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Lost the Civil War
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Preface

Lee’s Fatal Flaws

Robert E. Lee is often described as one of the greatest generals who ever lived. He usually is given credit for keeping vastly superior Union forces at bay and preserving the Confederacy during the four years of the American Civil War (1861-65).

This book presents a contrary view, a side of the coin infrequently seen. It relies upon previously-published sources but extracts from them a more critical analysis of Lee’s Civil War performance. It goes beyond any of the earlier critics of Lee by describing all of Lee’s strategic and tactical errors, analyzing their cumulative effect, emphasizing the negative impact he had on Confederate prospects in both the East and the West, and squarely placing on him responsibility for defeat of the Confederates in a war they should have won. More attention is given to developments in the West than in most books about Lee because events there spelled the ultimate military doom of Lee’s army and because Lee himself played an often-overlooked role in those events.

The cult of Lee worshippers began with former Civil War generals who had fought ineffectively under him. They sought to polish their own tarnished reputations and restore southern pride by deliberately distorting the historical record and creating the myth of the flawless Robert E. Lee.

In his capacity as the Confederacy’s leading general and President Jefferson Davis’ primary military advisor for virtually the entire war, however, Lee bears considerable responsibility for the war’s outcome. Even more significantly, Lee’s own specific strategic and tactical failures cost the Confederates their opportunity to outlast the Union, to cause President Abraham Lincoln’s electoral defeat in 1864, and, thereby, to win the war.

The war was winnable through a conservative use of Confederate resources, but Lee squandered the Confederacy’s precious manpower.

1 See Appendix I herein, Historians’ Treatment of Lee. On the “transcendentally” myth of Lee, see Fuller, J.F.C., Grant and Lee: A Study in Personality and Generalship (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1957) [hereafter Fuller, Grant and Lee], pp. 103-8.
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also had demonstrated great concern about southerners' property rights in slaves.

Lee's strategy was defective in two respects. First, it was too aggressive. With one quarter the manpower resources of his adversary, Lee exposed his forces to unnecessary risks and, ultimately, lost the gamble.

Second, Lee's strategy concentrated all the resources he could obtain and retain almost exclusively in the eastern theater of operations, while fatal events were occurring in the "West" (primarily in Tennessee, Mississippi and Georgia).

Historian Archer Jones provides an analysis tying together Lee's two strategic weaknesses:

More convincing is the contention that if the Virginia armies were strong enough for an offensive they were too strong for the good of the Confederacy. They would have done better to

8. For details of Lee's defective strategy, see Chapter 12, "Overview.


10. "Even some generals who enjoy high reputations or fame or have actually been predominately direct soldiers who brought disaster to their side. One such general was Robert E. Lee, the beau ideal of the Southern Confederacy, who possessed integrity, honor, and loyalty to the highest degree and who also possessed skills as a commander far in excess of those of the Union generals arrayed against him. But Lee was not,7 Napoleon, a great general. Lee generally and in decisively critical situations always chose the direct over the indirect approach." Alexander, Beverly, How Great Generals Win (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1950) [hereafter Alexander, Great Generals], pp. 25-6. "Of all the army commanders on both sides, Lee had the highest casualty rate." McPherson, James M., Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era (New York: Ballantine Books, 1988) [hereafter McPherson, Battle Cry of Freedom], p. 472.

11. Lee operated in an area of 35,000 square miles, while the western theater consisted of 225,000 square miles in seven states. Connolly, Thomas, The Campaigns of Lee and Jackson: The Western Confederacy: A Criticism of Lee's Strategic Ability; Civil War History, 13 (June 1967), pp. 116-32 [hereafter Connolly, Lee and the Western Confederacy] p. 118. "...very real criticism of Lee is that while he managed to defend Richmond for almost three years, he allowed the rest of the Confederacy to be slowly eaten away," Katcher, Philip, 1967. "...he never fully realized the importance of Tennessee, or the strategic power which resided in the state of the Confederacy," Fuller, Grant and Lee, p. 255. Although defenders of Lee contend that he was merely an eastern army commander for most of the war, he frequently advised President Davis on national issues, including military strategy. Connolly, Thomas, Lee and His Image in American Society (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977) [hereafter Connolly, Marble Men], pp. 202-3.
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spare some of their strength to bolster the sagging West where the war was being lost.10

Just as significant as his flawed strategy were Lee's tactics, which proved fatally defective.11 His tactical defects were that he was too aggres­

sive on the field, he frequently failed to take charge of the battle­

field,12 his battle plans were too complex or simply ineffective,13 and his orders were too vague or discretionary.14 The results of Lee's faulty strategies and tactics were catastrophic. His army had 121,000 men killed or wounded during the war -- 25,000 more than any Union or Confederate Civil War general including that alleged "butcher," Union Lieutenant General Ulysses Simpson Grant.


11 For details concerning Lee's tactical weaknesses, see Chapter 12, "Overview.

12 General James Longstreet said, "In the field, [Lee's] characteristic fault was headlong combative ness.... He was too pugnacious." West, Jeffrey D., General James Longstreet: The Confederacy's Most Controversial Soldier-A Biography (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993) [hereafter West, Longstreet], p. 296.

13 Lee explained his approach to a Prussian military observer at Gettysburg. "I think and work with all my powers to bring my troops to the right place at the right time; then I have done my duty. As soon as I order them into battle, I leave my army in the hands of God." To interfere later, he said, "does more harm than good." Connolly, Marble Max, p. 190.


