William Mahone and the Confederate Command Style During the Siege of Petersburg, 1864-1865

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WILLIAM MAHONE AND THE CONFEDERATE COMMAND STYLE
DURING THE SIEGE OF PETERSBURG, 1864-1865

by

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B.A., December 1994, Old Dominion University

A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of
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ABSTRACT

WILLIAM MAHONE AND THE CONFEDERATE COMMAND STYLE
DURING THE SIEGE OF PETERSBURG, 1864-1865.

David Kenneth Reed
Old Dominion University, 1998
Director: Dr. Harold Wilson

William Mahone exemplified the audacity and adaptability acquired by southern commanders during the last year of the American Civil War. Mahone’s contribution to Confederate military operations during the siege of Petersburg, Virginia, from 1864-1865 played an important role in the Confederacy’s survival. During the siege, he was one of Lee’s most trusted and capable lieutenants. The findings of this study show that Mahone’s emergence as a superior divisional commander came about mainly because of his knowledge of the terrain surrounding Petersburg.

This thesis discusses the way Mahone extended the life of the Confederacy. Four of Mahone’s engagements during the siege will be examined; additionally, I will explain how his knowledge and ability influenced Confederate successes during those engagements. Also discussed is Mahone’s place in the evolution of siege warfare and his contributions in the development of a limited offensive strategy. The primary sources used for this project include Mahone’s personal letters concerning his actions and the Official Records of the War of the Rebellion.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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There are many other people who also deserve recognition for providing support over the years. Chris Calkins, historian at the Petersburg National Battlefield, provided much needed influence and assistance. He offered guidance in the direction of my research. There were also many other Civil War historians who provided information and guidance to my work. Finally, my friends and family deserves acknowledgment for their love and patience throughout my endeavor.
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

In 1864, as the siege of Petersburg unfolded on the Virginia front, William Mahone emerged as an outstanding Confederate military commander. Today, he is primarily remembered as a general who achieved considerable success in postwar politics. Mahone the soldier, however, is best known for his role as the hero of the Battle of the Crater at Petersburg. But this was only a small part of his large military legacy.

Mahone's military contributions were important to the Confederate army's survival during the summer of 1864. The Army of Northern Virginia was in very dire straits by May, and young, audacious leaders like Mahone kept its hopes alive. His command became the army's shock troops and were regularly called upon to spearhead any offensive ordered by General Robert E. Lee, commander of the Confederate army.

Mahone was part of a new breed of Confederate leaders. Before May of 1864, Mahone served as a brigade commander, but upon promotion to divisional commander in May, he exhibited an aggressiveness that contributed to his remarkable success during the siege.¹

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The journal consulted for this thesis is Kate L. Turabian, *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*, 5th ed.

There is surprisingly little literature about Mahone and his Confederate service. Nelson Blake wrote Mahone's standard biography, *William Mahone of Virginia*, but largely neglected the general's military career. Except for the Battle of the Crater, Blake primarily focused on Mahone's long career as a railroad executive. Douglas Southall Freeman passingly mentions Mahone in *R.E. Lee and Lee's Lieutenants* but neglects his war career.²

One reason that Mahone was ignored for so long as a major contributor to the war effort was probably his controversial postwar activity. After the War, Mahone became the leader of the "Readjuster" party in Virginia, which became the Republican party, and he was the principal political leader of the state for a short time during Reconstruction and for several years afterward. His role obviously did not satisfy those who felt betrayed by the ex-Confederate officer.

This study is based heavily on primary documents and on later journal accounts. During the later years of Mahone's life, his military career at Petersburg was frequently the subject of published articles. Most of the literature came from Confederate veterans who had served with him. These

accounts are supplemented by his personal letters and correspondences. The primary sources used for this study come from the National Archives, Duke University, University of North Carolina, the State Library of Virginia, the Virginia Archives, and the Virginia Military Institute. These sources were used along with the primary accounts found in *Southern Historical Society Papers* and the *War of the Rebellion: Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* to give an overall picture of the command situation at Petersburg.

After Mahone died in 1895, there was very little study of his military career until Blake’s biography of Mahone in 1935. In the 1960s, there were a few books and articles that dealt with Mahone, such as Charles L. Dufour’s *Nine Men in Gray*, which dedicates as much to Mahone’s military career as Blake. Dufour covers Mahone’s life in thirty pages. It is a basic biography, but in some respects it goes into more detail than Blake’s book. There is, however, very little analysis of Mahone’s military career. Dufour’s book does not discuss the importance of Mahone to the Confederate military, and it has no discussion of Mahone’s development as a military tactician.

Mahone and the siege of Petersburg were not thoroughly studied for many years because the gruesome war of attrition that developed during the last year of the war was not something that many scholars researched. In more recent years, the number of books and articles that deal with the Petersburg campaign has grown dramatically, and most
historians devote at least some attention to Mahone's actions.

Noah Trudeau's *The Last Citadel*, published in 1991, gave a good interpretation of Mahone through the Petersburg campaign. His book is the standard military history of the siege, from June of 1864 to April 1865, and he places Mahone in every relevant engagement. His book was the first complete and careful history of the siege; however, Mahone's contributions are discussed only incidentally, and there is no overall analysis of Mahone's larger role.

There is also John Horn's book, *The Petersburg Campaign*, that covers the same general ground as Trudeau's but with more detail about Mahone. However, Horn makes Mahone a peripheral figure rather than a principal one, and no analysis is given to his role in the siege. The works of Trudeau and Horn are the two major histories of the Petersburg siege. Otherwise, the secondary literature on Mahone is very sparse, as is literature about the Confederate command style during the siege. These two topics deserve more careful attention and are the primary focus of this study.

The only engagement that has attracted extensive discussion of Mahone as a military commander was the Battle of the Crater. Because it was such an unusual battle, there have been many works discussing this event. There have been numerous articles written in the *Southern Historical Society Papers*, and many accounts of the battle are in the *Official Records*; however, the best analysis and discussion occurred
in George S. Bernard's *War Talks of Confederate Veterans*. Bernard was a member of Mahone's Virginia brigade and had first-hand knowledge of the affair. He draws from the official documents of the battle, along with numerous first-hand accounts. He received information from the commanders of both sides and the ordinary soldier in the trenches. It is an excellent source of information. This engagement, however, demonstrated only one example of Mahone's military capabilities.

The Army of Northern Virginia's grand strategy during the siege consisted of many parts. At Petersburg, Lee was forced to take the defensive and react to the movements of Ulysses S. Grant's overwhelming military force. Lee was outnumbered two-to-one in the last year of the war. The standard secondary sources that discuss the military events of that summer of 1864 usually fail to place Mahone in the larger strategy. J.F.C. Fuller's *Grant & Lee* is probably the most definitive analysis of the larger strategy employed by Grant and Lee. This work, however, fails to mention Mahone and many other subordinate commanders who carried out respective pieces of the larger plans. Mahone was successful in making tactical strikes against the Union army to keep the Federals from cutting off the Confederate supply lines that flowed into Petersburg from the South. This strategy became what is described in this study as the limited offensive.

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The Confederates successfully pursued this limited offensive strategy for the entire summer of 1864 with Mahone as one of the main elements. This maneuvering inflicted over twenty thousand casualties on the Union force. The Confederacy’s primary military goal, apart from defending Richmond and Petersburg, was apparently to influence the northern presidential election in November of 1864.

If Lincoln were to lose to George B. McClellan and the Peace Democrats, there might have been a chance for a political settlement of the war. At that late stage, the chance of negotiation with the Peace Democrats represented the Confederacy’s only chance at reaching a successful end. While the Army of Northern Virginia’s strategy was successful in inflicting casualties on the Union army, this strategy did not break the will of the Union to win an unconditional surrender.

Mahone was an important figure during the siege of Petersburg. The limited historical literature has no discussion of his significant place in the development of this desperate Confederate military strategy, and there has been no work dedicated to his military successes at Petersburg. This is a study of Mahone’s contribution to the Confederate military operations at Petersburg.
CHAPTER II

THE MAKING OF A CONFEDERATE COMMANDER

William Mahone’s contribution to Confederate military operations during the siege of Petersburg proved important to the Confederacy’s survival. Mahone’s emergence as a military commander during the last year of the American Civil War was predicated on earlier experiences. How and why was he able to achieve success during the siege?

Mahone had a very successful and fulfilling life before the outbreak of the Civil War. Born on December 1, 1826, in Southampton County, Virginia, he grew up in and around the areas where he was to have his greatest success in the Civil War. His father, Fielding J. Mahone, owned a tavern in Southampton County. This environment encouraged young William Mahone’s independent spirit, along with his taste for gambling and profanity. Mahone’s family moved around a lot during his youth; thus, young William met a wide range of people. Fielding Mahone wanted to be closer to the centers of travel in Southampton County, so young Mahone learned early the importance of the railroad when his family moved closer to the new Portsmouth and Roanoke Railroad that was planned to run through Southampton County.

When Mahone was fifteen, he entered Littletown Academy in Sussex County for the first formal education that he received. While at the academy for two years, Mahone

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1Dufour, 233.
received social and cultural training, as well as academic. He came in contact with the sons of many prominent families in the area. In 1844, at the age of seventeen, Mahone entered the Virginia Military Institute. Appointed as state cadet, he obtained free board and tuition. At V.M.I. he showed a decided talent for mathematics and engineering, as well as military tactics. He was at the top of his class in both of these subjects.

The military tactics book that was used by Mahone at V.M.I. was Dennis Hart Mahan's *A Complete Treatise on Field Fortifications*. Mahan was a professor of engineering at the United States Military Institute, West Point. He influenced many future military commanders, men who fought for both sides in the Civil War. Mahone graduated from V.M.I. in the summer of 1847 with the distinction of being an above-average student. The training that he received prepared him for his future military role.

V.M.I. provided Virginia and the Confederacy with a large reservoir of trained manpower that proved very effective as a source of commanders in the coming war. The Institute's basic education was accompanied by military drill which prepared its students to serve as

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2Blake, 12.


4Ibid.

5Ibid.
noncommissioned or junior officers. These men instructed the Confederacy's newly organized regiments in 1861. They gave the South, and especially the Army of Northern Virginia where most of these men served, a distinct advantage in the Civil War.

After V.M.I., Mahone accepted a teaching position at Rappahannock Academy in January, 1848. Because he was unable to find a job as a civil engineer, he taught at the Academy until the summer of 1849, when he was appointed as a surveyor in the engineering corps of the Orange and Alexandria Railroad. His survey work for the railroad ended in 1851, when Mahone was appointed as chief engineer of the Fredericksburg and Valley Plank Road Company. This road was designed to stretch from Fredericksburg to Gordonsville, Virginia through Spotsylvania and Orange counties. A decade later, Mahone was conducting military operations in these same areas as part of the Army of Northern Virginia. His knowledge of the terrain gave him an advantage over Union military commanders. As chief engineer of the Norfolk and Petersburg Railroad Company, he increased his knowledge of the Petersburg area.

The building of a railroad in southeastern Virginia then attracted Mahone's interest. Mahone realized that there was a greater future in railroads than in plank roads.

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"Blake, 18.

"Ibid., 22."
He wanted to have a part in the modernization of that section of the state where he grew up. He, therefore, made an effort to become the chief engineer of the Norfolk and Petersburg Railroad. His efforts succeeded when on April 12, 1853 he was elected chief engineer of the railroad. Mahone organized an engineering corps and surveyed the entire area from Norfolk to Petersburg. He was finished in October of 1853. The railroad’s entire line was completed on September 1, 1858.9 In April 1860, the Norfolk and Petersburg Railroad Company decided to consolidate the office of president and chief engineer, and Mahone was elected to the position at thirty-three years of age.10 He understood that Virginia must progress industrially to keep up with the North and was, therefore, one of the biggest supporters of internal state improvements, such as railroads and plank roads.

In 1861, at the outbreak of the Civil War, Mahone lived in Norfolk, Virginia. He had settled into his new job and was making a family with Otelia Butler, whom he had married on February 8, 1855.11 Mahone was making plans to consolidate the different railroads of the area into a system from Norfolk to Bristol, Tenn. The ultimate objective of this venture was to extend these connections to

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9Ibid., 31.
10Ibid., 32.
11Ibid., 35.
the Mississippi and to the Pacific coast.\footnote{Jedediah Hotchkiss, Virginia (Atlanta: Confederate Publishing Co., 1899), 634.} Mahone’s ventures and peaceful life were quickly shattered, however, by the outbreak of the American Civil War.

On April 12, 1861, Fort Sumter was fired upon, and William Mahone was never the same again. After Southern forces fired upon Federal Fort Sumter, President Lincoln called for troops to be sent from every state to suppress the rebellion. In response, the Virginia convention voted to secede from the Union. William Mahone was apparently an ardent secessionist. He was in Richmond when the Ordinance of Secession was passed.\footnote{Biographical information on William Mahone, Virginia Military Institute class of 1847, Mahone Papers, Virginia Military Institute Archives.} Surprisingly, he favored secession even though, according to the 1860 census records, he did not own any slaves.\footnote{United States Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, United States Census of Population: 1860, Vol. 10, Virginia, 529.} He followed the shift of power in the state toward secession, and accompanied Virginia into the Confederacy.

Given Mahone’s military training at the Virginia Military Institute, he was given a command of a regiment and later a brigade during the early months of the war. On April 29, 1861, Governor John Letcher appointed Mahone a lieutenant colonel of infantry. Later, on May 2, Mahone was promoted to colonel and assigned to the command of the 6th Virginia Infantry. The regiment was accepted into
Confederate service on July 1, 1861 and was stationed in the defenses around Norfolk. On November 16, 1861, Mahone was promoted to brigadier general. He retained command of the Second Brigade, which he had been commanding since October, 1861. The defense of Norfolk was his responsibility until the spring of 1862.

George B. McClellan, commander of the Union Army of the Potomac, launched his Peninsular campaign in the spring of 1862. Confederate leaders felt that this assault made Norfolk untenable; Mahone and the Confederate authorities in Norfolk evacuated the city. Mahone had retained his position as president of the Norfolk and Petersburg Railroad, but on May 1, 1862, Secretary of War George W. Randolph ordered him to instruct his superintendent to take charge of the business.

