

‘Lick ’Em Tomorrow, Though:’ *Grant’s Use of Mission Command Principles at the Battle of Shiloh*

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Military commanders operating in complex and ever-changing environments cannot rely solely on their tactical or operational proficiency to achieve mission success. Commanders must also be able to communicate their intent to ensure shared understanding and empower subordinate leaders to develop and execute a plan appropriate to the situation. This concept forms the basis of the U.S. Army’s modern mission command doctrine and the seven principles of mission command as outlined in Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-0, *Mission Command: Command and Control of Army Forces*. A commander’s ability to execute these seven principles often has a direct relationship with success on the battlefield.

The 1862 Battle of Shiloh demonstrates this relationship between a commander’s successful use of the mission command principles and victory on the battlefield. Union General Ulysses S. Grant’s effective use of mission command principles, specifically risk acceptance, shared understanding, commander’s intent, and mutual trust, significantly contributed to the Union Army’s successful counterattack and eventual victory over Confederate forces at Shiloh.

Background

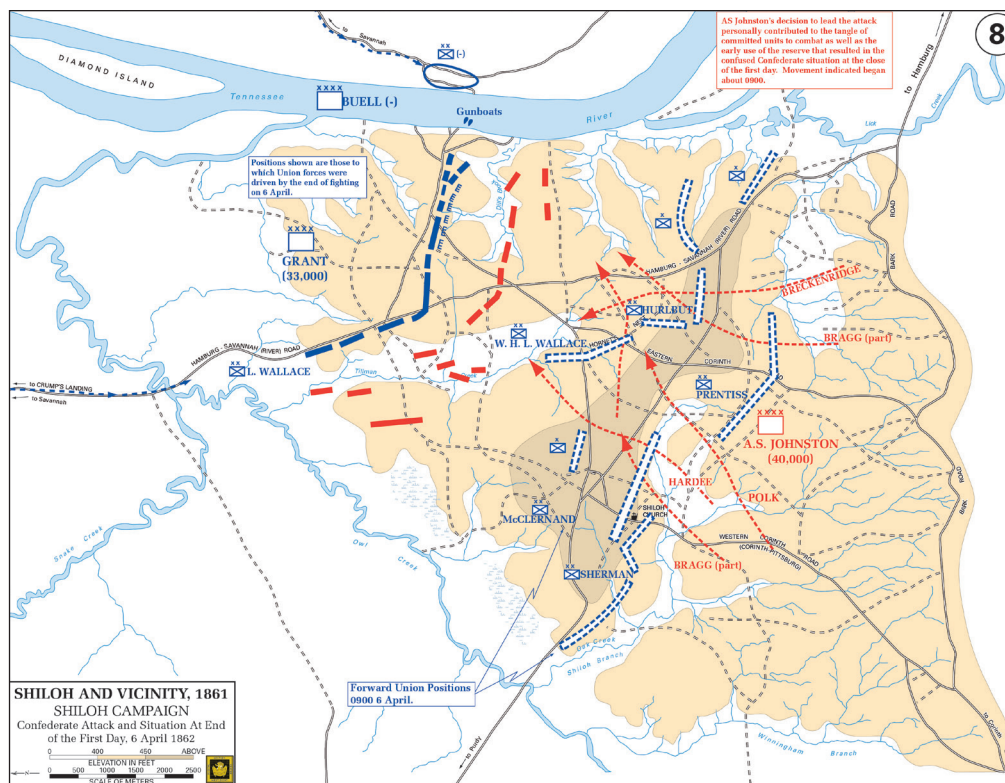
When the American Civil War broke out in 1861, President Lincoln and the War Department developed a plan to defeat the rebelling states by choking off their military and economic resources through blockades.¹ Key to this plan was gaining control of the Mississippi River, a significant avenue for the movement of Confederate soldiers and commerce. Tasked by their higher headquarters, Grant and the Army of Tennessee were responsible for capturing strategic locations along the river.² Grant’s previous victories at the Battles of Fort Henry and Fort Donelson resulted in the southward retreat of Confederate General Albert Sidney Johnston and his army into northern Mississippi.

