



# The Army of the Potomac 1861-65

by Jack Dyals, Jude Rooney and Aaron Karp  
*Old Dominion University Model United Nations Society*

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It has been 160 years since the American Civil War ended, bringing an end to slavery and the prospect of national collapse, the division of the United States into at least two countries. Viewed in retrospect, through the long lenses of history, it all seems so inevitable; Confederate collapse, Union victory, Emancipation, Constitutional Amendments and the failure of Reconstruction. These assumptions are a classical mistake of historical interpretation.

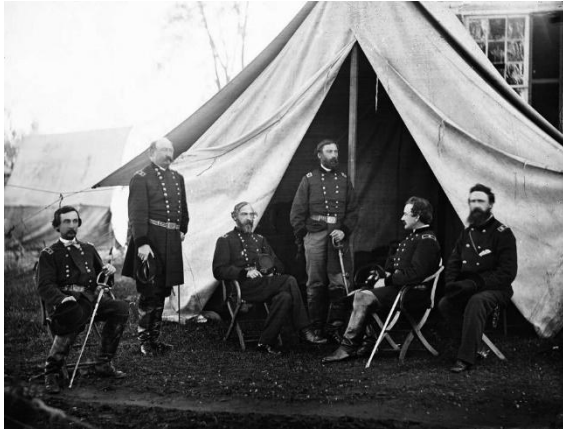
This error of *historicism* takes for granted innumerable details that had to fall into place at the time. At the time, the outcome of the Civil War seemed anything but inevitable. Until 1863, Confederate victory seemed more likely. If Confederate commanders often seemed not to have tried harder, it was largely because they were so convinced of the righteousness of their cause. If Union commanders seemed hesitant and uncertain, it was largely because they feared their own crushing defeat.

This ODUMUNC crisis simulation invited participants to go back into the thick richness of events, to the feverish, frightening and inspiring climate of the times, when the outcome was much harder to prophesize. Today we know several decisive steps along the way, starting with the decisive Union defeat at the opening of the war at Manassas or Bull Run, followed by victory at Antietam and Gettysburg. Military and diplomatic events in 1862-63 were instrumental shaping momentum. But it was changes in command in 1864 that did the most to determine the conflict's end.

## Introduction



## The Army of the Potomac 1861-65



Headquarters of the Army of the Potomac, Culpeper County, Virginia in September 1863. Left to right: Gouverneur Kemble Warren, William H. French, George Meade (Major General, Commander of the Army of the Potomac), Henry Jackson Hunt, Andrew A. Humphreys and George Sykes.

victories in the East have been few, and war weariness is overwhelming. The Union is fatigued by the losses and destruction the conflict has brought. The Democratic Party candidate for United States President, former General George McClellan, is running on a promise to negotiate an end to the war. Exhausted by the endless and indecisive fighting, most Union voters seem ready to agree. With the Democrats. President Lincoln thinks his own chance of reelection is poor, depending entirely on whether the Union Army in Virginia, the Army of the Potomac, can achieve a decisive battlefield victory.

In this ODUMUNC Crisis Simulation, the year is 1864. The American Civil War has been raging for three exhausting years. Northern



ODUMUNC 2025  
Crisis Brief



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This is a real historical document, a colorized version of the contemporary photo of commanders of the Union Army and the Army of the Potomac after a day of difficult fighting. The scene is outside Massaponax Church, Virginia, on 21 May 1864. For the meeting, church pews have been brought outside. There is a disagreement about who is who. The consensus is then-Major General Ulysses Grant sits between the trees, with Assistant Secretary of War Charles A. Dana to his left, while John Rawlins (Grant's assistant) reads a map next to Dana. Major General Meade sits on the left pew reading a map. Photo from a series of three by Timothy O'Sullivan, an employee of the photographer Alexander Gardner. See the interpretive video about the meeting: <https://www.battlefields.org/learn/videos/step-ulysses-s-grants-council-war>

## The Crisis Body



# The Army of the Potomac 1861-65



The simulation happens in the field, at the roving headquarters of the Army of the Potomac, as it moved throughout the war. Initially in Washington, D.C., the headquarters would follow the Army in the field, often on the road between Washington and Richmond, the axis of battle through much of the war, later with General Grant along the James River on the approaches to the Confederate capital of Richmond. After Grant was named to command all Union Armies in 1864, he usually headquartered with the Army of the Potomac, but it actually was just one of roughly a dozen Union armies under his authority.

