

# Gary W. Gallagher, “Upon their Success Hang Momentous Interests”: Generals

## Abstract

In “Upon their Success Hang Momentous Interests’: Generals” (1992), [Gary W. Gallagher](#), history professor at the University of Virginia, interrogates the relevance of military decision-making to a complete understanding of the Civil War’s outcome. Gallagher finds support for his argument in the words of Civil War soldiers, their leaders, and contemporary journalists, as well as in the example of General Robert E. Lee.

## Introduction

It is appropriate to note that current scholarship usually looks far from the battlefield to explain northern victory and hence treats generalship as largely irrelevant. Richard E. Beringer, Herman Hattaway, Archer Jones, and William N. Still, Jr., played down the importance of campaigns and battles in their exhaustive *Why the South Lost the Civil War*. Easily the most detailed treatment of the subject, this book assessed the theories of several generations of historians before offering its own explanation for Confederate defeat. The authors of *Why the South Lost* pointed to disaffection behind the lines and concluded that “the Confederacy succumbed to internal rather than external causes.” Wracked by doubts about slavery, alienated from a central government that repeatedly violated the doctrine of state rights to sustain its war effort, and unable to construct a viable nationalism, southern whites, “by thousands of individual decisions, abandoned the struggle for and allegiance to the Confederate States of America.” The activities of armies and generals supply a violent backdrop against which the authors pursue their thesis, but only occasionally do military events move into the foreground as an important element in determining the state of morale behind the lines.<sup>1</sup>

A collection of immensely complex and interrelated factors determined the outcome of the war, among which *was* an ultimate failure of will among southern whites behind the lines. But no shift in civilian morale North or South—and really none of the non-military factors—can be fully understood outside of the context of the military ebb and flow. James M. McPherson aptly observed in *Battle Cry of Freedom*, “Defeat causes demoralization and loss of will; victory pumps up morale and the will to win.” He pointed to the striking turnaround in northern attitudes in the late summer of 1864, when deep pessimism gave way to rampant optimism following Union victories at Mobile Bay and Atlanta. “The southern loss of will was a mirror image of this northern determination,” added McPherson, and the “changes of mood were caused mainly by events on the battlefield.” Testimony from participants underscores this point, none more dramatically than the entry for July 28, 1863, in Josiah Gorgas’s diary. After watching developments along the Mississippi River and in Pennsylvania, the able chief of Confederate ordnance summed up his feelings in the wake of disasters at Gettysburg, Vicksburg, and Port Hudson: “Yesterday we rode on the pinnacle of success—today absolute ruin seems to be our portion. The Confederacy totters to its destruction.”<sup>2</sup>

This essay proceeds from the assumption that generals made a very great difference in determining the outcome of the war. Their actions decided events on the battlefield, which in turn either calmed or aggravated internal tensions that affected the ability of each government to prosecute the war.

## **Robert E. Lee**

The greatest obstacle to northern victory during the last year of the war, as it had been since June 1862, was Robert E. Lee and his Army of Northern Virginia. Lee's transcendent reputation as a great captain remains firmly ensconced in the popular mind, and virtually no one challenges his brilliance as a field commander. But scholars increasingly have questioned his larger contribution to the Confederate war effort. Did he fail to see beyond his beloved Virginia, crippling Confederate strategic planning through a stubborn refusal to release troops badly needed elsewhere? Did his strategic and tactical choices lengthen the conflict, thereby increasing the odds that northern civilian morale would falter? Or did his penchant for the offensive unnecessarily bleed Confederate manpower when a defensive strategy punctuated by limited counteroffensives would have conserved southern resources? Did his celebrated victories improve the odds for Confederate nationhood, or were they nothing but gaudy sideshows that diverted attention from more significant military events elsewhere? In short, what was Lee's impact on the outcome of the war?

One of the most common criticisms of Lee alleges a lack of appreciation for the problems and importance of the trans-Appalachian Confederacy. J. F. C. Fuller frequently alluded to Lee's inability to see the war as a whole. The British author stated in one characteristic passage that Lee "was so obsessed by Virginia that he considered it the most important area of the Confederacy.... To him the Confederacy was but the base of Virginia."<sup>3</sup> A number of subsequent historians expanded upon the idea that Lee failed to take in the entire strategic situation. Especially strident in this regard was Thomas L. Connelly, who wondered "whether Lee possessed a sufficiently broad military mind to deal with over-all Confederate matters." Connelly saw Lee as intensely parochial, blinded by a desire to protect Richmond, and unwilling or unable to look beyond each immediate threat to his native state and its capital. When Lee did turn his attention to the West, averred Connelly, he invariably made suggestions "in the context of his strategy for Virginia." Connelly and Archer Jones reiterated many of these points in their study of Confederate command and strategy. They questioned Lee's knowledge about the geography of the West and deplored his habit of requesting reinforcements for the Army of Northern Virginia at the expense of other Confederate armies. Even Lee's grudging deployment of two-thirds of James Longstreet's First Corps to Georgia in September 1863 had a Virginia twist—he hoped that the movement might save Knoxville and shield Virginia's western flank.<sup>4</sup>

