THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR.—IV.

Some Lessons to be Learnt from it.

By John Buchan.

Mr. John Buchan concludes to-day the interesting series of articles in which he has been comparing the conditions of the North in the American Civil War with Great Britain during the present world struggle. He has demonstrated how nearly the difficulties which each Government has had to face have coincided, and he sums up the parallel most ably in the final paragraphs of this final article.]

GRANT was the man for the task. That is to say, he could apply the strategic scheme which gave the North victory. What was that scheme?

It was in its elements very simple. It was merely o use the superior strength of the North in men and wealth nd position to crush the Confederacy. The map will now that the Southern States were roughly a quadrilateral, ounded by the Potomac, the Mississippi, and the sea. One great Confederate State, Texas, lay west of the Iississippi, and North-West Virginia ran up in a long eninsula towards Lake Erie, so that it left only an isthmus hundred miles wide between the two parts of the North. he first business of the North was to occupy and hold orth-West Virginia, and this was done with little trouble. he next was to blockade all the sea coast and prevent any versea imports from reaching the South. The third was o control the Mississippi line, and so not only cut off exas from the Confederacy but complete the investment f the Quadrilateral. After that the sides of the Quadrilateral could be pushed in, so that the armies of Lee ere left with less and less ground to manœuvre in and raw their supplies from.

The North was perfectly conscious of its strength and of hat must be the main lines of its strategy. Strategy epends very much upon geography, and geographical acts cannot be blinked. But in the use of its strength it umbled for many long days. Strength in war, remember, s not a thing which can be said to exist in the abstract. here may be a potentiality of strength, but till the strength s made actual it is no better than weakness. A country nay have an enormous population, but unless that population appears in the shape of trained armies in the right lace it is not an element of strength. It may have reat wealth, but unless that wealth is used skilfully or the purposes of war it is not strength. The North ad the potentiality of strength, but it had to find out how o apply it.

One part of the problem was successfully faced from he first. The Navy was well handled, and the whole oast-line of the South was rigorously blockaded. That nust be set down to the credit of the civilians at Washington. Lincoln broke away from many of the accepted ractices of International law, and he and the Supreme Court created precedents which have been of great use to s in the present struggle. For a people so legally minded nd so conservative as America that was a remarkable erformance and sets an instructive example to other ations in the same position. The result was that the South was pinched from the first and very soon began o starve. Prices went up to a crazy level. Before the nd of the war coffee was selling at £8 a pound and tea t £6. A dinner in an hotel cost £4 and a newspaper ost 4s. A pair of boots cost £40. Moreover, practically ll the materials of war came from abroad, and, if it had not been that the arsenals of the South were well supplied t the start and that great quantities of munitions were aptured from the North in the first victories, the Conederacy must very soon have come to a standstill through heer lack of material. That part of the Northern strength vas well applied.

But it was not enough. The South had to be beaten n the field, and it was there that the North fumbled. The nain strategic objective was clear, but it is one thing to ave a clear strategical objective, and quite another o have a clear strategical plan. The two objects to be gained were (1) the capture of Richmond, the Southern capital, and (2) the mastery of the Mississippi valley. The Northern generals, M'Clellan and the rest, began with the most ingenious plans for the capture of Richmond. But they were too ingenious. They dissipated their strength. Five times great armies crossed the Potomac, and five times they were driven back by half their numbers. In 1862 four armies invaded Virginia and converged on Richmond. In three months Lee had routed them all. On at least two occasions the North was very near giving up the war in despair. It is true that Lee was a man of genius, and the fear of his name was worth an army corps, but over-elaborate tactics, which do not use adequately the strength of a people, play into the hands of a man of genius. The early Northern commanders all wanted to be Napoleons, and thought more about their military reputations than about beating the enemy. Grant, when he came along, thought only of using the gross strength of the North in a plain business-like way. The South was so situated that it could terribly punish divergence. It was operating upon interior lines, and so had the chance of striking rapid blows at the widely separated Northern armies. Even after Gettysburg, when the bad days had begun, it could play that game. An instance is Longstreet's swift dash to the West, which gave him the victory of Chickamauga and checked the Federal invasion of Georgia.

The Method of Grant.

