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A Glorious Army: Robert E. Lee's Triumph, 1862-1863

by Jeffrey D. Wert

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Jeffrey Wert's *A Glorious Army* is an insightful command study of the senior leadership in the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia from the summer of 1862 until the summer of 1863, a crucial time in the American Civil War. Focusing on General Robert E. Lee and his well-known subordinates Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson, James Longstreet, J. E. B. Stuart, A. P. Hill, and others, Wert shows how a cadre of talented military professionals led their force of valiant, if disorderly, soldiers to a virtually uninterrupted string of battlefield successes until their reversal in the fields near Gettysburg in 1863.

Wert's account presents a conventional—if often challenged—argument that the keys to Lee's operational and tactical success were his aggressive nature, his subordinates' abilities, and his opponents' excessive caution or outright incompetence. Like many historians in this camp, Wert agrees with Lee's assessment that the Confederacy needed an aggressive strategy because of its inferior numbers and resource base. The South could not outlast the North in a defensive war of attrition, and needed spectacular military success to get those people in the Union to allow the South its independence. This aggressive approach, Wert claims, was desperately needed. Lee assumed command of the Army of Northern Virginia in June 1862 when the full might of the Union Army of the Potomac was poised on the outskirts of Richmond. The Confederate army had just been repulsed in its efforts to relieve the capital, but Lee's way of war rescued Richmond by forcing a Union withdrawal in the Seven Days Battles. Lee's repeated seizure of the strategic initiative allowed his Army to nearly destroy the forces of John Pope in the Second Battle of Manassas, invade Maryland, and escape largely intact after the chaos of Antietam. In December, Lee's forces won a relatively easy victory against a bungled Federal attack at Fredericksburg, and in the following spring Lee's audacity led to his greatest triumph against astounding numerical odds at Chancellorsville. These successes were costly, however, as key subordinates (particularly Stonewall Jackson) were lost, and the army suffered immense casualties. Wert emphasizes that, despite the costs, these victories boosted élan and confidence in the Confederate Army, and solidified morale throughout the South. Gettysburg, however, brought Lee's string of victories to a halt when the very aggressiveness and confidence that had brought so much success instead resulted in shattering defeat.

Students familiar with the Civil War will find little new in Wert's book. The account is in many ways classic top-down, flags-and-generals military

history. He relies heavily on well-travelled primary sources and Civil War memoirs, and quotes liberally from scholars like Douglas Southall Freeman, Gary Gallagher, and Robert Krick, who have all gone this way before. This is, however, a good introductory work for students of the art of command or those looking for a good survey of this critical period and theater of the Civil War. The accounts of battles and campaigns are relatively clear, and the profiles of the Confederate leaders are in-depth and quite revealing in their humanity.

That being said, Wert is not afraid to take a stand on some contested issues within Civil War historiography. Though he is full of effusive praise for the Confederate leaders' accomplishments in the face of such overwhelming odds, he highlights critical mistakes, even in their greatest tactical victories. Such mistakes were especially detrimental because they increased Confederate casualties and prevented Lee's army from ever really crushing their dogged opponents. Given the South's objectives and limited manpower, such shortcomings were potentially deadly, and he portrays Lee's frequent disappointment when Union forces, though badly beaten, managed to escape to fight another day. Wert freely castigates Lee for his occasional mistakes, such as the wide dispersal of his command in hostile territory prior to Antietam, and for the overconfidence and lack of respect for his enemy that led to the Pickett's Charge debacle at Gettysburg. Though he praises Lee's effective subordinates, none of them escape entirely unscathed. Wert downplays the tactical reputation of "Stonewall" Jackson, for example, instead praising his ability to drive and motivate the men in his command. He highlights Longstreet's abilities, but also points out Longstreet was not above embellishing events in his memoirs. Worshipful partisans of the Confederate military pantheon may be troubled by the tarnish Wert puts on some of his portraits.

At its heart, this is a story about individuals and personalities. If there is any great flaw in *A Glorious Army*, it lies in Wert's occasional detours into moments of flowery, romantic prose that clash awkwardly with what is generally an effective narrative of real human beings struggling amidst the chaos and inhumanity of warfare in the Civil War era. Lee, his lieutenants, and their Army were able to accomplish an astounding series of triumphs, but at great, and ultimately futile, cost.