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Donald Stoker. *The Grand Design: Strategy and the U.S. Civil War*. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2010. Pp. viii, 498. ISBN 978-0-195-37305-9.

Review by Steven E. Sodergren, Norwich University (ssodergr@norwich.edu).

As Professor of Strategy and Policy, Donald Stoker (Naval Postgraduate School) has the background to probe the strategic dilemmas that faced military and political leaders during America's most destructive conflict. While his previous works have been narrower and more technical in focus, they have spanned history from the American Revolution to the arms races of the twentieth century.¹ *The Grand Design* is his most ambitious work to date, contributing to what Stoker admits is an over-saturated field of history.

Although his book evokes recent works by Russell Weigley² and John Keegan,³ Stoker attempts to set it apart from the normal glut of Civil War histories: "none of the more than three score thousand books on the Civil War is dedicated to looking at the war's strategy" (2). This, he asserts, is due to lack of familiarity with strategic analysis on the part of both modern historians (debatable) and Civil War leaders themselves (a fair point). Stoker outlines the basics of policy, strategy, operations, and tactics, using modern, Clausewitzian definitions to counterbalance Civil War commanders' stress on Jominian theories that were actually more operational than strategic in nature. Strategy in this sense is "the larger use of military force in pursuit of a political objective" (7), and Stoker seeks to place conventional studies of the war into this larger vision of how its conduct matched its real and apparent objectives.

With his definitions in place, Stoker progresses through a chronological breakdown of the war that tends to handle operations in the eastern and western theaters separately. Strategically speaking, the course of the war was dictated by the aims of the belligerents, which for the Union meant the complete overthrow of the Confederate state. Such an ambitious objective allowed for a growing, but painfully slow escalation in the use of force. Despite having "no real strategy when the war began" (36), Lincoln recognized that deficiency and sought to modify his war aims as the conflict developed, authorizing an increasingly aggressive policy that conjoined emancipation with military strategy. Ultimately preventing him from efficiently reaching his policy objectives were the divisions and personal faults of his commanders along with his own failure to assert himself over subordinates.

Only when a multi-front offensive was put in place as early as 1862, in a "grand plan" (212) initially proposed by Gen. George McClellan, did the Union assemble a viable strategy. To explain the delay in its proper implementation, Stoker indulges in the long tradition of picking apart the Union command apparatus, noting how, by the critical summer of 1863, "the Union command system was broken" (287) by General-in-Chief Henry Halleck's inability, and probably unwillingness, to exert command authority over the largest force in the field: Gen. Joseph Hooker's Army of the Potomac. Union strategy, he suggests, was myopic: Lincoln and his various Generals-in-Chief seemed to focus on one theater at a time, letting matters drift in the west while struggling to contain the disasters in the east. By 1864, the high command finally devised a single cohesive strategy for defeating the South's military power in both theaters (much as McClellan had tried to do in 1862).

Confederate strategy sought more limited objectives: not the total destruction of the enemy, but merely the ability to withstand the Northern onslaught and achieve a stable political future. But "strategic thinking in the South was almost nonexistent" (411), and, while Union strategy gained precision and sophistication as

1. See e.g., *Britain, France and the Naval Arms Trade in the Baltic, 1919-39: Grand Strategy and Failure* (Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 2003) and (co-editor) *Strategy in the American War for Independence: A Global Approach* (NY: Routledge, 2010).

2. *A Great Civil War: A Military and Political History, 1861-65* (Bloomington: Indiana U Pr, 2000).

3. *The American Civil War: A Military History* (NY: Knopf, 2009).

the war went on, the Confederates vacillated over the best means to achieve their political objectives. Like so many others before him, Stoker blames Confederate President Jefferson Davis for failure to grow as a commander-in-chief during the war and for trying to be his own general-in-chief. This was most tellingly evident in the spring of 1864, when Davis attempted to assert tactical control over Confederate forces in Mississippi from his office in Richmond, rather than delegating such control to his commander on the ground, Leonidas Polk. Thus, Davis's "cumbersome accumulation of duties ... injured the Confederate cause by denying it a clear chain of command and decisive leadership at the top" (123). Granted, Lincoln suffered the same defect for a portion of the war, but he grew out of it, while Davis never did.

The glimmer of hope for Confederate strategic planning came from Robert E. Lee, who actually understood how to win the war and "kept the political objective in view, as well as the military means of reaching it" (156). Striking at the enemy's will was Lee's strategic vision, one that Davis never grasped beyond a repeated operational call to concentrate forces and attack. Lee also turned to concentration whenever possible, but, unlike Davis, he wished to direct such a gathering of force not against enemy forces but "Union public opinion, and thus its will to fight" (279). Unfortunately for the Confederates, their chance to do this was increasingly diminished during the war so as to extinguish any hope of wresting a winning strategy from the growing likelihood of annihilation.