On May 9, Mahone had been ordered to reinforce Major General Richard Ewell’s division, which was on its way to join Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson in the Shenandoah Valley. But on May 14, General Robert E. Lee ordered Mahone to Drewry’s Bluff, which was only eight miles from Richmond. Mahone was to defend the area against McClellan’s army,


16Dufour, 236.

which was marching up the north side of the James River. He commanded the defenses until the end of May, when he joined the Confederate army's offensive against McClellan.18

On May 31 and June 1, his brigade took part in the Battle of Seven Pines, which occurred about seven miles east of Richmond.19 The assistance of Mahone's brigade to Major General D. H. Hill's men was instrumental in the repulse of the Union Army.20 For the next month, the Union and Confederate armies faced each other in the trenches around Richmond. The brigade was down to only 1,800 men during this period. Several skirmishes between scouting parties in advance of Confederate lines occurred, but no engagement of any consequence happened until June 25, 1862. On June 25, the Union army attacked Mahone's section of the Confederate line.21 This was the start of the Seven Days' Battles, but Mahone's men did not see any further action until the engagement at Malvern Hill on July 1, 1862. This battle was the bloodiest of the Seven Days' campaign.

The Confederate Army, now under the command of Robert E. Lee, pushed the Federals back from the outskirts of Richmond. But during this great Confederate push, Lee ordered his men to attack a well-fortified Union position. At Malvern Hill, the Confederates had to pass over a

19Ibid., part 1, 945, 978.
20Blake, 43.
succession of steep hills and ravines. Mahone's brigade took part in this foolish engagement and suffered mightily for it. His brigade consisted of 1226 men before the Battle of Malvern Hill, but after the battle only 897 men remained. His casualties were 39 killed, 166 wounded, and 124 missing, for a total of 329. More than twenty-six percent of his brigade was lost. Mahone saw firsthand the problems of attacking a well-entrenched enemy. This knowledge proved useful in his later campaigns.

The Battle of Malvern Hill was a bloody failure for the Confederacy, but it successfully ended a campaign that pushed the Union army away from Richmond. Mahone's command fought well during the battle, but there was little chance of success in the position he was placed. Robert E. Lee reorganized the Army of Northern Virginia after the Seven Days' Battles into two corps.

Mahone's brigade was then assigned to the division of Major General Richard Anderson, which was part of General James Longstreet's corps. Mahone's next engagement was the Battle of Second Manassas, on August 29-30, where he was severely wounded. As he was leading a flank attack against the Union army, a bullet hit Mahone on his left

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22Ibid., part 2, 796-801, 981, 672.

23Ibid., part 3, 651.

*"When word was brought to Mrs. Mahone that William was injured at Manassas, she became alarmed. But she was told it was only a flesh wound, in an effort to calm her. "Flesh Wound!" Mrs. Mahone exclaimed. "It can't be a flesh wound; the General hasn't any flesh!" Blake, 45."
chest over a rib. He fell just as he was ordering his brigade to attack the Union flank. Because of his injury, Mahone was forced to be absent from Lee’s campaign into Maryland. But he rejoined the Army in time for the battle of Fredericksburg, in December.

Fredericksburg was an area that Mahone knew very well because he had been the chief engineer of the Fredericksburg and Valley Plank Road Company. Longstreet instructed Mahone to construct the line of fortifications on his entire front because he had surveyed this area before the war. He had a part in deciding where the Confederates should position critical artillery batteries on top of Marye’s Heights. Mahone’s division commander, Richard Anderson, commended him for this after the battle, commenting that: "It is due to Brigadier-General Mahone to say that he discovered and pointed out the important position for a battery, which covered the slope upon which the enemy formed his battalions before and after his attacks upon Marye’s Hill." Mahone also assisted in the decision-making process of the battle, although on December 13, 1862, his command was mainly in reserve.

During the Battle of Chancellorsville, which took place from April 29 thorough May 3, 1863, Mahone was also

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27Ibid., part 1, 609.
positioned in front of the city of Fredericksburg. Here his brigade helped to repulse Union General John Sedgwick, who was coming to the aid of Joseph Hooker at Chancellorsville."

The Battle of Chancellorsville was a victory for the Confederacy, but the Confederacy lost one of its greatest generals, Stonewall Jackson. He was wounded performing a left flank attack on the Union Army and was successful in pushing the enemy back. In the reorganization of the Confederate Army after the death of Jackson, Richard Anderson's division was placed in Lieutenant General A.P. Hill's Third Corps. This was the corps with which Mahone fought at Gettysburg.

At the Battle of Gettysburg on July 1-3, 1863, Mahone's brigade took little part. His men acted as skirmishers during the battle and were kept in reserve. His report afterwards was that his brigade was constantly engaged. As skirmishers, his brigade was exposed to a large share of artillery shelling and suffered over one hundred casualties." After the battle of Gettysburg, Mahone's command was mainly inactive until the Overland campaign of 1864.

In the early spring of 1864, Ulysses S. Grant was appointed Lieutenant General of the Union Army. Grant was in command of all Union forces in the country, but he

\[\text{28Ibid., Vol. XXV, part 1, 801, 854.}\]

\[\text{29Ibid., Vol. XXVII, part 2, 621.}\]
directed his attention toward the Army of the Potomac in Virginia. His forces were stationed just north of the Rapidan River; on May 3rd and 4th, Grant started across the river. When he engaged the Confederate army on May 5th, the Battle of the Wilderness began. It was during the Battle of the Wilderness that Mahone began to emerge as a leader in the Confederate military.

William Mahone was not a man, however, who seemed to fit the mold of a great military commander. He was smaller than five feet seven inches tall and barely weighed one hundred pounds. His voice was almost a falsetto tenor. According to John Wise, a soldier at Petersburg, "he was the oddest and daintiest little specimen of humanity I had ever seen." He dressed very plainly; if he wore a coat it was a common Confederate jacket without any sort of insignia to indicate that he was a general. During the Civil War, Mahone’s headquarters was like a barnyard. Because of dyspepsia, he subsisted on milk and eggs. Therefore, he always kept a cow and a flock of chickens nearby. This was William Mahone - a small, unassuming man who gave the Union army more problems than it knew what to do with in the summer of 1864.

30Blake, 48.


32I.M. Auld to Mother, 13 July 1864, I.M. Auld Papers, Putnam County Library, Palatka, Florida.

The goal of General Grant's Overland campaign was to destroy the Army of Northern Virginia and keep Lee occupied so he would not reinforce Joseph E. Johnston's army of Tennessee. Johnston was occupied in Georgia trying to keep Union General William Tecumseh Sherman from capturing Atlanta. Grant was going to end the war one way or the other with his campaign. He wanted to press Lee and the Army of Northern Virginia until they were defeated.

Lee had to keep the Union army out of Richmond and inflict as many casualties as possible to cause the people of the North to demand an end to the war. Grant, however, was willing to fight a war of attrition. Four years of stalemate in the east had brought the war to this point, and the Overland campaign was to be the bloodiest of the Civil War.

Mahone had a key role in the Battle of the Wilderness and the entire Overland campaign. He was familiar with the terrain. On May 6, 1864, he led his brigade in General Longstreet's flank attack on the left of the Union's Second corps, commanded by Winfield Scott Hancock. This battle took place in Orange county, near the Orange Plank road. Mahone had surveyed this entire area before the war for the Orange and Alexandria Railroad. The flank attack was successful, but in an attempt to follow up this success, Longstreet was severely wounded by a party of his own men. As a result of this injury, on May 7, 1864, Major General Richard Anderson was assigned to the command of Longstreet's corps. Mahone was than placed in temporary command of
Anderson's division. This division consisted of roughly 8,000 men, and Mahone commanded it through Appomattox.

Grant was repulsed at the Battle of the Wilderness, but he refused to retreat. He moved his army forward, trying to get around Lee's right flank. The two armies met again at Spotsylvania Courthouse; between May 8th and May 19th, continuous fighting ensued. Mahone's division played an active role here and, later, in halting Union General Gouverneur K. Warren's advance on the North Anna river on May 23rd, 1864. Grant continuously pushed southward toward Lee's right flank. This continuous drive led Grant to challenge strong rebel positions in several instances, the most infamous of these being the battle of Cold Harbor.

On June 3, 1864, Grant tried to capture strongly held Confederate works and suffered one of his greatest losses. In about an hour, he received 7,300 casualties. Mahone's troops during this battle were held in reserve to back up any position if a section of Rebel line was broken. Mahone again witnessed the problem with attacking well-entrenched works. But even after this engagement, Grant was not willing to retreat and continued to press southward.

Grant crossed the James River south of Richmond and attempted to capture the railroad and supply center of Petersburg, Virginia. At Petersburg, however, Mahone would

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35Ibid., part 1, 1030-1031.
36Ibid., part 1, 1032, 1033-1035.
prove to be a substantial obstacle to Grant's plans of capturing Petersburg and ending the Civil War.

Mahone had a number of advantages over other Confederate and Union leaders at Petersburg. He was from the area where the campaign was being fought. He had surveyed the ground before the war, and he knew where to make successful flank attacks. He was a railroad president, so he was very aware of the importance of the railroads to the survival of the Confederacy. He knew why Petersburg was so important to the Confederacy and why the Union had to capture it. Mahone was aware of the entrenching defenses used by the Confederacy. He saw how well-entrenched troops were able to destroy the enemy at Malvern Hill, Fredericksburg, and Cold Harbor. He brought this understanding with him to Petersburg.

Mahone was obedient to the commands of his superiors, but he exercised a most liberal right of private judgment when he was sure of the facts. One example of this occurred after the battle of Cold Harbor in June of 1864. His superior, Richard Anderson, told Robert E. Lee that the Union army had left their front, and Mahone was ordered to attack. But Mahone knew that the Union army was still in his front, and to throw his division upon them could only end in disaster, as cruel as it was unnecessary. He informed Lee of the fact; however, Anderson insisted, and the order was reiterated to charge. Mahone knew that to obey that order would mean the annihilation of his division. He went ahead with the charge, but instead of using his
whole division he sent one hundred men to make the charge. The order was obeyed, and in less than half an hour the charge had been repulsed by the Union army. Mahone was all too aware that attacks against a well-entrenched enemy were foolish.

By May of 1864, Mahone's division was one of the strongest that Lee had in the army. Because of this numerical strength, Mahone's division was used frequently as Lee's shock troops for the remainder of the war. This was a major reason why he became so effective at Petersburg and goes far to explain his success as a division commander in the Army of Northern Virginia. Mahone used his military training at the Virginia Military Institute and his knowledge of the areas that he had surveyed before the war to his advantage during the last year of the war when he became one of Lee's best generals.

Mahone was not a political general, even though he had friends in the Virginia legislature. He was elected to the Virginia State Senate in May of 1863 from the city of Norfolk, but this did not interfere with his military activities. He did not take his seat until March 1, 1864 because of his military duties. He also returned to the army two months later in time for the Overland campaign.

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39 Blake, 48.
Mahone contributed much needed insight to the Confederate army during the final year of the war, which the Confederacy used to its advantage. This study describes Mahone’s contribution to Confederate military operations during the siege of Petersburg and his emergence as an effective Confederate commander.
CHAPTER III

THE PROBLEM OF PETERSBURG

Petersburg, Virginia, is a small city about twenty-five miles south of Richmond, but for ten months in the summer of 1864 it was the center of the American Civil War. Although the war was never far away from Petersburg, it was not until June of 1864 that the trenches around Petersburg became filled with soldiers. It was also here that American military strategy changed. Both the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia and the Union Army of the Potomac endured a life in the trenches. The trench warfare that dominated this campaign mystified the military leaders of the Civil War just as trench warfare would confound military leaders of the First World War. The offensive thinking of Confederate and Union commanders was drastically altered by the entrenchments around Petersburg.

Petersburg, Virginia, was a busy city in the 1850s and 1860s. It had a population of 18,266, which made it one of the biggest cities in the state. Located on the south bank of the Appomattox River, Petersburg was linked by water and rail to the James River and the Atlantic Ocean. Before the War, tobacco and cotton played major roles in Petersburg’s economy. The onset of war brought military industries to Petersburg, including factories to produce military supplies, as well as offices to manage the labor needs of
the important Richmond-Petersburg region. Petersburg was important to the economic and military stability of Richmond.

The war managed to elude the city of Petersburg for three years, but this does not mean that the city was not noticed by the Union army. Petersburg was an important railroad center, and there were five railroads that converged on the city. The Richmond and Petersburg Railroad connected Petersburg with Richmond to the north. The Weldon Railroad connected Petersburg with Weldon, North Carolina, to the south and thence to Wilmington, the Confederates' only available port. These railroads were the only direct rail line between Richmond and the Carolinas in 1860. The South Side Railroad ran west to Roanoke and eastern Tennessee. The South Side Railroad linked Petersburg with the Deep South via Roanoke and Chattanooga. The City Point Railroad linked Petersburg with the deepwater port at City Point, which is at the mouth of the Appomattox river. The Norfolk & Petersburg Railroad ran from Petersburg to Norfolk, but this was closed off to the Confederacy in 1862. Since these railroads provided much needed supplies for Petersburg and Richmond, their capture became a primary concern for the Union forces. Grant knew that the capture of Petersburg could force the surrender of Richmond.

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1Trudeau, 4.
2Horn, 12.
Petersburg, however, was not a defenseless city. In 1862, a Confederate engineer, Charles Dimmock, built a string of 55 batteries in a ten-mile arc around the city. This string of batteries was anchored on the Appomattox River, and they were linked together with strong earthen fortifications. They were designed to enable a small force to delay a major attack until help could arrive. These defenses were a major asset to the city of Petersburg.

As for the strength of these fortifications, the troops would sometimes use arbitrary measures to construct these works. The walls of solid earth could get to be ten to fifteen feet thick which was enough to stop the heaviest cannon. It was discovered as the war developed that even a slight work, if held by a strong rifle fire, always prevailed against an attacking force, unless the defenders were attacked in overwhelming numbers. The question for the Confederates, was whether or not they had enough manpower to hold these trenches.

When Ulysses S. Grant took over command of the Union forces in Virginia in March of 1864, he ordered all Union forces to work in a concerted effort to defeat the different armies of the Confederacy. Grant and the Army of the Potomac made Lee’s army and Richmond their objectives.

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General William Sherman, who took over the Union Army of Tennessee in the west, was to make Joseph E. Johnston's army and the city of Atlanta his objective. General Ben Butler was to advance up the James River, with either Richmond or Petersburg as his objective. This was Grant's plan when the spring campaigns got underway in May of 1864.

