Shiloh: Stormcloud of Revolution
by
Michael Hennelly, Ph.D
(Originally appeared on "Strategy Bridge" Apr 2018)

"*The battle of Shiloh… has been… more persistently misunderstood than any other engagement between National and Confederate troops during the entire rebellion*."
—Ulysses S. Grant[1]

As the first truly revolutionary battle of the Civil War, it is useful to reflect on the Battle of Shiloh in order to develop insights into the nature of strategy and leadership that are relevant to decision-makers in the 21st-century world.

The Historical Context

The spring of 1862 was a happy time for the Union soldiers in the Army of the Tennessee. In General Ulysses Grant they had a commander who had just become famous, they were buoyed by the recent and stunning Union victory at Fort Donelson, and now they were part of an audacious plan to invade the Confederacy. Adding to their satisfaction was an innovation in military logistics: instead of marching to their destination, a fleet of riverboats had carried them down the Tennessee River. One of Grant's divisions (6,000 soldiers under General Lew Wallace) disembarked at Crump's Landing. The rest of his army (five divisions totaling about 37,000 soldiers) disembarked six miles further south at Pittsburg Landing. The fields next to Pittsburg Landing (which featured a small church called Shiloh Chapel) soon blossomed with hundreds of tents as carefree young Union soldiers tried out their new weapons and generally familiarised themselves with the daily routine of army life. As they waited for the 35,000 soldiers of the Army of the Ohio under General Don Carlos Buell to join them, they and their commander spent their days thinking about what they would do to the Confederate army opposing them. They should have spent more time thinking about what the Confederates might do to them.

Instead of waiting to be attacked, General Albert Sidney Johnston's Confederate Army of 42,000 soldiers was also on the move, intent on hitting Grant's army before it was reinforced by Buell. Shortly after dawn on Sunday 6 April 1862, the Confederate Army burst out of the tree line adjoining the Union camp and took the Union forces utterly by surprise. What started out as a bad day for Grant and his army quickly turned catastrophic in what became known as the Battle of Shiloh. Over the next thirty-six hours, the two armies produced a level of battlefield violence never before seen on the North American continent.

---

[1] U.S. Grant, 1990. Personal Memoirs of U.S. Grant. The Library of America edition, p. 247

The first day of the battle saw Grant's army steadily driven from the field. By evening, the remnants of his army were barely clinging to a narrow strip of land on the western bank of the Tennessee River. The second day saw Grant's army —now reinforced by Wallace's division and the arrival of Buell's army—counterattack and drive the Confederates from the field they had so recently won. By the end of the second day of fighting, the exhausted and badly bloodied Confederate army retreated south, carrying the dead body of their commander with them. Their escape was primarily due to the fact that the equally exhausted Union army was incapable of mounting a sustained pursuit.

Stunned citizens on both sides tried to come to grips with what had just happened. Nothing in the first year of the Civil War had prepared either side for this unimaginable level of violence. As thousands of grieving families counted their losses, it became clear that Shiloh had produced 13,047 Union casualties and 10,694 Confederate casualties. To put this in context, each side had suffered more battle losses in only two days of fighting than America had sustained in the six and a half years of the American Revolution (10,623 casualties).[2] When Confederate cannons fired on Fort Sumter and opened the American Civil War one year earlier, no one had foreseen the levels of passion, bravery and sacrifice that had just been unleashed. Political and military leaders on both sides mistakenly thought one decisive battle would resolve the conflict by either confirming Southern independence or restoring the Union. The unprecedented scale of violence at Shiloh shattered these comfortable assumptions. It gradually became clear to political and military leaders on both sides that the nature of this conflict would require revolutionary action.

Revolutionary times require revolutionary action

One of the most remarkable features of the Civil War was the disparity in resources between North and South. Historian Peter Maslowski has noted that in 1860 the North had as many *factories* as the South had factory *workers*, which meant that the Civil War began with ninety percent of American industrial production in the North.[3] Southerners thought this disparity was irrelevant. The lesson they extracted from the American Revolution was that the side with the greatest amount of tangible resources does not always win the war. As the Civil War went on, however, it became clear the Confederates would have been better off using the French Revolution as a guiding historical precedent.

John Keegan asserts the Union and Confederates were "the first truly ideological armies of history" because they were motivated, in part, by political and social concepts. Using the

---

[2] Shelby Foote, 1986. *The Civil War. A Narrative. Volume 1: Fort Sumter to Perryville.* New York, Vintage Books. pp. 350-351.

[3] Peter Maslowski, 2009. "To the edge of greatness: The United States, 1783-1865." In *The Making of Strategy* (eds. Williamson Murray, MacGregor Knox and Alvin Bernstein), Cambridge University Press. p. 235.

French Revolution as an example, Keegan posits that a nation motivated by a cause will mobilize more effort and resources than nations going to war for the ambitions of a ruler or for territorial gain.[4] Keegan's distinction was in evidence at Shiloh. The most intense fighting on the first day of the battle occurred at a fold in the terrain that came to be known as the Sunken Road. Here, elements of two Union divisions held their ground while Grant tried desperately to set up a defensive line behind them. They withstood eight frontal assaults by Confederate units determined to sweep the battlefield. Both sides incurred enormous losses because the Confederates did not stop until they were successful and the outnumbered Union troops did not give up until they were completely surrounded.

