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The Grand Design: Strategy and the U.S. Civil War

by Donald Stoker

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In the introduction to *The Grand Design*, Donald Stoker, Professor of Strategy and Policy at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California, promises the first book on military strategy in the US Civil War. The claim of first is seriously debatable, but initiating that debate would not be useful. The better question for this review is whether *The Grand Design* is truly a book on

Civil War strategy. Strategy has acquired such an expansive definition it may be that Stoker has written a very good operational level history of the war. Much strategic and occasionally grand strategic discussion creeps in, but the operational story dominates the narrative. This is to some extent natural, and Stoker acknowledges the allure of the story; he consciously avoids battle narratives and concentrates on campaigns, but that only gets him to the operational level of war. The fact he discusses both theaters and more naval operations than is common gives the book some strategic credentials, and the modern use of the term “theater strategy” as an acceptable substitute for what is usually campaign planning adds cachet. Nevertheless, this is not primarily a strategic study.

For a book on strategy, Stoker ignores or underplays some key strategic issues. He does not deal with the fast-war, single, decisive battle strategy that dominated thinking on both sides in the Spring of 1861. It was a classic response to civil unrest—the Romans traditionally attacked immediately to try to squelch a rebellion before it really got going. Only if that failed did they bring in large numbers of trained troops to crush what was almost certainly a major uprising. The Union was entirely justified in attempting a similar approach, and the South in trying to counter it. Stoker also does not deal with the undeniable issue that it became obvious very early in the war that the eastern theater was the decisive theater. Lincoln’s famous comment about not getting credit for the North’s extensive gains in the west is instructive, and it was an issue for both sides. Stoker discusses the border-states issue, but because it was largely a political problem does not really flesh out (other than explaining their importance for both sides) the strategic maneuvering that kept them in the Union—a result that was arguably decisive for the eventual outcome of the conflict. Although he frequently mentions supposed Union sympathy in the South, he does not explore in much depth how that influenced Union strategy except in the case of eastern Tennessee (where it admittedly had the most significant impact).

Similarly, Stoker does not really deal with some of the modern strategic analysis of the war. For example, there is a very influential interpretation of Union strategy that essentially runs—Lincoln was a natural strategist who

learned as he went along. He identified fairly early a winning strategy of concentric pressure by overwhelming Union force to crush the Confederacy. His problem was that he did not have generals willing (McClellan) or capable (Banks, Burnside, etc.) of executing the strategy until the team of Grant and Sherman emerged. Lincoln could not fire many of his generals (for political reasons) until after his reelection in 1864, so the war dragged on waiting for competent leaders to execute the strategy. Stoker probably does not buy that argument; he would have done well to address it directly.

The author never deals with the basic issue of how people thought they were going to win the war—the most basic of all strategic questions. For example, he points out that Robert E. Lee in a letter in 1862 wrote that nothing but a political “revolution” from within would beat the Union, and that the South’s only way to produce such a revolution was by achieving “systematic success.” That is key to understanding what Lee did operationally. He kept trying to provide those successive battlefield victories that would erode Union political support for the war. Because Stoker does not accept that rationale, and because he knows the outcome, he criticizes the strategic thinking behind the Gettysburg campaign. If one accepts Lee’s strategic mind, not only does the Gettysburg campaign make sense, but the successive tactical attacks on that battlefield do too—Lee was trying to win a war, and he was willing to take huge risks to achieve that goal. Stoker claims a victory at Gettysburg would only have given Lee a win in the North, not a win in the war; however, that is counterfactual and thus pure supposition. Stoker cannot know that any more than Lee could.

Stoker knows of the ends-ways-means paradigm, but does not use it to structure his examination of strategy. In fact, he sets up excellent opportunities and then lets them slip away. For example, he cites Jefferson Davis’s inaugural address where the Confederate president laid out a classic ends-means mismatch, but that does not lead to a discussion of potential options to address the issue. This is perhaps most troubling because Stoker is very critical of Confederate strategy. He recognizes the initial problem of trying to defend everything was a political necessity. He sees the issue of too little force for the space (especially in the west) that plagued Southern strategy and argues against a cordon defense. He also argues, this reviewer believes unconvincingly, against the existence of a Confederate offensive-defensive strategy. He criticizes the constant call for concentration of forces, which directly reflected the strategic theory of Jomini all the leaders had learned, and he criticizes the departmental organization that decentralized control of the war. However, he does not offer an alternative Confederate strategy, although it would apparently have involved concentration of forces somewhere for some purpose and centralized control from Richmond. At the most basic level, Stoker fails to do exactly what he criticizes the strategists of the day for failing to do—propose a set of objectives, resources, and concepts of employment that might be able to achieve victory with an acceptable level of risk.

Less seriously, Stoker does not seem to understand the 19th century philosophy of command. He repeatedly criticizes generals and politicians for not specifically ordering their subordinates to act. The practice at the time was to acknowledge that the commander on the ground had a better understanding of his situation than a commander far removed from the action. The issuer of orders normally gave the subordinate discretion to use his judgment should the conditions differ from what the superior understood. Under that system, one should not expect direct and inflexible orders and should criticize the subordinate for failing to act, not the superior for failing to order. The superior deserves criticism only for failing to remove a subordinate when a problem developed or he abused the trust placed in him. Several Civil War commanders on both sides fit that category, and Stoker should have been advocating their removal, not their more decisive ordering.

To be fair, Stoker knows his business, and *The Grand Design* contains several instances of excellent strategic analysis—for example his analysis of Union strategy in the last half of 1863, which criticizes the North for not continuing to apply unremitting pressure on the South after the victories of the summer, or his analysis of Grant's eastern theater strategy in 1864, which points out both the risks and benefits of an attrition strategy. Similarly, Stoker's concluding analysis of the strategic abilities of the respective leaders is generally good, although he slams Lee because he does not like the Gettysburg campaign and belittles Lincoln's strategic ability outside the political arena (both serious underestimations).

In summary, a book on Civil War strategy should cover the debates and decisions about what to do, how to do it, and with what resources. It should be largely at the national level, and the explanations of what happened in the field should be short paragraphs necessary only to provide background for the next set of strategic questions or decisions. Stoker concentrates on the military element of power—a reversion to an older sense of the word strategy that is not particularly helpful. Ideally, a book on Civil War strategy should look at all the elements of national power and provide detailed discussions of the alternate approaches to financing the war, recruiting soldiers, equipping units, dealing with foreign powers, handling the media, maintaining domestic political support, etc., as well as fighting the campaigns. Some of that is in *The Grand Design*—for example, the Confederacy's Erlanger cotton loans is mentioned, although Erlanger did not make the index, and the entire cotton issue consumes only two pages of text—nonmilitary issues are just not the focus of the book.

Lest my strategic nitpicking leave the wrong impression, I actually enjoyed the book. *The Grand Design* is an excellent military study of the Civil War. It is well researched and written. It flows smoothly and keeps the reader's interest. It is critical of both sides, although there is a Monday-morning-quarterbacking aspect that occasionally irks, and Stoker is not afraid to offer controversial interpretations. I suspect the book will do well commercially, and I recommend it to readers.