Civilian and military leaders worked closely together, and political leaders routinely served in uniform as military commanders, the so-called political generals.

A routine visitor to the Army of the Potomac headquarters was President Abraham Lincoln. He was the ultimate Union decision-maker, readily using his Constitutional authority as Commander in Chief. He also was an active decision-maker in military affairs, often ready to override his generals, replacing disappointing or insubordinate commanders rapidly in his search for commanding generals who showed promise to actually win the war.

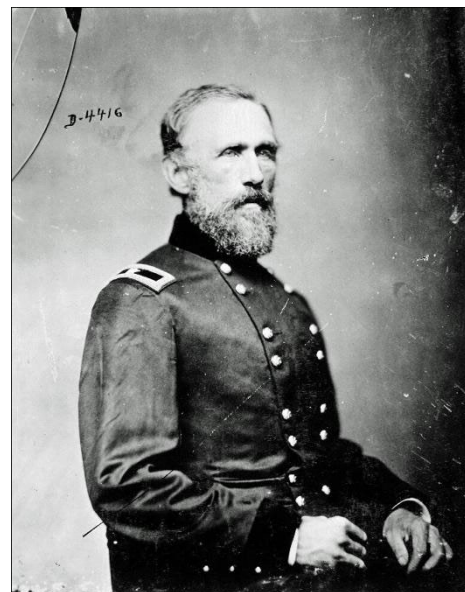
## Civil War era United States Army rank insignia



While the Army was a military organization, the membership of its command headquarters could be flexible, reflecting the informality of the highest levels of strategic decision-making.

## The Characters

*Note:* Portraits often show Union leaders as they appeared later in life, in retirement. The average age of Union general officers during the war was 40s to early 50s.



**Colonel John G. Barnard, Chief Engineer for the Army of the Potomac.** An expert in preparing a battlefield, military bridges, entrenchments and fortifications, Barnard is responsible for ensuring the construction of

entrenchment efforts particularly during sieges. His main duty is to construct trench lines and fortify positions for the Army of the Potomac. He served as Chief Engineer of the Army of the Potomac, 1861 to 1862, Chief Engineer of the Department of Washington from 1861 to 1864, and as Chief Engineer of the armies in the field from 1864 to 1865. He also was a distinguished scientist, engineer, mathematician, historian and author.

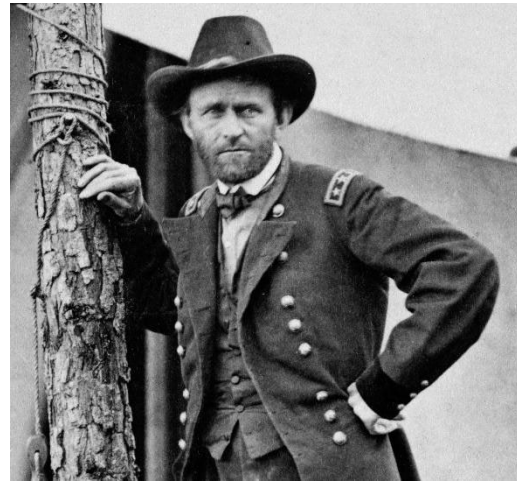


**Major General Ambrose Burnside, Commander of the independent IX Corps.** A brave, creative tactician and general, Burnside would lead an independent command over the IX Corps, independent of the direct control of Meade. He would report directly to Grant and enjoy relative autonomy. He would support the Army of the Potomac in battles and sieges. He is known to be overly ambitious in some of his controversial tactics.

He was responsible for some of the earliest Union victories in the Eastern theater, but was mainly remembered for disastrous defeats, at

Fredericksburg and the Battle of the Crater (Petersburg).