The level of commitment demonstrated by soldiers at Shiloh and the resulting levels of violence were new to American warfare and clearly showed that victory would require the coordinated and long-term mobilization of national resources. By the end of the war, the armed forces of the United States consisted of more than one million combatants. Establishing and maintaining a force of that size required President Lincoln and his administration to take an extraordinary series of revolutionary steps whose magnitude created tremors that reverberate today. Given the need to make up losses on battlefields such as Shiloh, national conscription was introduced for the first time in the history of the United States. A federal income tax and a new national currency system were introduced in order to finance the war effort. In addition, the society and government of the United States achieved a transformational level of organization in order to prosecute the war. In 1861, for example, the entire federal government consisted of about 40,000 civilian employees. By 1865, there were 136,000 civilian employees- just in the War Department.[5] It is, perhaps, no surprise that one congressman wrote in his diary in 1865 that he felt like he was living in a new country.[6] Many of these steps were hotly debated and reluctantly taken because their rationale was not apparent to everyone but, in actuality, the impetus for all of this change first became evident on the bloody fields of Shiloh.

Revolutionary times require revolutionary leaders

General William Sherman (who went on to become one of the greatest military leaders of the Civil War) commanded one of the divisions in Grant's army at Shiloh. At the end of the first day of fighting, he assumed the Union army would withdraw to the other side of the river and regroup. As the two generals talked that night however, all he said was "Well,

---

[4] John Keegan, 1987. *The Mask of Command*. New York: Viking. See his chapter on Grant.

[5] Allan Nevins, 1971. *The War for the Union. Volume III: The Organized War 1863-1864*. New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, p.279.

[6] James M. McPherson, 1988. *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era.* New York, Oxford University Press, p, 840.

Grant, we've had the devil's own day, haven't we?" Grant's immortal and completely unexpected reply was "Yes. Lick 'em tomorrow though."[7]

Grant's short, blunt statement provides a valuable insight into one aspect of leadership. The significance of this exchange was that it is the first time we see Grant display the leadership quality of *determination* that would help make him the greatest commander of the Civil War. Determination, in one memorable definition, is "a rare blend of intellect and moral courage."[8] Sherman had concluded, naturally enough, that the remnants of Grant's army needed to break contact, regroup and live to fight another day. Looking at the exact same battlefield, Grant came to a completely different conclusion and had the moral courage to act on what he alone saw.

Other Civil War commanders rivaled Grant's level of determination at the tactical level on the battlefield. Both Robert E. Lee and Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson come to mind. What distinguished Grant is that he consistently displayed this level of determination at higher and higher levels of responsibility. He displayed determination at the operational level the year after Shiloh during his brilliant and daring campaign that resulted in the capture of Vicksburg. In 1864-65, he displayed determination at the strategic level, when as commander of all Union forces he devised and carried out his war-winning strategy. Almost three years to the day after the Battle of Shiloh, Grant accepted Lee's surrender at Appomattox Court House, effectively ending the Civil War.

Implications for 21st Century Armies

The Battle of Shiloh occurred long ago but aspects of this event continue to shed light on challenges faced by 21st century strategic leaders. At Shiloh, the enormous casualty lists came as a shock because people did not truly understand the character of the ongoing conflict. Despite advances in information gathering and information technology, the same strategic challenge exists today. Japanese leaders fundamentally misunderstood the nature of their potential adversary when they decided on Pearl Harbor. Global leaders fundamentally misunderstood the vulnerabilities of the Soviet Union right up to its downfall. American leaders fundamentally misunderstood the security environment in the Middle East when they decided to overthrow Saddam Hussein. Leaders who do not understand the nature of their external environment will not be able to create effective strategy.

---

[7] Ron Chernow, 2017. *Grant*. New York, Penguin Press, p. 205.

[8] Michael Howard, 1983. *Clausewitz*. Oxford University Press, p.28. Howard is discussing the qualities that Clausewitz had identified as necessary for great commanders (one of which was determination).

A consideration of Shiloh is also valuable because of the insights it provides into the concept of leadership, although it must be said that these insights mystify as much as they clarify. Events at Shiloh demonstrated that Ulysses Grant had the intellectual bandwidth to identify opportunities that were not evident to others and he combined this quality with a willingness to tolerate risk that other military professionals found unacceptable. What is truly remarkable about Grant is that he eventually demonstrated this ability at the strategic as well as the tactical level of warfare. The mystifying part of this reflection on leadership occurs when we ask- how did Grant come to possess this unique and valuable quality? After all, when the war began (one year before the Battle of Shiloh), Grant was a clerk in his father's leather goods store in Galena, Illinois. It was only through an improbable series of personal connections and local events that he was even able to obtain command of a regiment of Illinois volunteers.

The well-known management author Jim Collins often says that a primary task of organizational leaders is to find the right people to put on their bus and then to put them in the right seat. The example of Grant illustrates the inherent difficulty of this task. Great leaders can come in all shapes and sizes and from a wide variety of backgrounds and are seldom recognizable as great leaders until they have passed into the annals of history. President Lincoln asked a lot of generals onto his bus to sit in the military commander's seat but it was not until he asked Grant that he finally got the right person in the right seat.