Grant was determined, however, to defeat Lee's Army of Northern Virginia, and what ensued was some of the bloodiest combat of the Civil War. He began this campaign at the Wilderness on May 5, 1864, and his army suffered horrific losses. But Grant pushed on to Richmond through the bloody battles at Spotsylvania, North Anna, and Cold Harbor. At the battle of Cold Harbor alone, from June 1-3, 1864, Grant's army suffered 9,948 casualties. Most of these casualties occurred on the assault of June 3, 1864. Grant's bloody roads south did not discourage the commanding general. From the battle of the Wilderness to Cold Harbor, he suffered around 64,000 casualties. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia suffered a loss of about 30,000 men. Including the assaults, on June 15 to 18, Grant had lost more men than Lee had in the Army of Northern Virginia when the campaign opened. Grant, however, planned to destroy

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"Freeman, R.E. Lee, Vol. 4, 446."
Lee's Army of Northern Virginia if it took him all summer.

Grant turned his sights to Petersburg in early June of 1864 and began his assault on the lines around the city on June 15, 1864. Lee was not oblivious to the threat that Grant posed to the Confederate positions south of the James. In early June of 1864, Lee wrote to General Jubal Early, "We must destroy this army of Grant's before he gets to the James River. If he gets there, it will become a siege, and then it will be a mere question of time." It was the first instance that Lee ever hinted at a Confederate defeat.

In June of 1864, P. G. T. Beauregard commanded the Confederate forces in front of Petersburg. His forces were thinly distributed along the entire line. On the morning of June 15, Beauregard had for the defence of Petersburg no more than 2,200 soldiers. The Union army, commanded by William "Baldy" Smith, confronted Beauregard with about 20,000 troops. General Smith arrived in position around the enemy's works around 1:30 p.m., but he did not launch his attack until about 7:00 p.m. He captured the enemy's outer works in about twenty minutes, but with the onset of darkness, he stopped his advance and waited for reinforcements. Lee was still unaware that Grant had even started to send reinforcements to Petersburg.

Lee wrote on June 16, 1864 that he did not know the

9Ibid., 398.


position of Grant's army: "Have not heard of Grant's crossing James River." On the same day, Beauregard counted three Federal corps across the James River. This force totaled about 53,000 men. Beauregard had only about 10,000 men with the addition of Bushrod Johnson's division from the defenses around Richmond. Beauregard wrote to Lee on June 17, 1864: "Enemy in large force, reported to be three corps—Second, Ninth, and Eighteenth." Beauregard told Lee that: "prisoners report that Grant on the field with his whole army." Finally, on June 18th, two days after the first reply, Lee reported to Jubal A. Early that, "Grant is in front of Petersburg." Lee's whole Army of Northern Virginia was now put in the trenches defending Petersburg. As a result of Smith's tardy assault, Grant and the Army of the Potomac were forced to lay siege. This began nine months of siege warfare.

By June 18, 1864, most of Lee's army was in the trenches defending Petersburg. That afternoon, William Mahone's division arrived. James E. Phillips, a member of Mahone's division, who was in the 12th Virginia regiment, recalled the arrival. On Saturday, June 18, 1864, they crossed the James River on pontoons. They arrived at

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15Ibid., 667.
Petersburg at 4:00 p.m., and the day was clear and very warm. This was an area that Mahone and the men from his Virginia brigade knew well, since most of them came from Petersburg and the Southside Virginia area.

Lee's army arrived with a very depleted force compared to the one that started the campaign in May of 1864. The combat of the last month had cost Lee thirty-seven per cent of the general officers of the army as casualties of war. The old organization of the Army was largely gone, and most that remained were new general officers who were untested in commanding large bodies of men. The majority of the divisional commanders were new to their positions. General John B. Gordon was new to his position as division commander in the Second Corps. General William Mahone, who was now a divisional commander in the Third Corps, had never acted in that capacity until May 8, 1864. New commanders were going to have to rise to the challenge.

As the siege of Petersburg began on June 19, 1864, Lee and the Confederacy had a number of issues to be concerned about. Lee was forced to hold a line of trenches that was now over twenty-six miles in length from Richmond to south and west of Petersburg. He had to prevent the Union army from seizing ground that would force the Confederate army back into the defenses around Richmond. He also had to

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17 Freeman, Lee's Lieutenants, Vol. 3, 514.
protect Richmond against a surprise attack while at the same time keeping open the railroads, on which his army and the cities of Petersburg and Richmond depended.\textsuperscript{18} These were the tasks that faced Lee and Mahone in June of 1864.

Lee was well aware of how serious the situation was. In a letter to one of his corps commanders in June 1864, he wrote, "The time has arrived, in my opinion, when something more is necessary than adhering to lines and defensive positions. We shall be obliged to go out and prevent the enemy from selecting positions as he chooses."\textsuperscript{19} Lee understood the situation and realized that a change in strategy was necessary. From this time on, Lee was engaged in a limited offensive against the Union forces. This strategy would keep the Union army off guard while allowing the Confederates to pick and choose their points of attack. Lee realized that the Union Army could not be allowed to continue the course that they were following because "we shall at last be obliged to take refuge behind the works around Richmond and stand a siege, which would be but a work of time. You must be prepared to fight him in the field, to prevent him taking positions such as he desires."\textsuperscript{20} A significant change in Confederate strategy now began.

Since a new strategy dominated the last year of the

\textsuperscript{18}Freeman, \textit{R.E. Lee}, Vol. 3, 448.

\textsuperscript{19}O.R. Vol. XL, part 2, 703.

\textsuperscript{20}Ibid.
Civil War, it is important to examine how the transition to trench warfare occurred. This new conduct is designated as the limited offensive strategy in this study. The evolution of trench warfare is important in understanding Lee and Mahone's reasons for developing this strategy at Petersburg. First, however, military strategies that dominated the nineteenth century, as well as the Civil War, need to be discussed.

Any study of military strategy in the nineteenth century must begin with Napoleon Bonaparte of France and the influence his campaigns had on military thinking. Napoleon led his country during a period of revolution and conquest that had a huge influence on the European continent. His success with offensive mobility during his campaigns in the Napoleonic wars played a huge part in influencing future generations. There was a tremendous transition, however, from the fluid strategic and tactical movements of the Napoleonic wars to the trench warfare of the American Civil War. This transition occurred over two generations.21 The armies of the Napoleonic wars were very different from the armies that fought in the Civil War. However, the strategies and tactics that these armies fought with were derived from Napoleon Bonaparte.

The most influential disciple of Napoleon, in the United States, was Antoine-Henri Jomini. Jomini dedicated

21Edward H. Hagerman, "The Evolution of Trench Warfare In the American Civil War" (Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 1965), 422.
his life to making warfare scientific; he devised a set of scripted techniques for military analysis and planning that continues to dominate thinking on the subject. Jomini's approach to the art of war removes war from its social and political context, instead emphasizing decision-making rules and operational results. His approach has been extremely durable over the years, and he deserved the title of founder of modern strategy."

Jomini spent his entire life examining the campaigns of Napoleon and the Prussian Frederick the Great. Jomini put great importance on the influence that great leaders could play on military operations. Jomini saw war mainly in personal, heroic terms, controlled by the great commander. The commanding general dominated the men who served him with sheer intellect and will, and he used these men to defeat his enemies. Jomini felt that a government should choose its best military commander, then leave him free to wage war according to scientific principles. Governments should not neglect their armed forces, but should not interfere in matters that only educated officers understand."

This idea of not interfering with the military was quickly adopted by military professionals all over the world, including the United States.

Jomini was not the first and was not to be the last


Ibid., 158, 161.
military strategist, but it was his ideas on strategy and
tactics that still merit discussion by military scholars.
Jomini’s ideal view of strategy was that strategic maneuver
by a highly mobile army aimed at cutting the opponent’s
lines of communication was most desirable. However, he
considered strategic maneuver, and particularly battlefield
flanking maneuvers, so difficult to execute that they could
not be depended upon. The more dependable strategy was the
direct and concentrated approach, with the ultimate
dependence on the massed frontal assault.24

The massed frontal assault was one of the most
influential ideas taken from the works of Jomini. But this
was just one of many tactical ideas that came from his work.
Jomini developed an offensive strategic system based on this
frontal assault. But his position on the virtues of the
offensive versus the defensive is quite confusing. On one
hand, Jomini wrote, "The offensive is almost always
advantageous, particularly in strategy." If the art of war
consists of throwing the mass of troops upon the decisive
point, it will be necessary to take the offensive. On the
other hand, Jomini wrote, "A defensive war is not without
its advantages when wisely conducted. It may be passive or
active, taking the offensive at times. The passive defense
is always pernicious; the active may accomplish great

24Antoine Henri Jomini, "Summary of the Art of War",
trans. Captain G.H. Mendell and Captain W.P. Craighill
(Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott & Co., 1862; reprint,
success.\textsuperscript{25} Jomini seems to have a liking for the active defense that was so successfully used by Frederick the Great. He held up the campaigns of Frederick and the Duke of Wellington as examples of how successful the active defense can be. Jomini's position on the defensive is that "an army is reduced to the defensive ... by a positive inferiority. It then seeks in the support of forts and in natural or artificial barriers, the means of restoring equality by multiplying obstacles in the way of the enemy."\textsuperscript{26} This is Jomini's basic concept of defensive military strategy. The fortifications are needed to assist this strategy.

Jomini's ideas for strategy and tactics influenced future generations of military theorists, including those in the United States. The most important American theorist during this generation was Dennis Hart Mahan. Mahan graduated at the top of the West Point class of 1824 and was assigned to the Corps of Engineers; then he was immediately appointed to the faculty of the Military Academy. The Army sent Mahan, before he assumed his teaching duties, to France for a four-year tour as student and observer; one year of this tour was spent at the School of Engineering and Artillery at Metz.

Mahan returned in 1830 to assume his teaching duties at West Point. In 1832, he was appointed Professor of Military

\footnote{Ibid., 72.}

\footnote{Ibid., 74.}
and Civil Engineering and of the Science of War. He held this position until his death in 1870. It was in this position that he influenced the future military commanders of the United States. Many of these commanders would be high-ranking officers during the Civil War. Moreover, Mahan’s writings influenced American military commanders for over a generation.

Mahan’s teachings were rich in French strategic techniques. However, he modified the teachings to be more sensitive to the conditions in the United States. The defense of the United States was dependent upon a small, professional officer corps in command of militia troops. These militia troops were important members of the community and not to be taken for granted by military men in a democracy; these men were voters. Mahan rebelled against the disregard for life that was prevalent in European doctrine. He saw this to be implied in the use of the massed frontal assault.  

Mahan’s teachings influenced a new group of American strategists. Mahan developed a tactical system in which he advocated the primacy of active defense. Mahan came into contact with this strategy from the study of European strategists, primarily Jomini. He felt that the active defense was superior to the massed frontal assault, mainly because the militia that was used in the United States

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lacked the discipline and experience to execute a frontal assault. This strategy was the backbone of Mahan's system. Mahan felt that "The chief object of entrenchments is to enable the assailed to meet the enemy with success, by first compelling him to approach under every disadvantage of position, and then, when he has been cut up, to assume the offensive, and drive him back." The goal of the active defense is to stay on the defensive until the enemy has been beaten and then attack.

The offensive-minded strategy of Napoleon in the early nineteenth century was slowly turned into a military strategy that became defensive oriented. However, it did not change overnight; a number of different factors were to bring about this change in offensive doctrine. Yet, at the outbreak of the American Civil War, the strategic thought of American military commanders was still very offensive. Operational mobility and offensive warfare encountered a number of obstacles during the Civil War. The undisciplined nature of a volunteer army had a profound impact on tactical movement. Other obstacles to successful mobility were inadequate tactical communications to coordinate operations along an extended front in heavily wooded and swampy terrain.

The most important factor, however, affecting tactical mobility was the changing balance of power in favor of the entrenched defensive, over the offensive, as the increased

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"Ibid., 14."
firepower of the new infantry weapons gradually began to make itself felt. The transition to rifled infantry weapons and minie ball bullets revolutionized tactics in the Civil War. This was especially true in the 1864-65 campaign in Virginia. According to J.F.C. Fuller, this campaign was not one of bayonets, but of rifled bullets. Unlike previous wars, where the bayonet played a huge role in tactics, it had little use in the Civil War. It was the rifled bullet that created the trenches and rifle pits at Petersburg. There were very few bayonet wounds in the Petersburg campaign of 1864. It was the rifle and the rifled bullet that kept the opposing armies in a constant close contact; this prevented the quick decisions of battles that occurred during preceding centuries. In 1861-65, the rifled bullet commanded the battlefield as did the machine-gun bullet in 1914-18. The added range, velocity, and accuracy of the rifled musket gave the tactical defense a very important advantage over the offensive.

The influence that Dennis Hart Mahan had on the future military commanders of the Civil War must not be underestimated. He taught future commanders like Ulysses S. Grant, William T. Sherman, Henry Halleck, P.G.T. Beauregard, and George B. McClellan. These commanders were to have a major impact on how the war was to be fought. Mahan, like Jomini, preached the necessity of a professional army. He

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also believed that, although the defensive was better for a militia system, a well-disciplined force led by professionals should be aggressive. He did not completely give up the idea of a massed frontal assault's success. Many of Mahan's students trimmed and oversimplified his lessons. They became enamored with professionalism and offensives, ignoring many of his warnings and much of his discussion of timeless principles. Many of the students of Mahan made a commitment to professionalism and the tactical offensive; this soon became orthodoxy in the regular army. This change was very different for a military that had a tradition of citizen soldiers and defensive warfare.

The change from defensive to offensive warfare was seen frequently in the Civil War. The Confederate Army under the command of Robert E. Lee and Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson took this offensive strategy to its farthest point. Lee and Jackson were not so much disciples of Mahan or Jomini as they were of Napoleon himself. Lee's goal was to maneuver against the enemy's rear and flanks to deal psychological and physical blows which would annihilate the enemy's army. This was a Napoleonic strategy direct from Napoleon himself. Lee studied Napoleon frequently while he was superintendent of West Point from 1852 to 1855. Lee, in his quest to destroy the Federal armies as effective fighting forces, moved closer to Jackson's completely offensive strategy.

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The death of Jackson, in 1863, was the end of Lee's effort to turn previously defensive-oriented American strategic thought to the offensive. After the loss at Gettysburg, Lee was no longer able to resume the strategic offensive.

This was as far as the Confederate strategic and tactical offensive got in the Civil War. Later, the tactics and strategy of the war changed.