Burnside was modest and unassuming, mindful of his limitations, propelled to high command against his will. His spectacular growth of whiskers became known as "sideburns", deriving from the two parts of his surname.



**Lieutenant General Ulysses S. Grant, Commander of Union Armies, headquartered with the Army of the Potomac.** In his early military career, Grant stood out as an extraordinarily talented horseman and an avid reader. Grant knows personally most of the commanders on both sides of the war from his past military experience, as a cadet at West Point, in the Mexican-American war of 1846-48 and from his service on the West Coast. Grant also was a controversial figure, who left the Army to end his suffering from family separation. He was vulnerable to binge drinking, gaining a reputation—only partially deserved—as a drunkard.

Despite his relative youth—he was 39 when he returned to military service in 1861—he was uniquely successful among Union commanders, with an extraordinary series of victories in the Western Theater of the war, mostly in Kentucky,

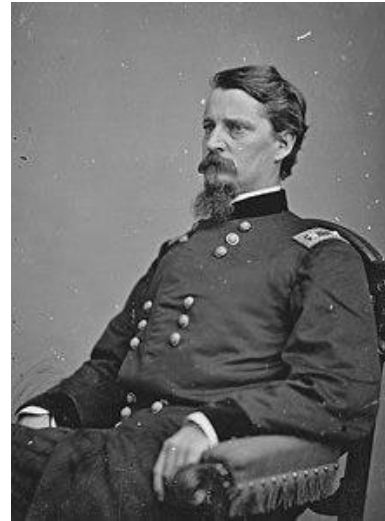
Tennessee and Mississippi. Grant's victories at Vicksburg and Chattanooga, regarded as great achievements in the history of military tactics, established Union control over the Western Theater. These victories led President Lincoln to bring Grant to the East in 1864 to command all Union armies. Grant would be widely acknowledged as the author of Union victory, something that could change in this simulation.



Major General Henry Halleck, Army Chief of Staff in Washington, provided the necessary administrative support to fulfill Grant's orders to the various armies. Without the pressure of having to control the movements of the armies, Halleck performed capably in this task, ensuring that the Union armies were as well-equipped and supplied as possible. He would manage administrative tasks to ensure the logistical supplies and trade routes of the Union armies.

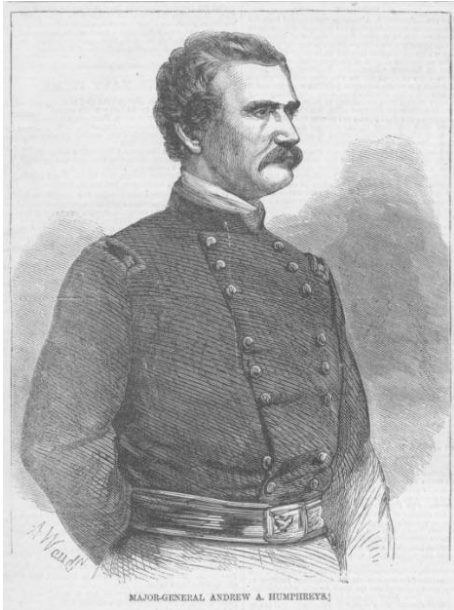
A noted expert in military studies, he was known by a nickname that became derogatory, "Old Brains". He was an important participant in the admission of California as a state and became a successful lawyer and land developer. Halleck served as the General-in-Chief of the Armies of

the United States 1862-64, and became Chief of Staff for the remainder of the war when Ulysses S. Grant was appointed to that position.