A great strategical plan is generally simple. As an example take Moltke's scheme which won the war of 1870. There was no fumbling there. His two great army groups had no other object but to concentrate all their might as soon as possible on the main forces of the enemy. The North began by flinging away its chances with divergent operations and divided counsels. Then came Grant's capture of Vicksburg, which along with the naval operations on the lower waters, gave the North the line of the Mississippi. It was Grant's greatest military triumph, and it will always remain an admirable example of that most interesting manœuvre when a general cuts himself loose from his base—a movement which Sherman made later in his great march to the sea, and which Lord Roberts performed in the South African War. Once the line of the Mississippi was won, and Grant was in supreme command, the strategic plan of the North was simplified. The policy of pressing in the sides of the quadrilateral began. Sherman split the Confederacy in two by marching across Georgia from Atlanta to Savannah, and the war zone was thereby narrowed to Virginia and the Carolinas. Grant with the Army of the Potomac advanced against Richmond. He fought his way into the Wilderness, till he was face to face with Lee behind the lines of Petersburg.

Now mark the situation. The South had been blockaded for three years. Its soldiers were ragged and barefoot, with scanty food, scanty munitions, scanty anæsthetics. But they did not give in. Grant did not underrate his enemy. He knew that he could not starve him into surrender, but must beat him in the field. He used all his cards for the purpose, and not merely a few. For example, he used the command of the sea. With its assistance in the 1864 campaign he shifted his base and the line of communications no less than four times within two months. By the end of March 1865, he had so weakened the enemy's man-power that he forced him to evacuate the Petersburg lines. Lee broke loose, but he could not get away. The net had closed round him, and on April 9th, 1865, the greatest soldier since Napoleon, commanding an army which was reduced to little more than a corps, laid down his arms at Appomatox. The North had ended the war in the only way by which the Union could be safeguarded; it had won a complete and final victory.

The Parallel.

Was the problem of the North altogether unlike our own? In many ways it was different. We are fighting along with strong Allies. We began by possessing the rudiments of a military system. We have suffered very little from the political dissensions, the Press clamour, and the personal intrigues which for so long weakened the hand of Lincoln. Again, we are happily not fighting against genius of the first order, for there is no German soldier who can rank with Lee and Jackson. We are engaged with a far more formidable power than the South, but if we allow the possession of the great Confederate leaders to weigh against the lack of trained men and supplies, we may say that the North was the amateur and the South the professional; just as to-day Britain is the amateur who begins by having the business to learn, and Germany is the professional who has studied the game for a generation. Like the North, we and our Allies have the greater potential strength in men and wealth, but all Germany's strength has been at her disposal from the outset, and we have had to make of ours a practical reality. Our problem is the same—to beleaguer the enemy and then to breach the walls of his fortress. But we began, like the North, by having no consistent strategic plan, by having no real staff work at headquarters, and by various divergent operations which dissipated our strength. Like the North we have had to mobilise our man-power to an undreamed-of extent, and we have had to train it. We have also had to find the men who could use our strength. Fortunately they need not be geniuses. Genius is like the wind that bloweth where it listeth, and no man knoweth the way of it. We cannot count on the advent of a genius—though a Lee or a Napoleon would no doubt change the whole aspect of the struggle—but we have the right to look for leaders who can recognise where our assets lie, and use them with an undivided purpose.

Our strategic objective is the same as that of the North, and our strategic plan is the same. We have succeeded, as the North succeeded, in blockading the enemy. But that is not enough. Grant had to fight his way through the enemy's defences and break him in a field battle, and that took two stubborn years. We have the same task. We cannot beat Germany by blockading her, though all that helps; the finishing touch must come from a field victory. We have no use for a complex and showy strategy any more than Grant had. Our strategy must be simple, but it must be pursued with a single-hearted purpose and unwavering resolution. We have to mobilise every ounce of potential strength and so concentrate it as to overwhelm the enemy. That was what Grant did, and only by doing that can we win the victory that Grant won.

Other Parallels: Trench Warfare.

There is another series of lessons to be learned from the American Civil War—technical lessons in the handling of troops. This is perhaps scarcely the place to enlarge on such a subject; but one or two points may be noted.

