's April 28 orders to Butler instructed him that *if* Lee fell back to Richmond from the north, then both armies should form a junction. This junction "under any circumstances" should be "above" (north of) Richmond. Stanton knew this standing order, which is why he claimed in his false dispatch that Lee's army fell back and was in full retreat for Richmond, with Grant on the march with his whole army "to form a junction with you." □

To this, Butler indignantly stated, "Not true" □ in his memoirs. (Butler p. 646).

Stanton's claim that "Lee's only hope was in heavy reinforcements from Beauregard," □ was not even possible, and Butler knew it. (Butler, p. 646)

## **The Outcome**

Stanton's efforts to prolong the war worked, but the Radical initiative to prevent Lincoln and Johnson from winning the Republican presidential nomination did not. Lincoln and Johnson won the nomination from a bipartisan committee of moderate Republicans and Democrats who supported Lincoln's policy of reconciliation and a restored Union that would be once again accountable to the Constitution. Lincoln then went on to win the election. To prevent Lincoln's policies from going forward, his rivals would have to devise another plan.