Anticipating the capture of Corinth, MS, as Grant’s next objective, Johnston developed a plan to attack the Union forces at Pittsburgh Landing (Shiloh) before Grant’s army could reach the city.³ Johnston initiated his attack on 6 April 1862, targeting the southernmost part of the Union lines. Surprised by the attack, the Union defenders were unprepared. Johnston’s army succeeded in bending Grant’s line and inflicting heavy losses. Union General Lew Wallace and his regiment ruined Grant’s attempt to counterattack when Wallace marched his forces to the wrong position, realized he was behind Confederate lines, and instead of attacking, returned to Grant’s headquarters.⁴ That afternoon, a stray bullet killed Johnston, and the command of Confederate forces passed to General Pierre G.T. Beauregard. Beauregard, believing his army victorious, ordered a halt to the attack.⁵

Grant used this halt and the hours of darkness to great advantage, developing and communicating a plan for a counterattack to turn the battle’s tide. The goal was to surprise the Confederate forces with a frontal attack supplemented by reinforcements from General Don Carlos Buell’s Army of the Ohio.⁷ At 0600 on 7 April, Grant’s forces launched their counterattack, successfully pushing Beauregard and his forces back past their previous day’s gains. The next morning, under cover of a cavalry attack, rebel forces withdrew from Shiloh and provided a path for Grant’s army to seize Corinth, Vicksburg, and ultimately the Mississippi River.⁸

Risk Acceptance

Risk, “exposure of someone or something valued to danger, harm, or loss,” is inherent and unavoidable in combat.⁹ Successful commanders understand that being overly cautious can be detrimental to mission accomplishment. Instead, commanders must analyze the anticipated cost to the force, weigh that cost against the importance of achieving their objective, and accept a level of risk that will allow them to achieve their objective.¹⁰ During the



Map 1 — Shiloh Campaign – End of Day, 6 April 1862⁶

Battle of Shiloh, Grant successfully executed the mission command principle of risk acceptance when he launched a counterattack despite the risk of additional losses to his depleted force.

Grant's army suffered unprecedented casualties on the first day of the battle. Of Grant's original 30,000 Soldiers, more than 7,000 perished during the day's fighting.¹¹ Facing the possibility of even more significant losses, Grant's peers, staff, and subordinate commanders counseled him to withdraw east. However, "even with dead bodies heaped up around him," Grant knew that failure to capture Corinth would mean continued use of the Mississippi River by the Confederates, which would prolong the war and harm the larger strategic objective.¹² Instead, Grant calculated that between his 15,000 available survivors and the additional 25,000 fresh troops arriving with General Buell's Army of the Ohio, he would be able to "dwarf the 25,000 able-bodied troops fielded by Beauregard."¹³ Additionally, Grant deduced from his previous experience that "when both sides seem defeated in battle, the first to assume the offensive would surely win," and it was "always a great advantage to be the attacking party."¹⁴ The influx of fresh troops and seizure of the initiative were enough to make Grant's risk of additional losses posed by the counterattack acceptable.

By identifying the risks, addressing the hazards, and accepting the residual risk to achieve the strategic objective, Grant changed the battle's outcome. Had Grant capitulated to those counseling him not to assume the risk of a counterattack, Union forces would have withdrawn from northern Mississippi, and President Lincoln would likely have relieved him of command. Instead, Grant's skilled use of risk acceptance reversed Confederate gains and opened a corridor leading to future victories.

Shared Understanding

Successful commanders communicate concepts and plans in a way that creates a "shared understanding of an operational environment, an operation's purpose, problems, and approaches to solving problems" among all echelons of their command.¹⁵ Investing the time to ensure information flows to the lowest possible level "forms the basis for unity of effort" and provides insight into the commander's expectations.¹⁶ Commanders can develop shared understanding by demonstrating a demeanor that reinforces their spoken message or using common perceptions

of military problems such as previous engagements.¹⁷ Following the setbacks of the first day of fighting, Grant effectively used the principle of shared understanding to communicate his plan of attack to all his subordinate commanders and prevent a recurrence of Wallace's failure to engage.