The first is the use of entrenchments. The great war of 1870 showed comparatively little spade work, at any rate in the earlier stages. But if you take such a campaign as Grant's in the Wilderness of Virginia in May 1864, you will find that it developed very fast into a war of entrenchments. Both sides sheltered behind parapets of earth and felled timber, and the result was the kind of stalemate which we have seen for the past year. Grant, it will be remembered, turned the first position by a very audacious flank march, and Lee took up a second line, the line of Petersburg. This line was admirably chosen, for Lee has never been surpassed in his eye for country. There Grant wore him down and ultimately drove him from his position. If we seek for parallels to the kind of frontal attacks on entrenchments which we have seen lately in the West there are plenty in the Wilderness campaign. The series of encounters which we call the Battle of Spottsylvania was such an attack. Mark what happened there. Grant found out a weak point in the Confederate line, and on May 10th attacked with three divisions after a long artillery preparation. The twelve battalions in the centre, like the Highland Brigade the other day at Loos, swept everything before them. They carried the first position, took 20 guns and 1,200 prisoners, and then swept on and carried the second position. But Lee delivered his counter-stroke, caught the Federals when their impetus was exhausted, and drove them back to their original line.

Grant's attack failed for one reason only—he had no reserves at hand. Two days later, early on the morning of May 12th, he made another desperate assault on a salient in Lee's front. Once again the first position was carried; once again the Northerners were brought up against the second position and routed by Lee's counter-stroke. The same thing happened in many other battles of the American Civil War—at Gettysburg, for example, where the superb charge of Pickett's Virginians failed for lack of supports. When a frontal attack succeeded, as at Chickamauga and at Chattanooga, it was because behind the spear-head there was a spear-shaft.

Have we not seen the same thing? At Neuve Chapelle, at Festubert, at Loos, we delivered frontal attacks which succeeded brilliantly in the first effort. But there were no fresh troops behind them to give the finishing stroke, and the impetus slackened just when the vital point was reached. The lesson of the American Civil War is that, when owing to the nature of the adversary's position, no manœuvre battle is possible and the only thing to do is to attack in front, that attack can only succeed if there are ample reserves—fresh troops who can carry on the impetus of the first assault. It was fortunate that the Germans had no Lee at their head to deal his deadly counter-stroke, for, if they had, Neuve Chapelle and Loos might have been for us not partial successes, but unrelieved calamities.

Cavalry.

A second point is the use of cavalry. The Civil War will repay the close study of all cavalry officers. It produced some really great cavalry leaders, like Jeb Stuart on the one side and Sheridan on the other. In shock tactics the American cavalry would probably have ranked below the cavalry of a first-class European Power. But they may be said to have discovered the mounted rifleman—men who could fight on foot or on horseback as occasion demanded, men full of initiative and self-reliance, who could form an impenetrable screen, or raid enemy communications, or urge a pursuit, or make a reconnaissance, or play their part in a set battle with equal competence. Happily in Britain we have learned this lesson. I think we may fairly claim that our cavalry are the handiest in the world. In pure cavalry work they showed great brilliance in the retreat from Mons, and at the first and second battles of Ypres they were as steadfast in trench-fighting as the best infantry. There is no parallel to such performances on the German side. Last September, when von Hindenburg made his desperate effort to cut off the Russian army in the Vilna salient, he flung 40,000 troopers under von Lauenstein round the Russian right flank. They turned that flank completely, but they could not hold their ground. They had no infantry with them, and the horsemen were routed by the Russian counter-attack. It was fortunate for Russia that the German cavalry were not true mounted infantrymen. Had they been trained on the British plan, it is not unlikely that von Hindenburg's bold stroke would have succeded.

These topics are suggested to anyone who cares to pursue the parallel. But that parallel is most instructive in connection with the greater matters on which the success of the North depended. In almost all respects their problem was our own. Given greater wealth and more men, how could these best be used to crush the enemy? Like us, the North had to levy armies beyond its wildest dreams. It had to summon the whole of its available man-power, and it had to use for this purpose the legal imperative. It had to learn how to train its levies, so that the initiative of the volunteer should be preserved under the discipline of the corporate unit. It had to use its navy to hem in the enemy, and to starve and cripple that enemy. It had to find men to lead its armies who could get the full value out of its greater man-power and better equipment. It had to find the right strategical plan and stick to it, discarding all divergent operations and brilliant side-shows. And when all this had been done it had to fight hard for success; to deliver hammer-blow after hammer-blow till the armed strength of the South crumbled to pieces in the field. Potential strength was not enough; it had to be made actual. Actual strength was not enough; it had to be used. Nothing less than a complete and whole-hearted national effort availed.

But when that effort was made, there was victory.