Lee's aggressive style of generalship, with its attendant high casualties, also has generated much criticism. Grady McWhiney and Perry D. Jamieson propounded the thesis that a reckless devotion to offensive tactics bled the South "nearly to death in the first three years of the war" and sealed the fate of the Confederacy. Lee fit this pattern perfectly, they observed, sustaining losses approaching 20 percent in his first half-dozen

battles compared with fewer than 15 percent for the Federals. Elsewhere, McWhiney bluntly claimed that the “aggressiveness of Robert E. Lee, the greatest Yankee killer of all time, cost the Confederacy dearly.”<sup>5</sup> A number of other historians agreed with McWhiney. The Army of Northern Virginia suffered more than 50,000 casualties in the three months after Lee assumed command, claimed Thomas L. Connelly, and over all “the South’s largest field army, contained in the smallest war theater, was bled to death by Lee’s offensive tactics.” J. F. C. Fuller believed that Lee’s only hope for success lay in emulating “the great Fabius,” who often retreated to avoid costly battles. Instead, time and again Lee “rushed forth to find a battlefield” and “by his restless audacity, he ruined such strategy as his government created.” Alan T. Nolan’s reasoned analysis of Lee explored the question of “whether the general’s actions related positively or negatively to the war objectives and national policy of his government.” Nolan thought Lee came up far short when measured against this standard. His strategy and tactics won specific contests and made headlines but traded irreplaceable manpower for only fleeting advantage. Such accomplishments did not bring the Confederacy closer to independence. Lee’s relentless pursuit of the offensive contravened the strategy best calculated to win southern independence.<sup>6</sup>

These historians raise serious questions about the relationship between Lee’s generalship and Confederate chances for independence. A different reading of the evidence, however, suggests that Lee pursued a strategy attuned to the expectations of most Confederate citizens and calculated to exert maximum influence on those who made policy in the North and in Europe. Far from being innocent of the importance of the West and the psychological dimension of his operations, he might have seen more clearly than any of his peers the best road to Confederate independence. His victories buoyed southern hopes when defeat lay in all other directions, dampened spirits in the North, and impressed European political leaders. They also propelled him to a position where, long before the end of the war, he stood unchallenged as a military hero and his Army of Northern Virginia had become synonymous with the Confederacy in the minds of many southern whites.<sup>7</sup> While his army remained in the field there was hope for victory; his capitulation extinguished such hope and in effect ended the war. Lee had selected a strategy that paradoxically enabled the Confederacy to resist for four years *and* guaranteed that it would not survive the surrender of his army at Appomattox.

It was the Virginia theater that captivated foreign observers. For example, Lee’s victories at the Seven Days and Second Manassas in the summer of 1862 conveyed to London and Paris a sense of impending Confederate success. Apparently unimpressed by the string of Union triumphs in the West extending from Fort Henry through the fall of New Orleans, Prime Minister Viscount Palmerston and Emperor Napoleon III leaned toward some type of intervention by the first week in September. Northern public opinion also seemed to give greater weight to the Seven Days than to events in Tennessee, prompting Lincoln’s famous complaint to French Count Agénor-Etienne de Gasparin in early August: “Yet it seems unreasonable that a series of successes, extending through half-a-year, and clearing more than a hundred thousand square miles of country, should help us so little, while a single half-defeat should hurt us so much.”<sup>8</sup>

If anything, the South exhibited a more pronounced interest in the East. Following reverses in Tennessee and along the Mississippi River during the winter and spring of 1862, Confederates looked increasingly to Virginia for good news from the battlefield. Lee and the Army of Northern Virginia provided the only reliable counterpoint to northern gains in other theaters and consequently earned a special position in the minds of their fellow Confederates. Lamenting the fall of Vicksburg in late July 1863, Kate Stone, a young refugee in Texas, added, "Our only hope is in Lee the Invincible."<sup>9</sup>

The foregoing testimony indicates a widespread tendency during the war to concentrate attention on Lee and Virginia. Lee himself discerned the centrality of his military operations to Confederate morale (after Gettysburg he commented on the "unreasonable expectations of the public" concerning the Army of Northern Virginia),<sup>10</sup> as well as to perceptions in the North and Europe. A man of far more than ordinary intelligence, he read northern and southern newspapers assiduously, corresponded widely, and discussed the political and civilian dimensions of the conflict with a broad range of persons. He appreciated the incalculable industrial and emotional value of Richmond as well as the profound concern for Washington among northern leaders. He knew the records and personalities of officers who led Confederate armies in the West. He watched the dreary procession of defeats from Fort Donelson and Pea Ridge through Shiloh, Perryville, Stones River, Vicksburg, and Chattanooga. Robustly aware of his own ability and the superior quality of his army, he faced successive opponents with high expectations of success. A combination of these factors likely persuaded him that victories in Virginia were both more probable and calculated to yield larger results than whatever might transpire in the West.