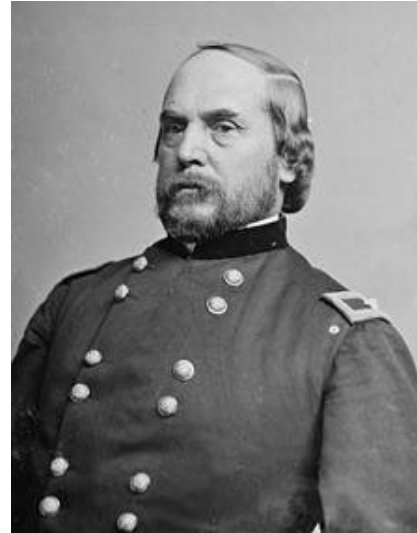
Major General Winfield Scott Hancock, **Commander of II Corps**, vital in Siege of Petersburg. Brave and decisive, his leadership especially at Gettysburg and the Siege of Petersburg will be paramount. He is bold and works well under pressure. He will commit front-line assaults against the Confederate lines and undertake critical siege actions for Union victory.

Known to his Army as "Hancock the Superb," he was noted in particular for his personal leadership at the Battle of Gettysburg in 1863. His military service continued after the Civil War, as Hancock participated in the military Reconstruction of the South and the U.S.'s western expansion and war with the Native Americans at the Western frontier.



Colonel Andrew A. Humphreys, Chief of Staff to Meade, was one of the most dependable officers in the Army of the Potomac during the latter phase of the war. A reliable and component advisor to Meade. His duties include managing the operations and HQ of the Army of the Potomac. He will work closely with Meade and report to Grant when needed.

A civil engineer, he served in senior positions in the Army of the Potomac, including division command, chief of staff, later became a Major General with a corps command, and was Chief Engineer of the U.S. Army.



Colonel Rufus Ingalls, **Chief Quartermaster of Union Armies.** An expert in military supplies and logistics. His main concern is managing a constant and easy flow of supplies for Union forces. He will coordinate with Halleck and Barnard on ensuring supply lines remain secure and all obstructions are dealt with promptly.

He became the Chief Quartermaster of the Army of the Potomac in August 1862 and performed his duties efficiently during the Northern Virginia and subsequent Maryland Campaigns, winning praise for his logistics skills.

In June 1864, his West Point classmate Ulysses S. Grant placed Ingalls in charge of supply with responsibility for all Federal armies operating against Petersburg and Richmond. His logistics base at City Point, Virginia, became the largest port operation in the Western Hemisphere.



Major General George Gordon Meade, **Commander of the Army of the Potomac**. He was born in Cádiz, Spain, to a wealthy Philadelphia merchant family and graduated from the United States Military Academy in 1835. Best known for his command of the Army of the Potomac at the Battle of Gettysburg. After West Point, he fought in the Second Seminole War and the Mexican-American War. He worked for the U.S. Army Corps of Topographical Engineers and led the United States Survey of the Great Lakes. When the American Civil War broke out, he joined as part of the Pennsylvanian reserves, constructing fortifications around Washington, D.C.

He fought in many of the key battles of the Eastern theater and defeated the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia led by General Robert E. Lee at the Battle of Gettysburg. He was appointed to command the Army of the Potomac just three days before the Battle of Gettysburg and arrived on the battlefield after the first day's action on 1 July 1863.



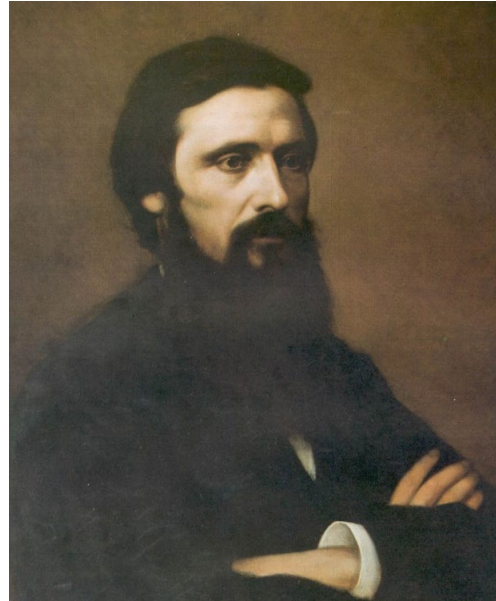
Major General Edward Otho Cresap Ord, **Commander of the XVIII Corps**, led the occupation of Richmond after the war. A capable leader who is pragmatic and cooperative within the command structure. frequently referred to as *E. O. C. Ord*, he was an engineer and United States Army officer who saw action in the Seminole War, the Indian Wars, and the American Civil War. He commanded an army during the final days of the Civil War, and was instrumental in forcing the surrender of Confederate General Robert E. Lee. He will engage Confederate defenses and secure Richmond by the end of the war. He also designed Fort Sam Houston. He died in Havana, Cuba of yellow fever.