Lee and Jackson did not understand how the tactical offensive had lost the advantage over the tactical defensive. Lee did not fully appreciate the impact of the rifled musket. The tactical offensive was very costly against defenders armed with accurate rifled weapons. The Union army suffered its worst defeats on the tactical offensive at Fredericksburg and at Cold Harbor, where the Union lost about 12,000 men in each engagement. Lee also suffered his worst losses on the tactical offensive at Malvern Hill and Gettysburg. By 1864, the operational offensive was no longer a successful strategy, but the Confederate and Union armies were very slow to give it up. But this all had to change with the spring campaigns in Virginia in 1864.

When Grant began his spring campaigns, he hoped that he might capture or destroy all the Confederate armies. The destruction of Lee's army was to be its capture, not its

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34McWhiney, 72.
attrition and ultimate annihilation. This was how he had captured the Confederate army under John Pemberton at Vicksburg. But Lee was not Pemberton, and he was not to be maneuvered into a position where he had to surrender his army. Grant was forced to settle for a campaign of attrition that was to wear down Lee’s army. After the war, Grant stated that his strategy was: "to hammer continuously against the armed force of the enemy and his resources, until by mere attrition, if in no other way, there should be nothing left to him but an equal submission with the loyal section of our common country." By the time he got to Petersburg, Grant was willing simply to pummel the Confederacy into submission. This strategy was developed in the trenches around Richmond and Petersburg.

It was the failure of Lee’s Napoleonic strategy along with the appalling costs of Grant’s method of destroying Lee’s army that forced both armies eventually to engage in a defensive strategy. These failures encouraged a return to the defensive strategy that had characterized American strategic thought before the Civil War. The demands of the war, unfortunately, had forced a search for a workable offensive strategy.” This offensive strategy had become impractical by the beginning of the Petersburg campaign.

This now brings our study back to the discussion of the

35 Weigley, 433.
37 Weigley, 436.
importance of Petersburg and William Mahone's place in the unfolding drama. Mahone played a very important part in the development of this new tactical defensive that was used around Petersburg. Mahone had surveyed the area before the war for the Norfolk and Petersburg railroad and was very familiar with the terrain around Petersburg. He had also studied Dennis Hart Mahan's teachings during his years at the Virginia Military Institute. In his final year at V.M.I, he took a Military and Civil Engineering class, which used Mahan's books as their texts. He also took a class in tactics, infantry, and artillery. Mahone did have a knowledge of Dennis Hart Mahan's teachings, and he was able to use this knowledge during the war.

Petersburg witnessed the development of the tactical defensive. The trenches that enveloped Petersburg represented a change in military strategy. Grant was forced into the trenches around the city after he had failed to turn Lee's right flank and capture the city of Richmond. The transition from strategic mobility to static trench warfare was a long and grueling process. Grant, by this stage of the war, recognized the unlikelihood of maneuvering successfully against an army with interior lines fighting on the defense, let alone an army led by Lee. Accepting this difficulty in maneuvering against the Confederate Army, the most logical option was a trench war of tactical

"Entries from Virginia Military Institute Catalogue of 1847, Mahone Papers, Virginia Military Institute Archives."
attrition. Lee’s army would be worn down by the tactical attrition until it was unable to put up a fight.

These siege lines around Petersburg were to see continuous combat until Lee was forced to evacuate Petersburg on April 2, 1865. The long siege lines, like those around Petersburg, were to characterize all operations on the western front in World War I. The high ratio of force to space in that war made them almost inevitable, just like the large Union and Confederate concentrations around Richmond and Petersburg. But the combatants in World War I had such substantial forces that entrenchments soon covered the frontiers, providing no opportunities for turning movements like Grant’s last campaign.40

Grant was stallemated in Virginia until the end, but he had time on his side where Lee did not. From a strategic standpoint, all Grant intended to do was to keep Lee from reinforcing Joseph E. Johnston’s Confederate army in North Carolina. He was not willing to adopt a wasteful and destructive combat strategy when he expected William T. Sherman’s Union army to link up with his at any moment.41 Nevertheless, this holding pattern that Grant was in, was as costly to the Union army as it was to the Confederate army.


40Richard E. Beringer and others, Why the South Lost the Civil War (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1986), 333.

The Confederates, however, were not able to replenish their troops.

The problem of Petersburg was that new military tactics had not caught up to the new form of warfare that was being practiced. It was in these trenches that Union and Confederate soldiers suffered as their commanders tried to come to grips with these new tactics. The Confederates were forced to take a defensive position out of numeric inferiority, but this was very much to the Confederates' advantage. They were able to develop an active defense that was worthy of Frederick the Great. The development of the limited offensive strategy allowed the Confederates to wait for the Union army to attack; then, they were able to counter-attack after inflicting heavy casualties on the enemy. The offensive strategy of the past collided head on with the defensive strategy of the Civil War. William Mahone played an important role in this development. The problem of Petersburg during the siege was never solved by the Confederate army, and it was never fully understood by the Union army.
CHAPTER IV
EVOLUTION OF THE LIMITED OFFENSIVE

By June of 1864, the Union army had trapped the Confederate army in the trenches surrounding the city of Petersburg, Virginia. The Confederates were forced to wage a limited offensive war against the Union, staying on the defensive while awaiting the best time to take the offensive against a small exposed part of the Union army. This was the new strategy developed by the Confederate army in the summer of 1864. The Union, on the other hand, was forced to fight on the offensive for the remainder of the war to accomplish the goal of destroying the Confederate army. William Mahone was the primary exponent of these operations developed in the trenches around Petersburg. His engagements reveal the evolution of this method of warfare.

Lee was not accustomed to fighting a defensive war, but he was forced to out of necessity. The Union army's numbers were too great to engage in an open battle. Jomini stated that the offensive-defensive, as he called the limited offensive, has strategic as well as tactical advantages. An army that has the advantage of being on its own ground, can, if the opening arrives, take the initiative and decide when and where to strike. This change in strategy was not without precedent. Frederick the Great during the first three years of the Seven Years' War was the aggressor. But in the remaining four years of the conflict, he became the model of the offensive-defensive strategy. He was able to
choose the offensive when and where he wanted. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia experienced the same situation. They were the aggressors early in the war, but by the summer of 1864 they had adapted a defensive strategy.

The art of war is the ability of an army to maneuver into position and mass a force to strike at one isolated point in an enemy's line and break through. This maneuverability allows a smaller force to survive against a numerically superior enemy. The best thing for an army on the defensive is to know how to take the offensive at a proper time and then, to take it.

Lee succeeded in maneuvering his troops when he had the advantage of interior lines and railroads for quick troop movement, allowing him to frustrate Grant. Lee's use of maneuvering when on the defense turned the 1864-1865 campaign between the two armies into a trench war of tactical attrition. This trench warfare limited the maneuverability of both armies.

The Confederacy had to choose between a passive-defensive and Jomini's offensive-defensive. The Confederacy's only chance of prolonging the war and forcing the North to abandon its attempt at conquest was to choose

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{1}}Jomini, 74.

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{2}}Ibid., 183.

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{3}}Hagerman, The American Civil War and the Origins of Modern Warfare, 253.
the offensive-defensive strategy. This strategy was very successful for the Confederacy until the very end of the war when it had finally broken down under logistical and manpower deficiencies.

The Confederate Army of Tennessee, in Georgia under the command of Joseph E. Johnston, was hindered by problems that were similar to Lee's. Johnston was forced into the defenses around Atlanta by a superior Union army under William Tecumseh Sherman when Grant ordered Sherman to destroy the Western Confederate army. At Atlanta, Johnston and John Bell Hood were much less successful then Lee was at Richmond and Petersburg.

There are several reasons why the South was not able to hold Atlanta. Johnston did not get along with the President of the Confederacy, Jefferson Davis, and Davis subsequently replaced him with John Bell Hood who destroyed his Army by going into the field with foolish offensive movements against Sherman. If the Army of Tennessee had followed Robert E. Lee's example, it might have survived to fight another day.

When Sherman began his campaign in 1864, his primary objective was to keep Johnston from reinforcing Lee in Virginia, thus allowing Grant to defeat Lee. It was not until late June of 1864 that Sherman made capturing the city


of Atlanta his goal — only after Grant had become seriously stalled in front of Petersburg. After becoming stalled, Grant made it one of his primary objectives to keep Lee from sending assistance to Johnston and later Hood in Georgia, thereby allowing Sherman to destroy the very will of the Confederacy to fight.

Back in Virginia, Lee’s limited offensive used strategic turning movements against Grant’s army and attempted to flank a portion of Grant’s army. Civil War infantry, however, usually failed in flank attacks because they faced men trained in the same way, with the same degree of maneuverability. Because opposing troops were so evenly matched and identically organized, offensive tactics in the Civil War were less successful than they had been in Europe.

This turning maneuver to outflank and turn a wing of the enemy needed support with other attacks, either against the wing turned or against the center of the line. The enemy’s line of communications should be cut before giving battle and with attacks made to its rear. This tactic was much more likely to be successful than a mere flank attack. However, Lee succeeded with his attacks during the Petersburg campaign. Lee had the advantage of interior

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"Jones, 134.

"Jomini, 207."
lines, and he was able to pick and choose his targets. The Union was unaware from what direction an attack was coming.

Grant was unable to take Petersburg from June 15th to 18th. On June 19th, he began siege operations. Lee’s supplies came in primarily by way of the three western railroads that met at Petersburg and were then conducted by a single line to Richmond. The Union attack in the first few days of fighting cut the two eastern railroads that led to City Point and Norfolk. Grant’s first campaign after laying siege to the city was to cut the Petersburg and Weldon line which ran to Wilmington and carried important supplies so that he might extend his strong line of fortifications westward across the railroad and deny Lee its use. This was the situation that Grant faced in June of 1864.

This was not, however, the only choice for operations against the Confederate trenches that Grant could have implemented. Major General Gouverneur K. Warren, who commanded the Fifth Corps of the Union army, had another idea. He proposed that the Union Army take six days’ rations and set out en masse for the Weldon railroad. Warren’s thinking was that if the whole Union army attempted to turn Lee’s right flank, then Lee would have to stop them by battle in the open field. Grant and George Meade vetoed this plan because they worried that Lee might be able to get

9Hotchkiss, 518.

10See Map 1: Defense of Petersburg. On following page.
MAP 1: Defense of Petersburg: This was the military situation around Petersburg in June of 1864. Mahone was placed on the right flank. (Number 5 in map). Reprinted from Craig L. Symonds, A Battlefield Atlas of the Civil War, (Annapolis, Maryland: Nautical and Aviation Publishing Company, 1983), 86.
between the Union army and its communication system.\textsuperscript{11} Grant did not want to take that risk, and he continued the process of slowly extending and expanding the siege on Petersburg.

William Mahone now entered the scene. He came to Petersburg in command of the third division in A.P. Hill’s Third Corps. His division consisted of five brigades: Colonel David A. Weisiger’s Virginia brigade (Mahone was in command of this brigade until he was promoted to division commander); General Nathaniel Harris’ Mississippi brigade; General Joseph Finegan’s Florida brigade; General John Sanders’ Alabama brigade; and General Ambrose Wright’s Georgia brigade.\textsuperscript{12} Mahone’s division consisted of roughly 8,000 soldiers.

Mahone’s headquarters was very small. He was basically his own staff. The only acknowledged staff members were an Assistant Adjutant-general to write out orders, couriers to deliver them, and a few orderlies.\textsuperscript{13} He ran his headquarters in this way for most of the war; it was a very streamlined staff system. One of the best descriptions of Mahone came from a member of his Florida brigade. He stated, “Since he [Mahone] has been placed in a position where he can exercise his talents he has shone forth some of

\begin{enumerate}
\item O.R., Vol. XL, part II, 333.
\item Trudeau, 499.
\item DePeyster, 396.
\end{enumerate}
the same qualities of the great Jackson."".

The first limited offensive action was the battle for the Jerusalem Plank Road on June 22, 1864. Grant attempted to attack the right flank of Lee’s army and capture the Weldon Railroad. The Second Corps commanded by General David B. Birney, while the regular commander, Winfield Scott Hancock, recovered from an injury, and the Sixth Corps, commanded by Horatio Wright, were ordered to make the attack. According to the Official Records, the Second Corps numbered 16,312 men, and the Sixth Corps numbered 16,352.15

The Second Corps and the Sixth Corps became separated while they were moving into position to the Union’s left to attack the railroad. General Wright was ordered to move on the Weldon Railroad, which was about three miles from the Jerusalem Plank Road. He was then to get possession of the railroad and entrench and establish communication with Birney’s Second Corps.16 But the Sixth Corps did not move as quickly as the Second Corps, and a gap opened between the two corps. This was a little after 12:00 p.m. on June 22nd.17 A.P. Hill’s Third Corps was sent to defend the road against the Union assault.

The Union army was attempting to maneuver onto the right flank of the Confederate line, which was on the

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11I.M. Auld to Mother, 29 June 1864, I.M. Auld Papers, Putnam County Library, Palatka, Florida.


16Humphreys, 228.

17Trudeau, 70.
outskirts of Petersburg; Lee could not allow this to happen. Lee rode to Mahone's division headquarters to discuss the matter. Lee believed that there were times when offensive movements were the basis for a strong defense, and this was one of those instances. Lee knew that Mahone had surveyed the area and knew every inch of ground. Mahone proposed that he be allowed to take three of his brigades and strike the left flank of the Second Corps. He took his Alabama brigade commanded by John Saunders, the Georgia brigade commanded by Ambrose Wright, and the Virginia brigade commanded by David Weisiger out to meet the enemy.

Mahone was in the trenches on the right of the Confederate line, and he remembered that there was a ravine that was near the right of his division which ran between the two lines. This ravine was unguarded by the Union troops, and Mahone took his brigades into it, easily getting in between the Second and Sixth Corps. Then he attacked the left flank of the Second Corps and rolled up part of the Union Corps. The Union Corps were not prepared for an attack because they did not know where the Confederates were. The affair caused a stampede and was a complete surprise to both Union corps. The Confederates got between

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19McCabe, 273.


the two corps and caused much confusion on the left of the Second Corps,\(^2\) thus ending the battle for the Jerusalem Plank Road.\(^2\)

This engagement is best described by some participants. One veteran of Mahone's brigade, J.E. Whitehorne, remembered that: "passing quickly along a ravine which screened us from the enemy's pickets, we gained a point which Gen. Mahone conjectured to be beyond the enemy's flank."\(^2\)\(^3\) They struck Francis Barlow's division of the Second Corps, and "it melted away like ice in the sun." They next struck Gershom Mott's division of the Second Corps and rolled it up while advancing unchecked. The brigade then attacked John Gibbon's division of the Second Corps and carried the entrenchments.\(^2\)\(^4\) Colonel William H. Stewart, commander of the 61st Virginia, remembered that: "The maneuver was so rapid and secret that the Federals were almost completely surprised. They were caught enjoying their dinner, and we were just in time to share their hardtack, pork, and beans."\(^2\)\(^5\) Mahone's flank attack of the Second Corps' position was a master move, but the Confederates had so few men that they were unable to follow


\(^{2}\)See Map 2: Battle of Jerusalem Plank Road. On following page.