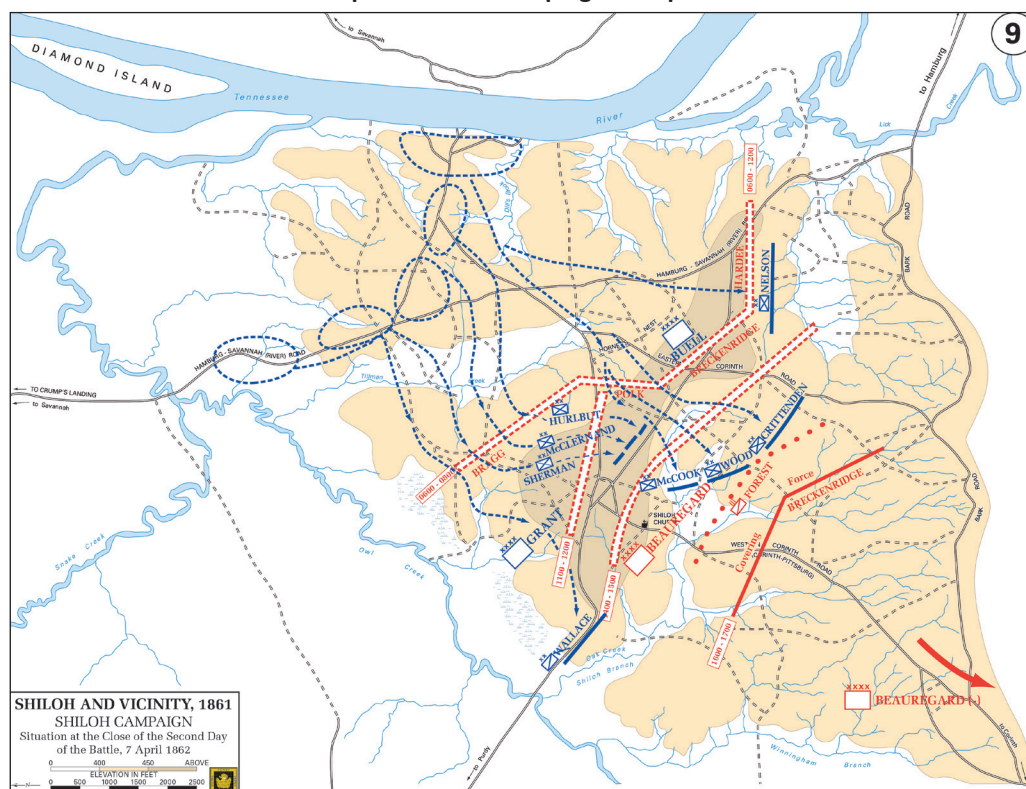
On the night of 6 April, all three of Grant's divisions "were more or less shattered and depleted in numbers from the terrible battle of the day."¹⁸ After accepting the risk associated with a counterattack and developing his plan, Grant left his headquarters to "visit each division commander in person" and communicate the concept of the operation to them.¹⁹ Using the "story of the assault at Fort Donelson" as a frame of reference, Grant ordered his commanders to "throw out heavy lines of skirmishers in the morning as soon as they could see, and push them forward until they found the enemy, follow with their entire divisions in supporting distance, and to engage the enemy as soon as found."²⁰ General William Sherman, one of the division commanders Grant met with that night, would later comment that Grant retained his "equanimity and unwavering faith in victory."²¹ When Sherman observed that their forces had "had the devil's own day," Grant calmly replied, "Yes, 'lick 'em tomorrow, though."²²

Grant's decision to visit his commanders in the field laid the groundwork for the next day's victory. First, it allowed Grant to communicate his expectations directly to the individuals responsible for carrying them out and ensured that the confusion exhibited by Wallace that almost cost them the battle would not occur again. Second, it allowed Grant to compare his new plan to the example of the attack at Fort Donelson, an experience common to his entire army, to clarify the commanders' roles further. Finally, Grant's calm demeanor, rooted in his confidence, reinforced the soundness of his plan. Together, Grant's actions ensured a shared understanding among his subordinate commanders that would lead to the successful execution of the counterattack and victory over Beauregard's forces.