What about Lee's supposed over-reliance on the offensive? His periodic use of highly questionable and costly assaults is beyond debate. Natural audacity overcame the dictates of reason when he ordered frontal attacks at Malvern Hill, on the third day at Gettysburg, and elsewhere, and when he elected to give battle north of the Potomac after September 15, 1862. But these unfortunate decisions should not unduly influence interpretations of his larger military record. After all, Grant and Sherman also resorted to unimaginative direct attacks at various times in their careers. Many critics fail to give Lee credit for what he accomplished through aggressive generalship. At the Seven Days, he blunted a Federal offensive that seemed destined to pin defending Confederates in Richmond; his counterpunch in the campaign of Second Manassas pushed the eastern military frontier back to the Potomac and confronted Lincoln with a major crisis at home and abroad. The tactical masterpiece at Chancellorsville, coming as it did on the heels of a defensive win at Fredericksburg, again sent tremors through the North.

Too many critics of Lee's offensive movements neglect to place them within the context of what the Confederate people would tolerate. It is easy from a late-twentieth-century perspective to study maps, point to the defensive power of the rifled musket, speculate about the potential of wide-scale guerrilla warfare, and reach a conclusion that Lee's aggressive strategic and tactical decisions shortened the life of the Confederacy. From the opening of the war, however, southern civilians, newspaper editors, and political leaders clamored for decisive action on the battlefield and berated generals who shunned confrontations with the Federals. As early as the winter of 1861-62, the

Richmond *Dispatch* described a “public mind ... restless, and anxious to be relieved by some decisive action that shall have a positive influence in the progress of the war.”<sup>11</sup> Confederate writings, both public and private, bristle with innumerable sentiments of this type.

[Lee] formulated a national strategy predicated on the probability of success in Virginia and the value of battlefield victories. The ultimate failure of his strategy neither proves that it was wrongheaded nor diminishes Lee’s pivotal part in keeping Confederate resistance alive through four brutally destructive years. That continued resistance held the key to potential victory—southern armies almost certainly lacked the capacity to defeat decisively their northern counterparts, but a protracted conflict marked by periodic Confederate successes on the battlefield more than once threatened to destroy the North’s will to continue the war.

In late June 1863, while the Army of Northern Virginia tramped across southern Pennsylvania and the defenders at Vicksburg held fast, a letter in a Georgia newspaper described the spirit behind the lines. “In breathless but hopeful anxiety, the public are awaiting the result of Lee’s movements at the North and Johnston’s at the South,” stated the author. “Upon their success hang momentous interests—no less to our mind than an early peace or the continuance of the war for an indefinite period.”<sup>12</sup> This individual left no doubt about the connection between generalship and affairs on the home front. Modern students who neglect this connection do so at their peril. Any explanation of the war’s outcome that slights military events cannot possibly convey the intricacies of the subject.

## Source

Excerpted from Gary W Gallagher, “‘On Their Success Hang Momentous Interests’: Generals,” in *Why the Confederacy Lost*, ed. Gabor Boritt (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 81–108.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard E. Beringer, Herman Hattaway, Archer Jones, and William N. Still, Jr., *Why the South Lost the Civil War* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986), 439.

<sup>2</sup> James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 858; Josiah Gorgas, *The Civil War Diary of General Josiah Gorgas*, ed. Frank E. Vandiver (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1947), 55.

<sup>3</sup> J. F. C. Fuller, *Grant and Lee: A Study in Personality and Generalship* (1933; reprint, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1957), 254.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas L. Connelly, “Robert E. Lee and the Western Confederacy: A Criticism of Lee’s Strategic Ability,” in *Civil War History* 15 (June 1969), 130–31; Thomas L. Connelly and Archer Jones, *The Politics of Command: Factions and Ideas in Confederate Strategy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1973), 47–48.

<sup>5</sup> Grady McWhiney and Perry D. Jamieson, *Attack and Die: Civil War Military Tactics and the Southern Heritage* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1982), xv, 19–23; Grady McWhiney, “Robert E. Lee: The Man and the Soldier, 1830–1855,” in D.

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B. Patterson, ed., 1984 *Confederate History Symposium* (Hillsboro, Tex.: Hill Junior College, 1984), 68.

<sup>6</sup> Connelly, "Lee and the Western Confederacy," 118; J. F. C. Fuller, *The Generalship of Ulysses S. Grant* (1929; reprint, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1958), 375-77; Alan T. Nolan, *Lee Considered: General Robert E. Lee and Civil War History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 62-63, 71, 105-6.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas L. Connelly's *The Marble Man: Robert E. Lee and His Image in American Society* (New York: Knopf, 1977) maintains that Lee became the most celebrated Confederate hero only after the war. Such an interpretation overlooks a mass of wartime evidence to the contrary.

<sup>8</sup> Roy P. Basler et al., eds., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 9 vols. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1953-55), 5:355-56.

<sup>9</sup> John Q. Anderson, ed., *Brokenburn: The Journal of Kate Stone 1861- 1868* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1955), 230.

<sup>10</sup> Clifford Dowdey and Louis H. Manarin, eds., *The Wartime Papers of R. E. Lee* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1961), 482.

<sup>11</sup> Richmond *Dispatch*, January 3, 1862; Macon (Georgia) *Journal & Messenger*, September 10, 1862.

<sup>12</sup> Macon (Georgia) *Journal & Messenger*, July 1, 1863.