\(^{2}\)Whitehorne, 51.

\(^{2}\)Ibid.

MAP 2: Battle of Jerusalem Plank Road: Mahone placed his troops in between Birney and Wright’s Union Corps, and struck the left flank of Birney’s Second Corps. Reprinted from William Henderson, 12th Virginia Infantry, (Lynchburg: H.E. Howard Inc., 1984), 80.
it up and permanently hold the position. Mahone's troops returned to their places in the trenches and the siege began again.²⁶

This battle was a major victory for the Confederate army because it kept Grant from the Weldon Railroad. During the battle, Mahone's division captured 1,742 prisoners, a huge quantity of small arms, four cannons, and eight flags. This was all accomplished in about an hour and a half.²⁷ The Second Corps suffered 650 casualties in killed or wounded. The Sixth Corps suffered 150 casualties in all categories.²⁸ Mahone's losses on that day numbered 421 killed, wounded, or missing.²⁹ This was Mahone's first battle in Petersburg, and he had proved his worth to Lee.

By August of 1864, little had changed in front of the trenches around Petersburg, but Grant continued to tighten his stranglehold on the city. Lee's only hope was that his forces could inflict enough casualties on the Union army that the Northern public might get disgusted enough with the war to vote Lincoln out of office. This was a very slim hope, but in August of 1864 it was the only hope that Lee had to force the Union army out of Virginia.

Abraham Lincoln had legitimate worries about his


²⁷Whitehorne, 52.

²⁸Trudeau, 78.

²⁹Ibid., 80.
reelection bid in the summer of 1864. War weariness was spreading, and demands for negotiations to end the killing were becoming louder. The Democrats were organizing for their national convention to be held in Chicago near the end of August. They were very likely to adopt a peace platform. Lincoln's Republican party was divided over how the war should be settled; he was in the middle of the two Republican factions, but the worst part facing his reelection was the fact that the Union armies seemed stalemated. Grant, after enormous losses, was stuck in front of Petersburg while Sherman seemed no closer to defeating the Confederate army at Atlanta.30

Mahone's next employment of the limited offensive strategy was the Battle for the Weldon Railroad. The Petersburg and Weldon Railroad connected Petersburg with Wilmington, North Carolina, via Weldon, North Carolina. Grant renewed his assault on this objective in August 1864 in an attempt to cut off the vital supply line. Wilmington, North Carolina, was one of the last major ports controlled by the Confederacy.

The battle began on August 18, 1864. Grant sent the Union army's Fifth Corps under Major-General Gouverneur K. Warren to attack the railroad, which was two miles southeast of Petersburg.31 By the evening of August 18th, the Union


forces had secured a foothold. Grant’s forces had achieved his less ambitious objectives on the first day of the battle. His forces were entrenched as close as possible to Petersburg, and the Federals also had a lodgement on the railroad. The following day was to decide the success or failure of the operation.

On August 19, 1864, the Confederates had their best chance to dislodge the Federals from the railroads. Before retiring for the night, Warren gave instructions to General Edward S. Bragg’s brigade that they be employed to establish and man a picket line connecting the Fifth and Ninth Corps. Bragg proceeded to carry out this order in the early morning hours of August 19th. The Union Fifth Corps’ right flank, lying to the east of the Ninth Corps, had become exposed. There was more than a mile between the Fifth Corps and the main body of the Army of the Potomac still farther to the east. The Ninth Corps was the extreme left flank of the Union army. Bragg’s picket was to form a connection between the Fifth Corps and Orlando Wilcox’s division of the Ninth Corps, but there were supposed to be reinforcements who would soon come to take their place. Warren’s headquarters and the majority of the Fifth Corps were stationed around Globe Tavern, which was a junction between the Weldon Railroad and Vaughn Road just outside of Petersburg. General Samuel Crawford’s third division held the far right

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of the Fifth Corps." On the morning of August 19th, this was the Union army's situation.

Confederate commanders were aware of the Union army's position and were looking for the right place to strike. A.P. Hill was given the task of organizing the attack. But it was William Mahone who came up with the battle plan for that day. Mahone had suggested to Hill that the distance between Warren and the left wing of the Union Army was probably occupied by no more than a picket line, which proved to be accurate. Mahone felt that Warren could be routed by penetrating this picket line, separating Warren from the main body of the Union army, and the Rebels could attack Warren from the flank and the rear. Hill approved an attack with five brigades. The task fell to Mahone and Major General Henry Heth. The brigades of Joseph Davis and H.H. Walker were under Heth, and the brigades of Alfred Colquitt, Thomas Clingman, and David Weisiger, were commanded by Mahone. Mahone's attack was to be led by Weisiger's Virginians. Heth's two brigades marched down the Halifax Road to the Vaughan Road intersection. Mahone, familiar with the entire area, planned to advance through the woods, break through Bragg's skirmish line, wheel to the right, and roll up Crawford's division.

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33Bearss, 22.
34DePeyster, 405.
35O.R., Vol. XLII, part 1, 940.
36Bearss, 33.
It was an extremely rainy and miserable day, preventing the prompt arrival of the expected Union reinforcements. The Fifth Corps was not anticipating an attack because of the weather and because it was so late in the afternoon. But Mahone and Heth had agreed on four o’clock as the time that the flanking column was to be in position. At 4 p.m., Mahone’s troops reached Bragg’s skirmish line and drove them back. Then Mahone’s troops attacked the exposed right flank of the Federals. At the same time, Heth’s division attacked Romeyn B. Ayres’ second division, where their Fifth Corps division easily held its ground against the Confederates. Mahone’s flank attack, however, was very successful in driving the Federals back.

The initial Confederate army success was followed by a Union counterattack. This counterattack checked the Confederates’ advance and eventually compelled them to retire to the cover of the woods and the trenches. Although the Union army successfully pushed the Confederates back, the counterattack ceased because night was approaching, thus ending the day’s fighting. The Confederates limited offensive was successful in pushing the Union army back, but there were not enough troops to create a decided victory.

37See Map 3: Battle for the Weldon Railroad. On following page.

MAP 3: Battle for the Weldon Railroad: Mahone attacked the right flank of the Union Corps. He was able to get in between the Fifth Corps and Wilcox's division of the Ninth Corps. Reprinted from Henderson, 86.
Mahone, and perhaps the rest of the Confederate leadership, believed that a few more brigades of troops could have completely dislodged the Union forces from the Weldon Railroad. After the battle, Hill felt that the Federals were going to leave their positions. He wrote, "The blow struck them [the Federals] has been a very severe one, and I regretted my weakness prevented me from following it up as I would like to have done."\(^3\) Mahone believed that if Lee were able to provide two or three additional brigades, he could completely dislodge the Union army. But in this one day of fighting, Mahone captured 2,700 prisoners.\(^4\) The Confederates lost around 600 men, which included 300 prisoners.\(^5\) There was very little fighting that took place on August 20, 1864, because both sides were planning for the next day’s battle.

Mahone planned the next Confederate attack for August 21st. The plan called for General Heth to attack the front of the Federals’ line with Brigadier General John R. Cooke’s and Colonel William MacRae’s Brigades of his own division and Brigadier General Matthew Ransom’s Brigade of Major General Bushrod Johnson’s Division. Mahone was to attack the Federals left with four brigades of his own division, with the added support of Colonel Joseph H. Hyman’s Brigade of Major General Cadmus Wilcox’s Division and Brigadier

\(^3\)O.R., Vol. XLII, part 1, 940.

\(^4\)Bearss, 46.

General Johnson Hagood's Brigade of Robert F. Hoke's Division. Mahone moved down the Vaughan Road with six infantry brigades to strike the Federals.

This time the Confederates were attacking with what they considered a sufficient force, nine full infantry brigades, which consisted of roughly 10,000 men. On August 21st, the Confederates again attacked the Federals on the Weldon Railroad, but this time there was no exposed opening for them to exploit because the Union army fell back and filled the gaps in the line. The Confederates began their attack by 9:00 o'clock in the morning. The Union troops had taken command of the high ground and were able to shatter any Rebel assault during that bloody morning. The Confederates were unable to recapture the part of the Weldon Railroad that the Union army had captured.

The loss of the Weldon Railroad was a severe blow to the Confederates. This disaster came at a time when there was no corn either in Richmond or at the army depots around Petersburg. In order to receive some of the supplies that were to come from the Weldon Railroad, Lee had them brought up as far as Stony Creek, Virginia by rail. He then established relays of wagon transportation to Petersburg, meaning that the supplies had to be hauled thirty miles by

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"Horn, The Petersburg Campaign, 138.

"Horn, The Destruction of the Weldon Railroad, 92.

"Ibid., 109.

"Bearss, 73.
road to reach the Confederate army. Lee felt that the Confederate army could survive by using these wagon trains and the remaining railroads until the Virginia corn crop was harvested. Lee, Davis, and the Confederate establishment were also looking at the approaching presidential campaign in the North.

Lee believed that the failure of the Federals to drive the Confederates from Petersburg, after so many Union casualties, could have a dispiriting effect on the North. The loss of the railroad was a severe blow to the Confederates, but Lee realized that if the Union continued to suffer so many casualties, the cause of the Peace Democrats in the North would be strengthened.

One of the major objectives of Lee's limited offensive campaign was to inflict as many casualties on the Union forces as possible. In the four days of fighting for the Weldon Railroad, the Union army suffered 198 killed, 1,105 wounded, and 3,152 missing or captured, for a total of 4,455. The Confederates' losses were estimated at 1,200 killed and wounded and 419 missing or captured, for a total of 1,619. After the battle, Lee sent a message to the Confederate Secretary of War asking for more men to be brought into Confederate service. He asked for a few thousand men to hold the stronger parts of Confederate lines


where an attack was not likely to be made, arguing that "Without some increase of strength, I cannot see how we are to escape the natural military consequences of the enemy's numerical superiority." But Lee still had the hope of spoiling Lincoln's reelection hopes.

These mounting casualties had a serious effect on the North's view of Lincoln's war. On August 30, 1864, the Democratic party nominated George B. McClellan, the former Union general, and adopted a peace platform. McClellan was a Democrat, but he was determined to unite the country. However, on September 4, 1864, Lincoln received a message from Sherman that Atlanta had been captured. These events coincided with Grant's success in capturing the Weldon Railroad. These Union victories, combined with the nomination of McClellan on a peace platform, had a devastating effect on the schemes of Lincoln's Republican enemies to replace him." The Lincoln reelection campaign had overcome some of its biggest external obstacles.

The next implementation of the limited offensive was the Battle of Burgess' Mill on October 27, 1864. This was the last major battle in Petersburg before the Presidential election. Grant wanted to gain possession of the South Side Railroad, the last line to the west, which was the last railroad connecting Richmond to the remainder of the

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"Donald, 531."
Confederacy. His advance was to move in three columns.\(^5\)

These columns were to consist of three Union Corps: the Second Corps, commanded by Winfield Scott Hancock; the Fifth Corps, commanded by Gouverneur K. Warren; and the Ninth Corps, commanded by John G. Parke. The assault was to consist of around 36,000 veteran troops marching on the Confederate position.

The plan of attack was for the Union troops to move to the left or west of the army so as to attack the right flank of the Confederate position. The plan called for Hancock’s Second Corps to cross Hatcher’s Run, a small creek on the left of the Union line, by way of the Vaughan Road. This road brought the Union army about fifteen miles west of Petersburg. Hatcher’s Run is a marshy stream flowing from east to west, through thick forests and dense underbrush. Its head waters are near the South Side Railroad, about fifteen miles southwest of Petersburg.\(^6\) The Second Corps was to then march to the South Side Railroad, striking it at a point three miles south of Sutherland Station. This was the Railroad’s last station before it arrived at Petersburg. In this operation, Major General David Gregg’s cavalry formed part of Hancock’s command and moved on Hancock’s left.\(^7\) Major General Parke’s Ninth Corps was to surprise the Confederate trenches near Hatcher’s Run. He was to keep


\(^6\) DePeyster, 405.

the Confederates busy while the Second and Fifth Corps moved behind him to turn the enemy's right.\(^3\)

General Warren's Fifth Corps was to move to the vicinity of Armstrong's Mill and support General Parke, moving on the left of the Ninth Corps. If Parke did not break the enemy's line, Warren was to cross Hatcher's Run and attempt to turn the enemy's right flank by crossing the Burgess Mill bridge.\(^4\) The attack was scheduled for 3:30 on the morning of October 27th. It was a dark, rainy morning, and the movement in the wooded ground was very slow. The enemy was not to be taken by surprise. Generals Parke and Warren found the entrenchments in front of them held with a force that was substantial enough so as not to justify an attempt to carry them; therefore, no diversionary attack was made. This was about nine o'clock in the morning. General Hancock's force was crossing Hatcher's Run by daylight, but it was not until 11:45 in the morning that the head of Warren's Corps began to cross Hatcher's Run.\(^5\) Hancock's Corps was left on its own to make the attack on the Confederate line.

The Confederates realized what the Union army was doing by early morning of the 27th. Lee reported what he knew to the Confederate Secretary of War. A.P. Hill, commander of the Third Corps in the Army of Northern Virginia, reported

\(^3\)Humphreys, 295.

\(^4\)Ibid.

\(^5\)Ibid., 296.
that "the enemy crossed Hatcher's Run this morning at Armstrong's Mill." The force was unknown, but there was also a Union assault being made north of the James, near Richmond. The Union army was making a simultaneous movement on both Confederate flanks. The Confederate army was now forced to defend itself against attacks on two different fronts.