These are familiar arguments. Though Stoker claims to offer a new approach to study of the Civil War, his conclusions do not venture far from established thought on the subject. Certainly battlefield tactics strongly preoccupy many historians (this reviewer included), but strategy, too, has been studied intensively over the years,⁴ though perhaps not in a single dedicated volume. Stoker reaches many of the same general conclusions as earlier writers: Davis was a poor commander-in-chief, Lincoln matured as a supreme commander, Grant brought what was necessary to win, and Lee had the vision but not the means to win.

In addition, the book is geared toward a general audience, providing many biographical and secondary details that will appeal to those only casually familiar with his subject. Less casual readers may ask why, in a strategic analysis of the Civil War, we read for the umpteenth time that Gen. Ambrose Burnside was "best known for his luxuriant side-whiskers" (211) or why biographical postscripts are needed to identify various figures, including Joseph Wheeler, mentioned a total of four times in the text. While these may be minor issues, they cast *The Grand Design* as a rather typical study of the Civil War.

That said, Stoker does offer several worthwhile reappraisals of conventional strategic concepts. For instance, he questions the long-held notion that the South espoused an "offensive-defensive" strategy. While such a strategy was in fact frequently enunciated before and after the war by figures like Davis and Lee, and was subsequently adopted by historians eager to link the struggle of the Confederacy with that of the American revolutionaries, Stoker observes that "Taken together, these comments [by Lee's staff officers] indicate a generally defensive strategic bent, but one supplemented by operational and tactical offensive action as the situation warranted. In the end, though, these examples do not demonstrate proof of a larger, coherent Confederate offensive-defensive strategy (which, as we've seen, is often claimed for the South), nor do they fit the related mistaken interpretation of a South waiting for a Union move and then striking. Indeed, they demonstrate the very opposite" (280).

Stoker convincingly presents a much more aggressive, yet operationally faulty Confederate vision, which consistently called for a concentration of force to strike against the enemy. But the South's flawed civil-military relations ultimately frustrated this strategy by impeding a decisive marshaling of forces early in the war while they were most abundant.

Stoker challenges recent appraisals of Lincoln as politically adroit in his handling of the war effort and his mixed bag of subordinates.⁵ He frequently criticizes Lincoln's command style and interference (or lack

4. See T. Harry Williams, *Lincoln and His Generals* (NY: Knopf, 1952); Herman Hattaway and Archer Jones, *How the North Won: A Military History of the Civil War* (Champaign: U Illinois Pr, 1991); Archer Jones, *Civil War Command and Strategy: The Process of Victory and Defeat* (NY: Free Press, 1992); and Weigley, note 2 above.

5. This analytical trend began with Williams, note 4 above, and continues in such recent works as Eliot A. Cohen, *Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen, and Leadership in Wartime* (NY: Anchor, 2003).

thereof) in the actions of his subordinates, citing, for example, his damaging diversion of McDowell's forces from their supporting role during the Peninsula campaign. Lincoln thus comes off as an inexperienced meddler without the will to order his commanders to follow his strategic vision. But, at the same time, he credits Lincoln with advocating "multiple, concurrent movements against the enemy," a strategy "plagued by generals unwilling or incapable of carrying it out—at least until 1864" (79). To Stoker, this strategy rightly placed pressure on Confederate armies as the center of gravity behind the Southern war effort. So, to conclude as he does that Lincoln's "strategic ideas, barring emancipation, had virtually no impact on the course of the war" (410) is self-contradictory.

Lincoln's command style suits Stoker's presentation of the most frustrating and fascinating element of Civil War leadership: the lack of assertiveness at almost every level on the part of commanders and policy-makers who refused to enforce their will on subordinates. Well known examples are Lee's "if practicable" orders and Lincoln's pleading missives to McClellan. Indeed, Stoker finds indecisive, excessively tactful commanders across the whole conflict: McClellan "asks" Halleck to take Decatur, Alabama, in March 1862; Halleck cannot bring himself to order Rosecrans forward in the summer of 1863; Joseph Johnston refuses to command his army that same summer and Davis is unwilling to relieve or overrule him. The list goes on, with superiors doing their best to stroke rather than curb the egos of their subordinates, which may reflect the customs of a nineteenth-century officer corps governed by an archaic gentlemanly code of conduct. At times it was proper for a commander to defer to a subordinate who had a better understanding of the tactical and operational picture on the ground. As Stoker demonstrates, however, a general hesitancy meant that an overall "grand design" was rarely impressed upon those charged with implementing it. Such recurrent command failure naturally caused critical strategic lapses and the war dragged on for four bloody years.

While much here is familiar and needlessly envisions too wide an audience, *The Grand Design* is still commendable for striving to mesh the stated objectives of political and military figures during the war with the strategic realities they actually created. Stoker's "unapologetically top-down" (405) perspective has merit in this broad approach to a vast subject.