Colonel Marsena R. Patrick, **Provost Marshal of the Potomac Army**. He worked on the Erie Canal and briefly taught school. He attended the United States Military Academy and graduated in 1835. A successful battlefield commander, Patrick was named as the provost marshal for the Army of the Potomac in 1862. To support his efforts, he had the equivalent of a brigade of troops (some 3,000).

Responsible for discipline and strict orders. Patrick would ensure internal order within the Union camp. He would be responsible for disciplining Union soldiers, ensuring they fought and did not desert. He was responsible for Confederate prisoners of war and conquered civilians. He would meet regularly with other quartermasters and commanders to ensure security and maintain adequate supplies to prisoners.



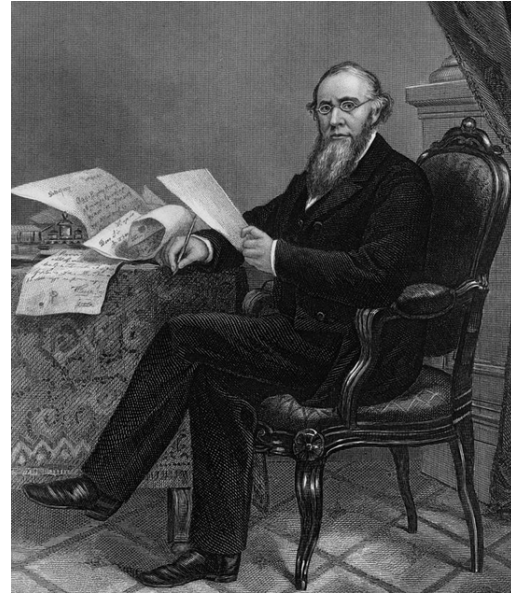
Captain John A. Rawlins, **Chief of Staff to Grant**, is Grant's right-hand man, confidant and voice of reason. He is Grant's most trusted and loyal advisor who looks out for the General, especially his drinking and other personal problems. His duty is to manage Grant's headquarters, to run his office, visitors and correspondence, to ensure the conduct of war and strategy are executed swiftly and effectively. He is most famous, perhaps, for nagging Grant to control his drinking, a nagging campaign which was largely successful, failing only when the two are separated.

Rawlins was a self-made man who overcame an impoverished family background, scanty education, and an absentee father who was prone to drink. After studying law, Rawlins passed the bar in 1854 and started a practice in Galena, Illinois. A close friend of Ulysses Grant, also a Galena resident, Rawlins followed Grant through his military successes, supporting him. Rawlins contracted tuberculosis in 1863, but continued to serve on Grant's staff during Reconstruction, becoming Secretary of War under President Grant.



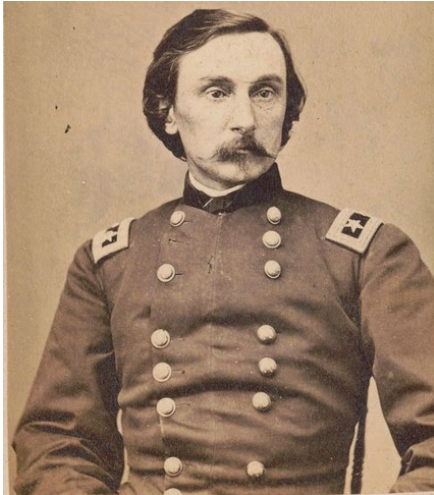
Major General Philip Henry Sheridan, **Commander of the Union Cavalry Corps**, led the Valley campaigns of 1864. A bold and aggressive cavalry leader. Sheridan would lead a campaign into the Shenandoah Valley. He coordinates with Grant and operates somewhat independently on the battlefield. His duty is to disrupt Confederate supply lines and lead raids in support of the main Army.