Hancock's Second Corps was pushed forward toward the Boydton Plank Road. While they advanced on the Boydton Plank Road, a section of the enemy's artillery near the Burgess' Tavern opened fire. But before his column was well under way, General George Meade ordered Hancock to halt at the Plank Road. Meade and Grant informed Hancock that Samuel Crawford's division of the Fifth Corps was advancing up Hatcher's Run. General Hancock was ordered to extend his line to the right in order to make a connection with Crawford's troops. These forces combined were to make the assault on the Confederate lines.

At a quarter to twelve on the morning on October 27, 1864, John Parke's Ninth Corps was stalled in front of the enemy's works, and the Union plan of attack had to be altered. Parke was then ordered by Grant and Meade to hold

57 Ibid.
the Union line on the Boydton Plank Road while Hancock and Warren moved to attack the South Side Railroad. Now Meade informed Hancock that only one division was to cross Hatcher's Run to assist the Second Corps instead of two corps that were promised. The connection between Hancock and Crawford was to be maintained during the attack against the railroad. 59 The decision that Parke and the remainder of Warren's Corps were to take no further aggressive action proved disastrous for the Union army because as the Union wasted time trying to find the right place to strike, the Confederates moved forward to meet the impending blow.

As the Confederate army moved into position, the Union plan of attack fell apart. Hancock was made aware of the change of plans, and he quickly sent a member of his staff to find the position of Crawford's division. At 1:10 p.m., Crawford was discovered to be about three quarters of a mile from the extreme right of Hancock's line. Crawford was to move forward and link up with Hancock because at this time Hancock was engaged with the enemy at Burgess' Mill. 60 Generals Grant and Meade were returning to headquarters when the enemy moved across Hatcher's Run, through the gap between Hancock and Warren. This gap was not closed as ordered, and the enemy made an attack on Hancock's right and

59 Ibid., 328.
60 Ibid., 329.
General Wade Hampton, Confederate cavalry commander, was ordered to lead the Confederate defenses. Hampton’s cavalry, along with Henry Heth’s and William Mahone’s divisions of infantry, formed to force the Union army to fall back. Hampton was to attack Hancock’s left flank and rear. Heth was ordered to oppose Hancock’s advance toward Petersburg on the Boydton Plank Road. Mahone was sent to cross Hatcher’s Run about a mile below Burgess’ Mill, and, following a narrow wood road, make a sudden attack upon Hancock’s right flank. Mahone was ordered to strike at a position between Hancock’s Corps and Crawford’s division before the link was to be made.

If all went as planned, Hancock’s Corps would be caught in a trap by the Confederate forces. The entire Confederate force was roughly 20,000 men, including Hampton’s cavalry. The Union force, consisting of three Union Corps, totaled over 42,000 men. Mahone had three brigades under his command for the attack. He had the Virginia Brigade under David Weisiger, the Alabama Brigade under William H. Forney, and William MacRae’s Brigade from General Heth’s division. Mahone’s brigades were ordered forward, and they quickly overwhelmed the Union forces in front of them. Mahone’s

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"Humphreys, 300.

"Livermore, 130-131."
force was able to strike the right flank of the Second Corps, and they got in between the Second and Fifth Corps units and inflicted a great deal of chaos. Mahone’s troops reached the Boydton Plank Road at least a quarter of a mile west of the bridge across Hatcher’s Run, around 4:00 p.m.  

Signaled by Mahone’s guns, Hampton’s battle lines surged forward against Hancock’s infantry and David Gregg’s cavalry troopers. Crawford’s troops were being surrounded, but Mahone’s success was very deceiving. The Confederates had no reinforcements to send Mahone, and his troops found themselves becoming dangerously isolated and vulnerable. Union reinforcements swept Mahone from the field and drove his men into the woods. He was surrounded by Union artillery and forced to withdraw. One member of Mahone’s Virginia brigade recalled part of the retreat: "As we were nearly surrounded by the enemy, we remained where we were, in a thick piece of pine woods, till about 11 o’clock at night, when we withdrew to the plank road." This ended a long day of fighting for both sides.

The Confederates were again successful with their

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64William Mahone to George S. Bernard, 16 August 1895, George S. Bernard Papers, Transcript in the hand of George S. Bernard, University of North Carolina Archives, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

65See Map 4: Battle of Burgess’ Mill. On following page.

66Humphreys, 302.

67Whitehorne, 56.
MAP 4: Battle of Burgess' Mill: Mahone struck the right flank of Hancock's Second Corps. He placed his troops in between the Second Corps and Crawford's division of the Fifth Corps. Reprinted from Cavanaugh, 55.
limited offensive in that they forced Grant to pull back his forces. Hampton, Heth, and Mahone were able to hold off a serious challenge by the Union army to destroy their last major supply line into Petersburg. Lee wrote to the Confederate Secretary of War on October 28, 1864 that Mahone captured 400 prisoners, 3 stands of colors, and 6 pieces of artillery. Mahone broke three lines of battle and forced the enemy to retreat during the night. Hill reported 700 prisoners taken. There were 1,758 casualties suffered by the Union army during the battle of Burgess' Mill, and about 1,058 of those casualties were suffered by the Second Corps. The Confederates suffered about 1,300 casualties.  

Winfield Scott Hancock was very bitter after the battle of Burgess' Mill. He was within a few miles of the South Side Railroad, and he believed it could have been easily seized if Warren's Fifth Corps and Parke's Ninth Corps had attacked the trenches in front of them. This was the last engagement before the election on November 8, 1864. Grant and Lincoln tried to keep the true nature of the engagement out of Northern newspapers so as not to affect the election.

In mid-October, Lincoln had been worried about the

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"Trudeau, 250.

This was Winfield Scott Hancock's last field operation. The hero of Gettysburg took a leave from the army on November 26. He ended the war in command of the Shenandoah Valley. He remained bitter about not reaching the South Side Railroad. Ibid.
election and its impact on the war. On October 13, he jotted predictions for the November election. He calculated that McClellan would carry New York, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and all the border states. He predicted McClellan would receive 114 electoral votes, and he would receive 117 votes himself. Lincoln felt it was to be a very close election. Republican fortunes changed in late October when Sheridan began a successful drive up the Shenandoah Valley and Sherman continued his success in the deep South. From the early returns of the election, it was clear that the Republicans had won a huge victory. They won every state except New Jersey, Delaware, and Kentucky. When the ballot was counted, Lincoln had won the popular vote; and the electoral vote was won by a margin of 212 to 21. The soldiers supported Lincoln by a four to one margin.

The great military strategist Carl Von Clausewitz of the nineteenth century was unknown to probably all American military strategists of this time, but at this point in our study, one of his axioms is very meaningful. Clausewitz wrote that "War is an instrument of policy. The conduct of war, in its great outlines, is therefore policy itself." Political policy decides how wars will be fought. Lincoln’s election was just another example of Clausewitz’s rule. The

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71Donald, 544.
72Trudeau, 253.
fate of the entire American Civil War hinged on Lincoln’s reelection. The Confederacy was doing everything in its power to sway the Northern public to vote Lincoln out of office. The Lincoln administration, however, was much more adept at this political game.

The Army of Northern Virginia was very successful in its limited offensive strategy for the entire summer of 1864. Lee realized that his army must stay in its trenches under cover until the Union army came out in the open and gave him a prime target to strike. These three examples of the limited offensive explain how this strategy was implemented. In these engagements alone, Mahone’s division and allied units inflicted 3,161 casualties in killed and wounded, they also captured 5,594 prisoners, for a total of 8,755 men. Through knowledge of the terrain and accurate Confederate intelligence of Union troop movements, Mahone was successful. The local citizens around Petersburg provided the Confederate army with invaluable intelligence which enabled Mahone’s divisions to attain their victories. However, this bloodshed in the summer and early fall did not sway the Union voters when it came time for the Presidential election. The Union army had the time and the manpower that the Confederate army was unable to spare.
The battle of the Crater is the best known engagement of the siege of Petersburg. It was one of the more unusual offensive gambles that the Union army undertook during the war. The attack was based on blowing a mine underneath Confederate defenses and attacking the breach in the Confederate line. It was William Mahone’s division that kept the Union forces from pushing into Petersburg. The Confederate army then took a primarily defensive battle and turned it into one of the most decisive Confederate victories of the siege. If the Confederacy had taken only the position of a passive defense, the Union army would likely have captured Petersburg. This battle proved that in combat, the defenders can profit from an offensive action.

Early in the morning of July 30, 1864, a powerful explosion created a giant hole in the middle of Confederate lines. The men of Stephen Elliott’s South Carolina brigade, who manned the trenches that were above the mine, were rudely awakened out of a sound sleep. There were three hundred and thirty troops stationed in the trenches directly above the mine. Of these, two hundred and seventy-eight men were killed or wounded in the explosion. Thirty of these men were part of Captain Richard Pegram’s artillery battery. The hole created by the explosion was between one hundred and fifty to two hundred feet long, about sixty feet wide.
and thirty feet deep. This was an excellent opportunity for the Union army to capture Petersburg.

The battle of the Crater was a very complex battle that possessed a number of problems even from the beginning. The idea of creating a mine to pass under Confederate fortifications to form a breach in their lines was the idea of a young Union colonel named Henry Pleasants. He was the commander of the 48th Pennsylvania infantry and a coal mining engineer from Schuylkill County. His regiment was made up mostly of local coal miners. At Petersburg they were in possession of the ground that was the closest to the Confederates' earthworks. Pleasant's regiment came into possession of this ground on June 18, 1864, and he proposed the idea for a mine five days later. On that day, he overheard one of his men saying that they could blow the Confederate fort in front of them out of existence if a mine could be run under it. Pleasant accepted this idea and prepared a plan of action.

Pleasant sent his proposal to General Robert B. Potter, commander of the Second Division, Ninth Corps of the Union army. Potter in turn endorsed the idea to General Ambrose E. Burnside, commander of the Ninth Corps. He told Burnside that the distance between the Union main line and the Confederate earthworks did not exceed 100 yards.

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1Trudeau, 109.
2Pleasants, 9.
3Ibid., 48.
Pleasants believed that he could run a mine forward at a rate of from twenty-five to fifty feet a day, including supports, ventilation, and so on. The Colonel was of the opinion that a few miner's picks, a few hand-barrows, one or two mathematical instruments which could be supplied by the engineer department, and ordinary entrenching tools were all that were required. This was on the 24th of June. On the next day, Pleasants met with General Burnside and received preliminary approval to begin digging the mine.

General Grant was eager to attempt some sort of offensive movements against the Confederates, and he was looking for any feasible option. Grant heard about the mine from General George Meade, commander of the Army of the Potomac, and he proved to be very supportive of the idea. Grant and his staff had more experience with mine warfare than any other group in Petersburg because he had used mines in his Vicksburg campaign of 1863. During the siege of Vicksburg, Grant exploded two mines beneath Confederate fortifications. The first mine was exploded on June 25, 1863; it consisted of 2,200 pounds of gunpowder. The mine created a crater that was fifty feet long and twelve feet deep. The Union army captured the crater, but Grant's men had trouble climbing along the sides of the pit. The Union force was absorbed by the crater, and the attack stalled. Grant exploded another mine on July 1, 1864, but did not

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'O.R., Vol. XL, part 2, 397.'
follow it with an assault.5

Grant knew the dangers of mine warfare, but he believed that it was worth an attempt at Petersburg. When Burnside submitted the plan for approval, Grant approved of the operation mainly as a means of keeping the men of the Ninth Corps occupied. Burnside's position was very favorable for carrying on the work of mining but not so favorable for the operations to follow its completion.6 Grant knew what needed to be done, but he provided little assistance to Burnside in the planning of the attack that should follow the explosion of the mine.

Colonel Pleasants overcame many obstacles before the task of completing his mine was over. Meade felt that the mine could not be successful. Major James Duane, chief engineer of the Army of the Potomac, also felt that this mine could not be built. They felt that a mine of this length had never been excavated in military operations, and it could not be done. They felt that the explosion would either smother the men for lack of air or the enemy would find out about the proposed attack and it would amount to nothing. Initially, Pleasants could not get the instruments needed to build his mine nor could he acquire the boards and lumber needed to complete the operation.7 His only

5Horn, 120.
6McFeely, 607.
assistance was to come from Burnside's headquarters, as Meade and the staff of the Army of the Potomac provided little aid.

The problem of ventilating a mine that had to be over 500 feet was the greatest accomplishment of Pleasants' mine. Pleasants overcame the ventilation problem by sinking a ventilation shaft twenty-two feet down into the ground, which was only two feet in diameter. The shaft was dug directly behind a nearby Union rifle pit. At this depth, the shaft was connected to the tunnel. Next, he made an airtight canvas door shutting off the section of the tunnel between the shaft and the mouth of the tunnel. Pleasants had a fire built at the bottom of the air shaft, covered by a furnace grating. As the work progressed, Pleasants constructed a tight wooden duct that extended from the outside to where the miners were digging. The fire created a draft that drew the foul air from the tunnel and forced it up the shaft, while the vacuum that was created sucked in fresh air through the wooden duct. As the tunnel grew longer, new sections had to be added to the wooden duct to lengthen it accordingly. This was the first time that a ventilation system like this had been attempted in warfare, and it allowed for the ventilation of the mine to go undetected by the Confederates who were only a little more than 500 feet away.

The mine was started at 12 p.m. on June 25, 1864. The

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*Pleasants, 69.
dirt excavated from the mine was carried out in hand barrows made out of cracker boxes. Pleasants was very resourceful in overcoming every obstacle that stood in his way. The main gallery of the mine, being 510.8 feet in length, was completed on July 17th. The left and right galleries of the mine, located underneath a strong Confederate fort named Elliott’s salient, were thirty-seven and thirty-eight feet long, respectfully. The lateral galleries contained eight powder magazines, four in each gallery. The mine and its galleries were completed on July 23rd. Pleasants and the men of the 48th Pennsylvania put a great deal of work into their mine in the hope that it was to lead to a Union victory.

While obstacles underground were successfully overcome, the obstacles to a coordinated attack against the Confederate fort that was to follow the explosion of the mine were just beginning. Burnside decided upon a plan to attack the Confederate defenses, which he presented to General Meade on July 26, 1864. His plan was to explode the mine just before daylight and mass the two brigades of General Edward Ferrero’s colored division in rear of his lines in two columns. As soon as the leading regiments passed through the breach in the Confederate lines, the next regiments of the right and left columns were to advance on the enemy’s lines on either side of the breach. The goal of this division was to allow their regiments to capture

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'O.R., Vol. XL, part 1, 557.'
Cemetery Hill, part of Blandford Cemetery in Petersburg, which held the high ground over the city. This division was to be followed by the other divisions of the Ninth Corps.¹⁰

Prior to the attack, the Ninth Corps had about 15,272 men in its ranks.¹¹ The attack plan called for the army to quickly push into Petersburg and capture the city.

