

Manufactured History?: Study Exposes Conflict Of Myth And Fiction Surrounding Lee

Mackubin Thomas Owens

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Owens, Mackubin Thomas (2002) "Manufactured History?: Study Exposes Conflict Of Myth And Fiction Surrounding Lee," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 4 : Iss. 2 .

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol4/iss2/2>

Review

MANUFACTURED HISTORY?

Study exposes conflict of myth and fiction surrounding Lee

Owens, Mackubin Thomas

Spring 2002

Gallagher, Gary W. *Lee and His Army in Confederate History*. University of North Carolina Press, \$29.95 ISBN 807826316

Manufactured history?

Study exposes conflict of myth and fiction surrounding Lee

For decades no Civil War figure, not even Abraham Lincoln, has surpassed the reputation of Robert E. Lee. Lee has been portrayed as outshining all others on both sides of the conflict not only in soldierly virtue but also in magnanimity and humanity. He has been described as the perfect soldier Christian and a gentleman as well as a peerless commander who led the Army of Northern Virginia to a spectacular series of victories against overwhelming odds.

This view of Lee has come under attack by some historians, most notably Thomas Connelly and Alan Nolan, although both reflect a view advanced by the British military writer J.F.C. Fuller in the 1930s. Historians of this school contend that Lee hurt the Southern cause with his single-minded offensive orientation that led to casualties the Confederacy could not afford. According to his detractors, Lee had no grand strategy, focused narrowly on defeating his adversary in Virginia, and was willing to pay any cost to prevail. Lee's predilection for the offensive not only hastened the demise of the South but also was a major contributing cause of that defeat. In the words of Connelly, the Confederacy would have fared better had it not possessed a leader as aggressive as Robert E. Lee. These critics argue that Lee's reputation as a gifted soldier was manufactured history, by such Lost Cause writers as Jubal Early, who distorted the record by vastly inflating Lee's abilities and wartime stature.

Gary W. Gallagher, one of the best of a new generation of Civil War scholars, addresses this controversy in his new book, *Lee and His Army in Confederate History*. Gallagher deals with three general issues: first, was Lee highly esteemed by his contemporaries, or was his reputation forged after the war by Lost Cause writers? Second, has Lee been overrated as a general? And finally, Can we accept what Lost Cause authors said about Lee and his army without also lending a measure of authority to . . . their blatant distortions regarding other aspects of the war?

Almost from the instant that the conflict ended, the Lost Cause school has towered over Civil War historiography. Lost Cause authors were instrumental in shaping perceptions of the war, in the North as well as in the South. Gallagher has written that these interpretations of the war gained wide currency in the 19th century and remain remarkably persistent today.

According to the Lost Cause interpretation of the war, the attempt to create a Confederate nation was a noble undertaking. The cause of the war was not slavery but the oppressive power of the central government. The South wished to exercise its constitutional right to secede, but was thwarted by a power-hungry Lincoln. Southern patriots were the true heirs of the American Revolutionary generation in their attempt to vindicate their rights. In spite of a valiant effort, the Confederacy was finally crushed by the superior resources of the industrialized and more populous North.

The most gallant soldier of the war, according to the Lost Cause school, was Robert E. Lee. He and his army were the backbone of the Confederate cause. Though his adversaries were far less skillful than he, they commanded superior resources, which ultimately overwhelmed the Confederacy. In defeat, Lee and his soldiers could look back on a record of selfless regard for duty and magnificent accomplishment.

In Part One of *Lee and His Army*, Gallagher argues persuasively that Lee's high reputation was not a post-war creation of the Lost Cause school. Relying on wartime sources distinct from post-war accounts informed by full knowledge of how the war unfolded he concludes that Southerners retained a remarkable faith in the qualities of Lee and the prowess of his army. He contends that Southerners did not see the setbacks at Antietam or Gettysburg as disasters, and even in late 1864 believed that victory was ultimately possible.

In Part Two, Gallagher examines Lee's generalship, effectively refuting arguments that he was interested in Virginia at the expense of the Confederacy as a whole, that he lacked a comprehensive grand strategy, and that he preferred an offensive strategy that bled the South dry. Gallagher demonstrates that Lee was a nationalist who well understood the relationship between politics and war. He also understood his role and that of his army in maintaining the morale of Confederate citizens. And he makes the case that Lee's penchant for the offensive was not as risky as those with 20/20 hindsight argue.

Lee thought that the best way to neutralize the Union's advantage in engineering, artillery, and naval power was to employ the strategic turning movement and open-field maneuvering by infantry and cavalry in order to gain an advantage, attack the enemy, and inflict heavy losses. Only in this manner, Lee believed, could the population of the North be convinced that a costly, lengthy struggle lay ahead if the South were not granted its independence.

On the other hand, defensive actions usually cost the Confederacy vast stretches of territory while achieving few tangible benefits. Albert Sidney Johnston's position-oriented defense of Kentucky and Tennessee in late 1861 and early 1862 sacrificed western Tennessee and led to the loss of some 15,000 troops at Fort Donelson. As Gallagher observes, every major siege of the war occurred during campaigns marked by Confederate defensive strategies, and each ended in a Union victory.

Gallagher also debunks the claim that Lee was a throwback to an earlier style of leadership ill suited to the demands of modern warfare, and that he granted too much leeway to subordinates. Gallagher examines the spring/summer Virginia campaign of 1864 to show how Lee dealt with the loss of his most competent corps commanders and replaced those who were not performing.

The last essay addresses the problem of the Lost Cause school for today's historians. Despite its claim that states' rights, not slavery was the cause of the war, the Lost Cause interpretation is not altogether false, especially regarding the war's military aspects. Lee was a remarkable soldier. The Confederacy was overmatched in terms of manpower and industrial capacity. After fighting a war of maneuver in the West, Grant did rely on attrition to wear Lee down.

Gallagher does not dismiss the entire Lost Cause interpretation as a dissembling effort by slaveholders who had lost on the battlefield. Instead, he argues, each part of the Lost Cause school should be engaged on its merits. The most important reason for accepting those parts of the argument based on evidence "will lend greater power to critiques of the Lost Cause interpretations based on blatant twisting of the historical record." Such a nuanced approach will "help highlight the complexity of an important and fascinating dimension of the Civil War era." Gallagher's work, both in *Lee and His Army* and elsewhere, is a sterling example of this balanced approach and sets a high standard for the history profession.

Mackubin Thomas Owens is professor of strategy and force planning at the Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island, where he also teaches courses on the policy and strategy of the Civil War and the statesmanship of Abraham Lincoln.