Commander's Intent

Mission command requires that subordinate leaders use their judgment to make decisions that further the purpose of the operation and achieve a specific end state. Commanders owe subordinate leaders a "clear and concise expression" of this purpose and end state.²³ Empowered by the intent provided by their commander, subordinate leaders can adapt and act decisively even when conditions around them change unexpectedly.²⁴ Grant excelled at not burdening his division commanders with detailed instructions and, in the hours before the second day of fighting, provided them with an intent that allowed them as much freedom of action as possible.²⁵

Map 2 — Shiloh Campaign — 7 April 1862



Having expressed to his division commanders his intent that the Union forces surprise the Confederate forces at first light with a frontal attack and push them off the battlefield, Grant spent the hours before the operation inspecting the lines and issuing final guidance.²⁶ When Grant approached Wallace, whose indecisiveness on the first day nearly ended the battle, he studied the terrain and instructed Wallace to “[m]ove out that way, parallel to the river.”²⁷ Wallace acknowledged the order and asked if “he was to take any special formation in the attack.”²⁸ Despite ample reason to micromanage Wallace, Grant decided to “leave that to [Wallace’s] discretion.”²⁹ With Sherman, Grant’s most capable division commander, Grant would later say “in perhaps his loftiest tribute,” he “scarcely needed to give [Sherman] any advice.”³⁰

In an era where technology limited combat communication to runners, signal flags, and bugle calls, battlefield commanders had no efficient way to relay information or receive commands. Grant’s decision to issue his broad intent and allow his division commanders to adapt to the circumstances unfolding was essential to maintaining pressure on the Confederate forces “in as many places as possible.”³¹ This pressure would ultimately convince Beauregard that he could not defeat Grant’s force, resulting in his order to withdraw further south.

Mutual Trust

“Mutual trust is shared confidence between commanders, subordinates, and partners that they can be relied on and are competent in performing their assigned tasks.”³² Built over time and through shared experience, it must exist at all levels of the chain of command for any force to be successful.³³ For example, commanders must trust that their subordinate leaders can execute their intent and make sound decisions. Likewise, individual Soldiers must trust that their leaders will take care of their welfare and see their leaders sharing in hardship and danger.³⁴ At Shiloh, the trust Grant cultivated among his peers, division commanders, and individual Soldiers was vital in achieving victory.

At Shiloh, trust permeated throughout the second day’s engagement. Grant demonstrated trust in his subordinate commanders’ tactical competence by giving them “a broad outline of his intent” and “freedom to be spontaneous.”³⁵ Grant confirmed his trust in Buell, his adjacent commander, by “making a sound calculation” that Buell would arrive in time to provide the reinforcements needed to make his counterattack plan feasible.³⁶ Most significantly, in a war where “one in five soldiers on both sides would abandon their post,” Grant’s Soldiers proved their trust in him by willingly marching back into combat, an act made even after suffering losses that, in a single day, totaled more than the number of casualties in the U.S.’s three previous conflicts combined.³⁷⁻³⁸ Grant further strengthened this trust when “at one point in the afternoon, he gathered two regiments, lined them up for battle, then personally led them forward.”³⁹

The trust Grant cultivated among his forces and the trust those forces placed in him significantly impacted the battle’s outcome. Grant’s ability to maintain his lines and rally them to victory, even in the face of overwhelming casualties, provided the mass needed to push back the Confederate forces. Had that trust not existed, the attack would likely have fallen apart like engagements at the First Bull Run (1861). Instead, with Beauregard’s forces defeated, the Union Army could continue its advance into the deep south.

Conclusion

The 1862 Battle of Shiloh demonstrates the relationship between a commander’s successful use of the mission command principles and victory on the battlefield. General Grant’s effective use of mission command principles, specifically risk acceptance, shared understanding, commander’s intent, and mutual trust, significantly contributed to the Union Army’s successful counterattack and eventual victory over Confederate forces at Shiloh.