His career was noted for his rapid rise to major general and his close association with General-in-chief Ulysses Grant, who transferred Sheridan from command of an infantry division in the Western Theater to lead the Cavalry Corps of the Army of the Potomac in the East. In 1864, he defeated Confederate forces under General Jubal Early in the Shenandoah Valley. His destruction of the economic infrastructure of the Valley, "The Burning", was one of the first uses of scorched-earth tactics in the war. In 1865, his cavalry pursued General Robert Lee and was instrumental in forcing his surrender at Appomattox Courthouse.



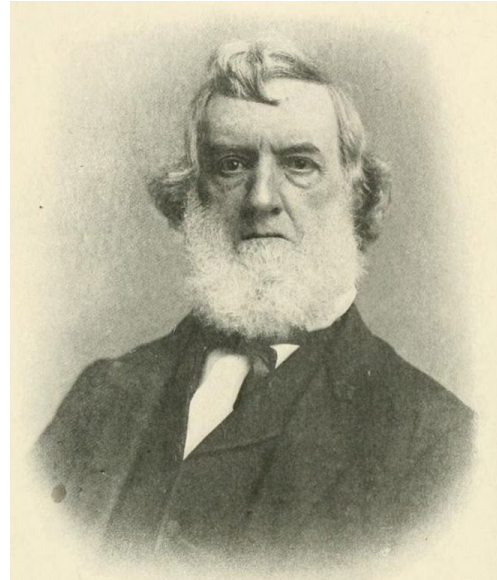
Edwin M. Stanton, Secretary of War who reorganized the War Department Stanton was an administrative mastermind and had an impressive work ethic. Although he suffered from asthma, he was relentless in maintaining and reforming the War Department. His reforms sought to ensure a united effort against the Confederacy. He will continue to snuff out any internal disputes and preserve Union coordination and efficiency.

A lawyer, he served initially as US Attorney general. As Secretary of War in the Lincoln Administration during most of the Civil War, Stanton's management helped organize the massive military resources of the North and guide the Union to victory. He was criticized by many Union generals, who perceived him as overcautious and a micromanager. He also organized the manhunt for Abraham Lincoln's assassin, John Wilkes Booth.



Major General Gouverneur K. Warren, **Commander V Corps**, fought at Overland, Siege of Petersburg. Note that Gouverneur was a name, not a title. Skilled in defensive tactics. He would be essential in the Overland Campaign and the Siege of Petersburg.

He is best remembered for arranging the last-minute defense of Little Round Top during the Battle of Gettysburg and is often referred to as the 'Hero of Little Round Top'. His subsequent service as a corps commander and his remaining military career were ruined during the Battle of Five Forks, when he was relieved of command of the V Corps by Philip Sheridan, who claimed that Warren had moved too slowly. A post-war court of inquiry found that Sheridan's relief of Warren was unjustified.



Gideon Welles, Secretary of the Navy, was a Connecticut politician. As Secretary of the Navy he carried out the Anaconda Plan to weaken the Confederacy through a strict trade blockade. He also worked to give Union armies complete control of waterways for movement and resupply. He expanded the navy tenfold by the end of the war.

Nicknamed 'Father Neptune' for his appearance as well as his position, he initially opposed the Union blockade but actively worked to organize the US Navy to seal the Confederate coastline and preventing the South from exporting cotton, its dominant cash crop. This was a major cause of Union victory in the Civil War,



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Major General Horatio Gouverneur Wright, **Commander VI Corps**, Army engineer and general in the Union Army during the American Civil War. He took command of the VI Corps in May 1864 following the death of General John Sedgwick. In this capacity, he was responsible for building the fortifications around Washington DC. In the Overland Campaign he commanded the first troops to break through Confederate defenses at Petersburg. After the war, he was involved in a number of engineering projects, including the Brooklyn Bridge and the completion of the Washington Monument, and served as Chief of Engineers for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.