

Yet McClellan and Halleck both proved reluctant to take decisive action in the field. After the Battle of Shiloh, it took the latter almost a month to advance 20 miles south to attack the vital Confederate railroad junction at Corinth, Mississippi. Lincoln grew so frustrated with McClellan's inaction that he responded to the general's October 1862 request for more horses with an exasperated telegram: "I have just read your despatch about sore tongued and fatigued [sic] horses. Will you pardon me for asking what the horses of your army have done since the battle of Antietam that fatigue anything?"

By contrast, Grant had never been an enthusiastic student of military art and science. Even his fiercely loyal lieutenant William T. Sherman doubted Grant's "knowledge of grand strategy, and of books of science and history." He told his friend precisely that in a March 1864 letter, in which he also concluded that Grant's triumph owed in large measure to his fundamental "common-sense" and to his "chief characteristic," an unshakeable "faith" in victory. That faith was justified by a serendipitous combination of qualities that enabled Grant to become one of the most extraordinary military leaders in American history.

Grant didn't go in much for doctrine, but he brought a relentlessly aggressive approach to warfare. He always favored activity and forward movement to standing still. Even in victory, he would be frustrated by subordinates' failure to pursue the retreating enemy.