Burnside had Ferrero’s African-American division drilling for three weeks with the view of making this attack. He chose the African-American division because it was in better condition to make a charge than either of the white divisions. The black troops had not been in any active service, had not been exposed to much combat, and besides that, they had been trained with the intention of making this attack.

In comparison, the white divisions had been exposed to continuous combat for the last few months. The white divisions had been in such a close proximity to the enemy that no man could raise his head above the trenches without being fired at. Burnside felt they were not in any condition to make a serious charge.¹² The black troops had been specially trained, and they were prepared to make an attack. But politics blocked their opportunity.

General Meade objected to the plan. He did not want the black troops leading the assault because the division

¹¹O.R., Vol. XL, part 1, 177.
¹²Report of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War: the Attack on Petersburg, 4.
was new and untested in combat. Burnside greatly disagreed with Meade’s reasoning, and in response to these objections, Meade took the idea to Grant. Grant agreed with Meade, believing that it was improper to put an untried division in a critical operation at the lead of the attack. However, the real reason for this objection had more to do with politics than sound military strategy.

At the time, Abraham Lincoln was having problems in the North trying to keep alive his reelection bid. Grant did not want to provide the Northern press with any more ammunition to use against Lincoln, and the idea of having several thousand inexperienced black soldiers slaughtered in front of the trenches at Petersburg was not very appealing to Grant. He stated in his testimony to the Joint Committee that "if we put the colored troops in front ... and it should prove a failure, it would be said, and very properly, that we were shoving those people ahead to get killed because we did not care anything about them." He was trying to help Lincoln’s reelection chances with this battle, not destroy them.

On July 29, 1864, Burnside received the orders to alter his attack plan, less than twelve hours before the attack was to begin. General Meade’s revised plan of attack was that the mine would be exploded at 3:30 in the morning on July 30th. Meade’s orders were that "Burnside’s assaulting

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13 Ibid., 5.
14 Ibid., 111.
columns will immediately move rapidly upon the breach, seize the crest in the rear, and effect a lodgement there.\textsuperscript{15} Burnside was to be followed by Major General Edward Ord's Eighteenth Corps which would support him on the right. Major General Gouverneur Warren's Fifth Corps would support him on the left.\textsuperscript{16} Burnside's lead division was no longer to form in columns and clear out the Confederate trenches on either side of the breach, but it was to now push forward in one column.

Burnside was greatly disturbed by the change in plans, and his actions were to demonstrate this. He could not decide between his three white division commanders as to who should lead the attack. Instead of deciding, he determined that the three division commanders of his corps should draw straws. The unlucky commander who chose the long straw was General James Ledlie, commander of the First Division.\textsuperscript{17} Ledlie was unprepared for this honor.

Grant, however, would provide assistance to Burnside's attack on the Confederate lines. The explosion of the mine was to be the focal point of a massive Union assault. Grant's other objective was to support the assault by diverting as many of Lee's troops away from the south side of the James River as possible. To accomplish this, he sent

\textsuperscript{15}O.R., Vol. XL, part 3, 596.

\textsuperscript{16}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{17}William H. Powell, "The Battle of the Petersburg Crater," in Battle and Leaders of the Civil War, Vol. 4, eds. Clarence Clough Buel and Robert Underwood Johnson (Edison, New Jersey: Castle, 1884), 549.
the Second Corps, under Winfield Scott Hancock, to make an
attack against Richmond. Grant believed that Hancock was
either to succeed in getting through the enemy’s lines in
front of Richmond, or he would force the Confederates to
weaken their defenses around Petersburg. ¹⁸

This part was successful and by the 28th of July, Lee
had sent most of his troops north to the defenses around
Richmond. There were only three Confederate divisions left
in the Petersburg entrenchments. Only Robert Hoke’s,
Bushrod Johnson’s, and William Mahone’s divisions of
Confederate infantry remained.¹⁹ The time was right for
the massive Union assault. The Union army had the numeric
advantage that it wanted; success depended on whether or not
they knew how to use their advantage to its fullest.

The plan of attack was set, and Pleasants was ordered
to load the mine with gunpowder. On the 28th of July, the
mine was loaded with eight thousand pounds of gunpowder, in
320 kegs of about twenty-five pounds each. He was given the
orders on the 29th of July to blow the mine at 3:30 in the
morning of July 30th. He lighted the fuse at 3:15 a.m., and
he waited an hour. Pleasants then sent two men into the
mine to examine the cause of the delay. The fuse to the
mine had gone out at one of the splices. The fuse was
relit, and at 4:44 a.m. the powder exploded.²⁰

¹⁹Humphreys, 252.
The Confederate trenches were quickly reshaped. The Confederates were compelled to fall back to a rear line of trenches to prepare for the oncoming assault. The Ninth Corps was on the move shortly. About ten minutes after the explosion, the first division, under James Ledlie, entered the enemy's line at the breach. The organization of the division was broken as the troops crowded into the crater and took shelter. This division met with little resistance from the enemy before reaching the crater. The second and third divisions of the Union army were put into action and captured the enemy's trenches on either side of the pit. From 150 to 200 yards of the enemy's lines on either side of the crater were occupied by Union troops.  

Here the Union advance stalled as the Confederates commenced to take the initiative.

The Confederate forces were almost completely silent for the first hour after the explosion. There was no fire from the Confederates' infantry in front of the Union position for at least half an hour; for over an hour not a shot was fired from the Confederate artillery. These forces were totally overwhelmed by the initial attack.

On the previous night, the 29th of July, Lee ordered that all units should be under arms by daylight the next morning. He anticipated that the Union army designed an attack to be made against his lines during the morning of

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21 Report of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War: the Attack on Petersburg, 7.

This account is supported by Captain John C. Featherstone of the 9th Alabama Regiment stated that:
"During the night of the 29th, we received orders to get our men under arms and ready for action at a moment's notice, which convinced us that General Lee had information of which we were ignorant."

At the time of the explosion, Lee was north of the James leading the forces around Richmond. Shortly after 6 a.m., he was informed of the explosion of the mine. He immediately ordered his aide, Colonel Charles Venable, to ride to the right of the army and bring up two brigades commanded by William Mahone.

Mahone heard the explosion from his position, two miles away, at Rives salient, and was already on the alert. Mahone was forced to take a route that kept him out of the sight of the Union troops, making his journey to the site of the explosion three miles long instead of two. He ordered the Virginia and Georgia brigades to drop back to a ravine in the rear to avoid disclosure of the weakening of his front. The troops were moved in order by brigade and were conducted beside ravines in the general direction of

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25McCabe, 289.

26DePeyster, 402.
the Crater so as to conceal the march from the enemy.27 This tactic proved very successful.

The day was to be one of much suffering and many hardships for both Union and Confederate soldiers. There was intense heat that day, the temperature reaching over 90 degrees; the sun beat down on the men marching to the Crater and the men in the Crater.28 In the Confederate line, Mahone’s division confronted General Gouverneur Warren’s Fifth Corps. Mahone’s men were ordered to drop back one by one, as if going for water. This order was obeyed with such skill that Warren reported to General George Meade that not a man had left his front.29

The evacuating Confederates were overlooked by the commanding General of the Fifth Corps but not by his men who reported the Rebel exodus. Some soldiers of the Fifth Corps on the morning of July 30th observed the Confederates breaking camp right in front of their position. The Union troops could see that their lines were being closely inspected by the Confederates; seeing that no assault was coming from the Union troops in front of them, regiment after regiment of the Confederate troops left the works and marched over the hill towards the Crater. While it should have been the scene of the greatest Union activity, the left side of the Union lines was quiet for the entire day. If

27Mahone, 5.
28Humphreys, 259.
29McCabe, 289.
the Fifth Corps had advanced, it would have relieved the pressure of the Union troops at the Crater.\textsuperscript{30}

By 6:00 a.m., Meade discovered from prisoners arriving early that no Confederate troops had returned from the north side of the James. Meade then informed Burnside and ordered him to push his troops forward at all hazards. While Burnside ordered his division commanders forward, they were unable to get their men to push over the Crater.\textsuperscript{31} The disorganized Union assault was the result of poor leadership. There was no high-ranking Union officer anywhere near the Crater to take control of the situation, so hours passed before the Union soldiers were organized for an assault on the Confederate lines.

Leadership is an important aspect of all military engagements, and the absence of sound leadership can be disastrous in combat. Antoine Jomini, the military theorist, stated that two things must exist in a man to make him a general: "He must know how to arrange a good plan of operations and how to carry it to a successful termination."\textsuperscript{32} During the battle of the Crater, the Union leaders were able to arrange a good plan of operations, but the leaders of the Ninth Corps did not have the determination to carry out the battle to a successful

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\textsuperscript{31}Humphreys, 258.

\textsuperscript{32}Jomini, 327.
conclusion. Jomini also stated that one of the greatest talents of a general is to be able to take the initiative during the progress of a defensive war." William Mahone was to prove capable of accomplishing this demanding task.

Mahone led his troops along the long route to the break in the Confederate lines. At approximately 8:30 a.m., they reached the Jerusalem Plank road which was directly behind the Crater. The Union soldiers were just as they had been for nearly four hours, in quiet occupation of the Crater and the surrounding works. The Federal force in possession of the Crater was estimated as at least 3,000 men." Mahone marched to the front lines while his troops got into position. He assessed the situation and realized that he was going to need more troops. He dispatched a courier to bring up another one of his brigades, the Alabama brigade, which was two miles away. In doing this he assumed a grave responsibility of depleting his line while bringing more troops onto the scene." He did so on his own initiative.

Soon after this order was given, the Virginia brigade began to exit from the trench and to advance toward the front line. When the men reached the front, the first person they saw was General Mahone. He was reported to have said to his men: "Men our lines have been broken, we must

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"Ibid., 74.


McCabe, 290.
retake them. I want you distinctly to understand that you have got to retake them."  

James E. Phillips of the Virginia brigade reported that "Gen. Mahone ordered the men to fix bayonets and lie down and in the charge not to fire a shot until the works were taken."  

The works on the north side of the Crater were filled with thousands of enemy soldiers. He counted twenty-one regimental flags flying from the Crater and the surrounding works.

A little past 8:30 a.m., the Union troops in the Crater were finally organized enough to make a push against the Confederate forces. These troops were led by the men of the black division. Lieutenant Colonel Charles S. Russell, commanding the 28th U.S. Colored Troops, took part in the charge. He stated that his troops got within fifty yards of the Jerusalem Plank road when they were driven back.

As Mahone observed the Union soldiers making their attack, he ordered his staff officer, Captain Victor Girardey, to advance forward with his troops. The counterattack started at about 8:45 a.m. and consisted of about 800 Virginians. When the Virginians reached the works to the north of the Crater, there was hand-to-hand combat until the works to the north or left of the Crater

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36 Whitehorne, 54.
37 Bernard, 186.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid., 172.
40 Ibid., 169, 215.
were recaptured. The bulk of the Union forces were massed in the Crater itself. The Virginia brigade was successful, and the Georgia brigade was next to attack."

The Georgians failed in capturing the enemy’s works to the right of the Crater. Afterwards, the situation at the Crater stayed somewhat stationary until approximately one o’clock in the afternoon. The Crater was crowded with Union troops, and Confederate artillery fire poured into the pit from batteries to the north and to the south of the Crater."

At 1:00 p.m., the Alabama brigade, the third that had been brought up from Mahone’s old lines, was ready to attack. The Alabama Brigade consisted of only 628 men, and they were ordered to charge a hole filled with at least 5,000 Union troops." The brigade attacked and captured the works to the right of the Crater. The Crater was then held only by Union troops. The Confederate troops were about to launch a last attack when the Union soldiers inside the Crater decided to surrender. The Confederate forces captured eleven hundred and one Union prisoners." The battle of the Crater was over, and the Confederate army had recaptured their lines.

The Union army had suffered 504 killed, 1881 wounded,

"See Map 5: The Battle of the Crater. On following page.

"Claiborne, 226.

"Herbert, 159.

"Mahone, 11."
MAP 5: The Battle of the Crater: Mahone followed the line of his march to where the Union mine had been blown. He ordered his Virginia brigade to attack the north, or left, side of the Crater. Reprinted from Henderson, 83.
and 1413 captured, for a total of 3,798 casualties" while the Confederate army suffered a total of 1,491 casualties. " Mahone had an effective force of approximately 3,000 men. The Ninth Corps of the Union army had at least 10,300 men," not even counting the additional twenty to thirty thousand Union support troops.

The battle of the Crater was the bloodiest of the siege. James Verdery from the Georgia Brigade wrote after the battle to his sister that it was a truly bloody fight and a "perfect" massacre, nearly a black flag fight. Mahone was quoted by Verdery as stating after the battle that: "he never saw the dead so thick in his life on any battlefield before.""

Mahone's soldiers fought against black soldiers for the first time at the Crater. Some Confederates recognized their slaves fighting against them for the Union army. A captain in the Forty-first Virginia recognized two of his old slaves, "Ben" and "Bob," whom he had left working the fields back home in Dinwiddie County, Virginia." The Richmond Dispatch reported that "Saturday was the first occasion on which the Army of Northern Virginia ever fought


"Trudeau, 127.

"Bernard, 169, 171.

"James Paul Verdery to sister, July 31, 1864, Eugene Verdery, Jr. and James Paul Verdery Papers, 1859-1870, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina.

"Herbert, 152.
against negro troops.... They were placed in front in the charge, and our men [Confederates], enraged by the cry of 'No quarter,' slaughtered them like sheep."\(^{50}\) This animosity toward African-American soldiers resulted in very few being taken prisoner. The carnage of the battle was so terrible that Mahone is reported to have turned away saying, "Stop the fire, it makes me sick."\(^{51}\)

When the battle was over, it proved to be a huge disappointment for the Union army but a significant boost to Confederate morale. Grant wrote to Washington, D.C. after the battle that "It was the saddest affair I have witnessed in the war. Such opportunity for carrying fortifications I have never seen and do not expect again to have."\(^{52}\) This was the last time that Grant would make a direct assault against the trenches in front of Petersburg until April of 1865. He was forced to endure a long and bloody siege of the city. The major reasons for the Union failure was the lack of Union leadership and the determination of the Confederate resistance.