16 Lee's futility adumbrates his order his generals to perform specific actions or discipline them if they failed was probably his greatest character defect.... One of his staunchest defenders [Fitch, William Garrett] agreed: "He had a reluctance to oppose the wishes of others, or to order them to do anything that would be disagreeable and to which they would not consent." [Fitch, "Army of Lee", p. 26. "Every order and act of Lee has been destined to fail his staff officers and subordinates with a leviness that excites suspicion that, even in their own minds, there was need of defense to make good the positions they claim for him among the world's great commanders." Brown, George A., "Lee and the Strategy of the Civil War," pp. 111-58 [hereafter, Brown, "Lee and Strategy"] in Gallagher, Gary W. (ed.), Lee the Soldier (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1996) [hereafter, Gallagher, Lee the Soldier], p. 117.

and about 90,000 more than any other Confederate general.15 Although Lee's army inflicted a war-high 135,000 casualties on its opponents, 60,000 of those occurred in 1864 and 186516 when Lee was on the defensive and Grant was engaged in a deliberate war of attrition (achieving attrition and exhaustion) against the army Lee had fatally depleted in 1862 and 1863.17 Astoundingly (in light of his reputation), Lee's percentages of casualties suffered were worse than those of his fellow Confederate commanders.18

During the first 14 months that Lee commanded the Army of Northern Virginia, he took the strategic and tactical offensive so often with his understrength army that he lost 80,000 men while inflicting only 73,000 casualties on his Union opponents.19 Although daring and sometimes seemingly successful, Lee's actions were inconsistent with the North's 4.1 manpower advantage and were fatal to the Confederate cause. By 1864, therefore, Grant had a 120,000-man army and additional reserves to bring against Lee's 65,000 and, by the sheer weight of his numbers, imposed a fatal 46 percent casualty rate on Lee's army while losing a militarily tolerable 41 percent of his own replaceable men, as Grant drove from the Rappahannock to the James River and created a terminal threat to Richmond.20

By June, 1864, Lee's diminished forces were tied down by Grant at Richmond and Petersburg. In the following month, Sherman reached Atlanta. Atlanta fell on September 1, and the Shenandoah Valley was lost in October. Lincoln was recalled in November. The South was doomed, Sherman was marching through Georgia, and Confederate soldiers were dying, near starvation and desertion in droves.

16 McWhorter, Grady and Jamieson, Perry D., Attack and Def: Civil War Military Tactics and the Southern Heritage (Tuscaloosa and London: The University of Alabama Press, 1982) [hereafter McWhorter and Jamieson, Attack and Def], pp. 19-23.

17 Ibid., p. 19.

18 Though Lee was at his best on defense, he adopted defensive tactics only after attrition had deprived him of the power to attack. His brilliant defensive campaign against Grant in 1864 made the Union pay in manpower as it had never paid before; but the Confederates resorted to defensive warfare too late. Lee started the campaign with too few men, and he could not replace his losses as could Grant." Ibid., pp. 16-17.

19 Major Confederate generals' percentages killed and wounded were: Lee, 20.2%; Johnston, 10.5%; Breckinridge, 15.5%; Earl Van Dorn 8.5%; Jubal Early, 11.2%; and John Bell Hood, 19.2%. Ibid., p. 19-21. See Chapter 12, "Overview," for more comparative statistics. Also, see Appendix II herein, "Casualties in the Civil War."


21 McWhorter and Jamieson, Attack and Def, p. 19; Livemore, Numbers & Losses, pp. 115-6.
The time had come to end the war, but Lee did nothing. Revered and loved by his troops and the entire South, Lee certainly had the power to bring down the curtain on the great American tragedy. His resignation would have brought about an even more massive return of southern soldiers to their homes and would have destroyed the Army of Northern Virginia's, and, ultimately, the Confederacy's, will to fight. But he did nothing. For five more months after Lincoln's reelection, up until the last hours at Appomattox, Lee continued the futile struggle. The result of Lee's failure to resign was continued death and destruction throughout the South. This senseless continuation of the slaughter was Lee's final failure.25

Although the morale of some in the Confederacy remained high until the end, many realized that defeat was becoming increasingly likely in late 1864 and early 1865. Massive desertions from Lee's army reflected, among other things, the likelihood of defeat. See Chapters 10 and 11.

Chapter 1

The Making of the Man and Soldier

"The Lees of Virginia." That simple phrase conveys the historical burden that fell on Robert Edward Lee. Most of his ancestors had been rich, famous and, most importantly, respected. But, despite a romantic record as a Revolutionary War officer, Lee's father had disgraced the family name. His war record actually was tainted. Henry Lee, III, proudly known as "Light-Horse Harry" Lee, had been court-martialed twice. He had ordered a deserter hanged and then, cruelly, had the man's severed head delivered to General George Washington. Finally, he had resigned from the army in 1782 while engaged in a love affair.

But it was Henry Lee's profligate spending of his two wives' money that brought dishonor and disgrace to him and the family. In 1785, he married his cousin, Matilda Lee, and spent their (her) money so foolishly that she hired an attorney to put the remaining assets in trust for their two sons. After her sudden death, Henry married Ann Hill Carter of the famous and wealthy Virginia Carters—over the strong and wise opposition of Ann's father. That 1790 marriage resulted in the birth of five children, including Robert E. Lee (the fourth child and third son) on January 19, 1807, but ended in another financial disaster. The grand Stratford Hall plantation, Robert Lee's birthplace, was reduced from 6,600 acres to 256 acres under the profligate management of Light-Horse Harry.2

Harry had, thus, squandered a second family fortune, passed bad checks (including one to George Washington), fraudulently sold to his brother land that he no longer owned, and served two jail terms totaling a year for failure to pay his debts. Four relatives cut him out of their wills. In 1813, Lee's father, desperate to escape his debtors, fled the

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