Grant is a model of how the use of mission command principles directly correlates with success on the battlefield. Grant demonstrated risk acceptance by moving forward with a counterattack despite the previous day’s overwhelming casualties because he knew his operation’s strategic importance. Grant’s mastery of shared understanding and clear commander’s intent ensured his subordinate commanders understood the concept of their shared operation and what they must accomplish without limiting their ability to adapt to a complex and ever-changing situation. Finally, the mutual trust cultivated by Grant up and down the chain of command provided a foundation that held the force together. If General Grant had faltered in any of these principles, the result of the battle and the war could have been drastically different.

Notes

- ¹ Ed Redmond, "Places in Civil War History: The Anaconda Plan and Union Victories in Tennessee," Library of Congress Blogs, Worlds Revealed: Geography and Maps at The Library of Congress, 15 February 2018, accessed from <https://blogs.loc.gov/maps/2018/02/places-in-civil-war-history-the-anaconda-plan-and-union-victories-in-tennessee/>.
- ² Earl J. Hess and Larry J. Daniel, "Shiloh: The Battle That Changed the Civil War," *The Journal of Southern History* 64, no. 3 (1998): 555, accessed from <https://doi.org/10.2307/2587827>.
- ³ Stephen Bowman, Leonard Fullenkamp, and Jay Luvaas, "Union Counterattack" in *Guide to the Battle of Shiloh* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1996), 187-204.
- ⁴ Jeffrey J. Gudmens, *Staff Ride Handbook for the Battle of Shiloh, 6-7 April 1862* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2005).
- ⁵ Grady McWhiney, "General Beauregard's 'Complete Victory' at Shiloh: An Interpretation," *The Journal of Southern History* 49, no. 3 (August 1983): 421, accessed from <https://doi.org/10.2307/2208103>. Larry J. Daniel, essay in *Shiloh: The Battle That Changed the Civil War* (Norwalk, CT: Easton Press, 2004).
- ⁶ Maps courtesy of U.S. Military Academy Department of History.
- ⁷ Bowman, Fullenkamp, and Luvaas, "Union Counterattack," 187-204.
- ⁸ Ibid.
- ⁹ Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-0, *Mission Command: Command and Control of Army Forces*, July 2019, 1-13.
- ¹⁰ Ibid.
- ¹¹ Jeffrey J. Gudmens, *Staff Ride Handbook for the Battle of Shiloh, 6-7 April 1862* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2005).
- ¹² Ron Chernow, "A Glittering Lie," essay in *Grant* (NY: Penguin Books, 2018), 198-208.
- ¹³ Ibid.
- ¹⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁵ ADP 6-0, 1-8.
- ¹⁶ Ibid.
- ¹⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁸ Ulysses S. Grant, *Ulysses S. Grant: Memoirs and Selected Letters: Personal Memoirs of U.S. Grant Selected Letters 1839-1865* (NY: Library of America, 1990).
- ¹⁹ Ibid, 345-350.
- ²⁰ Chernow, "A Glittering Lie."
- ²¹ Ibid.
- ²² Ibid.
- ²³ ADP 6-0, 1-10.
- ²⁴ Ibid.
- ²⁵ Ibid.
- ²⁶ Chernow, "A Glittering Lie."
- ²⁷ Edward Cunningham, Gary D. Joiner, and Timothy B. Smith, *Shiloh and the Western Campaign of 1862* (NY: Savas Beatie, 2012).
- ²⁸ Ibid.
- ²⁹ Daniel, essay in *Shiloh*.
- ³⁰ Chernow, "A Glittering Lie."
- ³¹ Ibid.
- ³² ADP 6-0.
- ³³ Ibid.
- ³⁴ Ibid.
- ³⁵ Chernow, "A Glittering Lie."
- ³⁶ Ibid.
- ³⁷ Bowman, Fullenkamp, and Luvaas, "Union Counterattack," 187-204.
- ³⁸ Hess and Daniel, "Shiloh: The Battle That Changed the Civil War," 555.
- ³⁹ Chernow, "A Glittering Lie."

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