William Mahone led his troops to victory, and he eventually received the admiration that he deserved. Concerning Mahone's part in the Battle of the Crater, Col. W.H. Stewart of the Virginia brigade said: "The whole movement was under his immediate and personal direction, and


\(^{52}\)O.R., Vol. XL, part 1, 17.
to him, above all, save the brave men who bore the muskets, belong the honor and credit of recapturing the Confederate lines." On August 2, 1864, Jefferson Davis ordered Mahone’s promotion to Major General for this memorable service.

Mahone took a primarily defensive Confederate position and turned it into one of the greatest Confederate victories of the War. Carl von Clausewitz, the military theorist, argued that the defensive consists of counterattacks to go along with resistance, just as the offensive is made up of attack, pause, and resistance. This concept means that if the opportunity presents itself, then the defensive force can easily switch to the offensive. This was what happened during the battle of the Crater; Mahone saw the opportunity to take the offensive, and he took it.

If Mahone and the Confederate army had taken the position of a passive defense during the battle of the Crater, the Union army would have captured Petersburg. The Battle of the Crater proved that in combat there will always be a time when the defenders must take an offensive position. The combination of a poorly led Union attack and the ability of Mahone promptly to piece together the Confederate position saved the day for the Confederacy.

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53Hotchkiss, 635.


Mahone proved a good operational commander. He arranged a good plan of operations, and he carried the battle to a successful termination. The battle demonstrated Mahone’s ability as a commander and the attributes that make him worthy of a thorough military study.
CHAPTER VI
RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

William Mahone proved himself as a successful Confederate commander and one of Lee’s best lieutenants. He was an example of a "new breed of Confederate leadership" that developed during the final year of the war. At Petersburg, during that final year, the Army of Northern Virginia’s limited offensive strategy proved a successful one for an army that was desperately trying to persevere. Mahone made a large contribution in the success of the limited offensive strategy. Mahone’s post-war career and the controversies that surrounded him eclipsed and tarnished his war record. But there is no doubt that Mahone’s part in the limited offensive strategy kept the Confederacy alive for the last year of the War.

The Army of Northern Virginia was in turmoil by the summer of 1864. If it were not for the abilities of young audacious commanders like William Mahone, the Confederacy probably would have been lost sooner than it was. Mahone’s command during the siege of Petersburg became the army’s shock troops. His troops were regularly called upon to spearhead any attack ordered by General Lee. Mahone was part of the "new breed" of Confederate leaders, like Wade Hampton and John Gordon, who rose late in the war to replace deceased officers such as Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson and J.E.B. Stuart.

Mahone’s career as a commander began slowly, but
promotion transformed him. By the summer of 1864, he had become one of the best division commanders in Robert E. Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia.¹ John Brown Gordon duplicated the rise of William Mahone. Gordon was a Brigadier General at the beginning of May, 1864. He commanded a division by the end of the month, and by the late winter he was in command of Lee’s Second Corps.² Wade Hampton was a Major General of Confederate Cavalry, and he received a new responsibility when his commander, J.E.B. Stuart, fell. He became a successful cavalry commander for the last year of the war.³ The high command of the Confederate army underwent drastic changes during the last year of the war that were the result of the loss of many prominent leaders.

The army command was weakened drastically during this attrition of Confederate leadership, but some men were able to step up and fill the gaps. Mahone, Hampton, and Gordon developed rapidly during the summer of 1864. One or another of them was responsible for most of the great accomplishments of the last nine months of the Confederate army’s life. These men could only do so much, and they could not take the place of all the men who had fallen.⁴

During the summer and fall of 1864, Mahone scored one

¹Freeman, Lee’s Lieutenants, Vol. 3, xxxviii.
²Ibid., xxxiv.
³Ibid., xxxii.
⁴Ibid., xiv.
victory after another against the Union army. The battles of Jerusalem Plank Road, Weldon Railroad, Burgess' Mill, and the Crater were Confederate victories that kept the Confederate army from going quietly into the night. From his assumption of division command on May 6, 1864, until the re-election of President Abraham Lincoln on November 8, 1864, Mahone was successful in capturing 42 regimental colors, 15 pieces of artillery, and 4,867 small arms. The Union army considered him the most formidable of Lee's divisional commanders. The officers on the staff of General Meade were of the opinion that Mahone had caused more trouble to the Union army around Petersburg than all of Lee's generals combined. In the engagements previously discussed, Mahone captured 7,007 prisoners and inflicted 5,546 casualties, killed and wounded, on the Union army, for a total of 12,553 in those four engagements alone. Mahone definitely made his presence felt during that last year of the War.

After the Confederate losses at Gettysburg in July 1863, Lee tendered his resignation to Jefferson Davis, President of the Confederacy, and he recommended that a younger officer be appointed in his place. Davis persuaded Lee to remain in command, and the matter was kept quiet. It was hardly known to anyone until long after the war. When people found out about it, there was curiosity as to whom that younger general was. Major-General Benjamin F. Butler,

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5DePeyster, 392-393.
a Union officer, stated that "General William Mahone was the man recommended by Lee." In support of this assertion Butler cited a letter from Major J. Horace Lacy to William Mahone.

Lacy tells of a conversation that he had with Lee and Wade Hampton. In the discussion, Lee stated that he often thought, near the end of the war, about who should take command of the Army of Northern Virginia if he were to fall. Lee stated that, if he could nominate a successor, "among the younger men I thought William Mahone had developed the highest qualities for organization and command." Lacy gave this letter to Butler to prove the recommendation was factual. Butler stated that since Mahone's change of politics in Virginia, the idea of Lee recommending him had been strongly contradicted. Mahone was ignorant of both Lee's resignation letter and of the recommendation. In this entire autobiography, Autobiography and Personal Reminiscences of Major General Benjamin F. Butler, this is the only discussion of Mahone given by Butler.

The incident, if true, indicates the high regard that Lee had for Mahone as a military officer. Mahone was in command of his division until the very end of the war. He was with Lee when he surrendered at Appomattox: "Mahone's

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' Ibid., 884.

*Ibid., 880-886.
division was in better fighting trim and surrendered more muskets than any other division of Lee's army." On April 9th, Lee had only 7,892 organized infantry at Appomattox. Nearly half of those that were present at the surrender were in Mahone's division, which numbered 3,537 officers and men.\(^9\)

Mahone survived the war, and he was to have a long career in politics. After the war, Mahone immediately returned to the railroad business. He regained leadership of the Norfolk and Petersburg Railroad; on December 7, 1865, Mahone was elected President of the South Side Railroad which ran from Petersburg to Lynchburg.\(^11\) It was a road that he had stubbornly defended during the war. In just eight months after the war, Mahone was in control of the railroads in Southside Virginia, yet he was not satisfied with just these. On November 12, 1867, Mahone gained control of the Virginia and Tennessee Railroad. He had command of the railroads that ran from Norfolk, Virginia to Bristol, Virginia.\(^12\) From his position, he was able to bring together the consolidation of the three railroads, creating the Atlantic, Mississippi & Ohio, with himself as President. He earned an annual salary of $25,000, as much as the President of the United States. Mahone remained in

\(^9\)Wise, 428.

\(^10\)O.R., Vol. XLVI, part 1, 1278.

\(^11\)Blake, 73.

\(^12\)Ibid., 85.
command of his railroads until the panic of 1873 when he was forced out. It was in the railroad business that he earned his money, but it was in politics that he gained real power.

In 1878, Mahone turned to politics when he unsuccessfully ran for the Democratic nomination for governor of Virginia. He stood for a strong public school system and for a readjustment of the huge public debt that Virginia had incurred after the War. He became one of the founders of the Readjuster Party, which eventually controlled the state. The Virginia Assembly, whose majority were members of the Readjuster Party, elected Mahone to the United States Senate in 1881. He eventually eased into the Republican party in the ensuing years. In 1884 and 1888, Mahone led the Virginia delegations to the Republican National Convention. In 1889, he ran for governor of Virginia as a Republican and was defeated. His process of becoming a Republican alienated a great many of his old friends and former Confederates.

The defeat of Mahone and the Republicans in the election of 1889 brought a decided check to Republican activity in Virginia. Mahone was finished with politics, and he lived the remainder of his life in Washington, D.C. Mahone died on October 8, 1895. Judge Edmund Waddill, of

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13 Dufour, 265.
14 Ibid., 265-266.
15 Blake, 254.
Virginia, exclaimed that Mahone was: "the most influential political figure which Virginia has produced since the days of Thomas Jefferson." 

Mahone's place in military history is the subject of this study, and in particular, his place in the Confederate military style during the summer of 1864. The strategy of the limited offensive, however, was not one that was to bring a quick Confederate victory. It instead prolonged the trench warfare that both Union and Confederate armies were forced to live with for the last year of the war at Petersburg. One of the reasons that Lee's army was not able to employ the same offensive strategy that it was so successful with earlier in the war was because Lee's army suffered from severe attrition. The daily incidents of trench warfare at Petersburg soon showed how seriously the Confederate army was suffering.

Life in the trenches was harsh for both the Union and Confederate soldiers. The Union army, however, was able to rotate units in and out of the trenches. The Confederates, on the other hand, were less fortunate. By mid-1864, the North's superiority in numbers had placed such pressure on the Confederate troops that their units could not be rotated out of the trenches. Some regiments passed months in the trenches without relief. These lives were harsh, but they seldom reached the misery that came to characterize

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16Ibid., 274.

17Freeman, Lee's Lieutenants, Vol. 3, 541.
conditions on the Western front during the First World War.

The men in Mahone's division suffered greatly in the trenches around Petersburg. This mole-like existence had strained and broken not only men's bodies but also their allegiance to many of the ideas with which they had started the war. This existence caused many soldiers to abandon the causes that they were fighting for and desert their armies.

This limited offensive strategy was not the quickest or easiest way to fight a war, but the Confederate commanders felt it was the only way to insure their survival. But was it the only way? Other historians have suggested that the Confederate army could have executed other strategies instead of holding onto ground that they probably would have been forced to abandon eventually. The two most common critiques of Confederate strategy have been that the South should have taken the defensive as often as possible and that the Confederate leadership should have adopted a guerilla-style resistance.

T. Harry Williams, however, suggested that the South's best chance to win its independence by a military decision was to attempt a concentrated mass offensive, but he believed that Southern culture prevented the Confederacy from any national application of this strategy. He further

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stated that the defensive strategy of holding onto an area was the worst strategy. Williams' strategic plan, however, did not have the advantages of the limited offensive.

The limited offensive kept the Union army at a safe distance while allowing the Confederate army to make offensive strikes when the opportunity presented itself. The first problem with applying a purely offensive strategy is that the Confederate army did not have the manpower to be successful against the huge mass of Union soldiers. The second problem with this idea is that the Confederate government in Richmond was never willing to approve a completely offensive strategy. They were not willing to give up the capital of the Confederacy because it would have been a huge blow to the morale of the country.

The most common critique of Confederate strategy is that it took the offensive position too often and did not rely on the strength of the defense. A defensive strategy conserved manpower, and mid-nineteenth-century military developments, like rifled muskets and field fortifications, added to a defender's advantage over the attacker. Confederate leaders could have looked at the American Revolution as proof that a weaker power, which claimed few victories and often retreated rather than confronting superior forces, could achieve independence by wearing down

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the enemy's will.\textsuperscript{21}

The second critique of Confederate strategy has been that the Confederate armies should have broken up into small guerrilla forces. The argument continues that Grant's strategy alone could not have won a war against a people sufficiently determined to maintain their independence. Grant provided no means of handling the Confederate armies should they disperse. Then, the Confederacy could have continued organized resistance as units which ranged from a division to an independent company. The Confederate armies surrendered rather than dispersing into these small groups, and the soldiers went home because they did not want an independent nation badly enough to continue the struggle,\textsuperscript{22} a struggle which could have continued for years, with many more lives lost.

John Shy has pointed out that the Southern social order could not possibly have survived the guerrilla warfare that would have been required to continue the conflict. Therefore, the Southern people were not totally committed to the war effort.\textsuperscript{23} This argument is valid, but guerrilla warfare was not the type of warfare for which Southerners were prepared. The Confederate commanders were also not ready to make such a drastic change in their strategy.

Neither an overwhelmingly defensive strategy nor a

\textsuperscript{21}Gallagher, 119-120.
\textsuperscript{22}Berringer, 436.
\textsuperscript{23}Ibid., 438.
guerilla resistance would have garnered wide support in the civilian or the military sector; thus, it is probably inconceivable that either would have met the test of inspiring white southerners for a protracted war. An overwhelmingly defensive strategy was not well-suited to Confederate expectations and would probably not have saved significant manpower or prolonged the war. Lee’s aggressive strategy and tactics produced much more good than evil for the Confederacy.\(^2\) Also, if the Confederate military had chosen a guerilla war, it would have proven to the world that the Confederate experiment had truly failed.

The Confederate army’s limited offensive strategy and Mahone’s part in it proved to be the best chance to keep the Confederate army alive for the last year of the War. The best chance that the Confederacy had for success was if Abraham Lincoln had been put out of office. After Lincoln was reelected in November of 1864, the Confederacy had little chance of surviving through the next year. In the trenches around Petersburg, the Confederate army adopted a limited offensive strategy because of the lack of maneuverability in trench warfare.

The strategy of the Confederate army in 1864 was only as good as the generals that carried it out. There were but a few generals in the Confederate army who were as successful as William Mahone at taking the initiative during a defensive war. Mahone lived in Petersburg before the War,

\(^2\)Gallagher, 127.
and there was no one in the army who knew the terrain around the city as well. He took full advantage of every situation and he never failed to take the initiative when the situation presented itself.

During the siege of Petersburg, Mahone proved himself to be a successful commander and one of Lee’s best lieutenants. His place in military history is very obscure; there are very few works that discuss his importance as a military commander. However, he proved through his actions to be one of the ablest commanders in the army and one of the few who grasped the true importance of the limited offensive. Even though Mahone was a small part in the Confederate operations at Petersburg, he has remained a prime example of how the limited offensive strategy could be successfully carried out.
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VITA

David Kenneth Reed is from Petersburg, Virginia. He received a Bachelor of Arts degree in History from Old Dominion University in December of 1994, with a minor in Political Science. This thesis is in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts. He has had experience working with the National Park Service in Petersburg. He is currently working at Pamplin Park Civil War Site in Petersburg.

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