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Recommended Citation

Bates, Bonnie L. (2002) "Perspectives In History: Gary W. Gallagher Probes Perceptions Of Confederate History," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 4 : Iss. 1 .

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol4/iss1/3>

Interview

PERSPECTIVES IN HISTORY: GARY W. GALLAGHER PROBES PERCEPTIONS OF CONFEDERATE HISTORY

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Winter 2002

Civil War Book Review (cwbr): Which do you find more informative about Lee from an historical standpoint: his military strategy or his writings?

Gary W. Gallagher (gg): Both afford numerous insights into Lee's military personality. Strategically, he almost always sought to find a way to seize the initiative. He believed that smaller Confederate armies had the best opportunity to offset Union numbers by dictating the action rather than by merely reacting to an opponent's movements. His writings help to explain strategically aggressive campaigns such as his forays across the Potomac River in the autumn of 1862 and the summer of 1863. In each of those cases, Lee sought not only to gain logistical advantages and favorable ground from which to fight battles, but he also hoped to influence northern public morale and politics. Better than almost any of his Confederate or Union contemporaries, he understood-as his writings make abundantly clear-the many intersections between military and civilian affairs, and he knew as well that civilian morale held the key to victory for both sides.

cwbr: On a personal level, which do you find more revealing about Lee: his own writings or what his contemporaries said about him? Do you have any examples?

gg: As I stated above, Lee's writings are very revealing. His letters to Jefferson Davis during the 1862 Maryland campaign, for example, tell us a great deal about his motivations, expectations, and frustrations. But he did not reveal everything about why he acted as he did, leaving us in the position of seeking additional information about his operations and his personality elsewhere. One of the best sources for that additional information is the body of written testimony from those who knew and observed him. Edward Porter Alexander's

postwar memoir is an excellent case in point. The astute and observant Alexander had the opportunity to see Lee in action through much of the war, and his published recollections offer a number of telling passages about Lee's humor, temper, and enormously audacious approach to warfare.

cwbr: What personal qualities gave Lee his strength as a military leader?

gg: He had great breadth of vision that enabled him to see the war in its broad context and chart a course that would enable his army to have the greatest possible effect. He could make hard decisions and take full responsibility for them—as he did following the disastrous assaults on July 3 at Gettysburg. He also displayed a very deft touch in terms of personnel, handling a number of crises of command with admirable skill. Finally, he understood that as a soldier he was subordinate to civilian authority—something U.S. Grant also understood but that generals such as George B. McClellan and Joseph E. Johnston either never figured out or simply ignored. The result of Lee's effective leadership was a string of victories in 1862-63 that forged an unshakable bond between him and his soldiers and between his army and the Confederate people.

cwbr: Which of Lee's battles/conflicts do you think has been most misrepresented/misunderstood?

gg: Almost all of Lee's operations have been studied in great detail. I believe the Seven Days ranks as perhaps the most important of Lee's campaigns, a fact typically lost in the attention lavished on Gettysburg, Antietam, and, to a lesser degree, the Overland campaign. The Seven Days began a striking reorientation of the war in Virginia, giving the Confederate people their first real victory of 1862 (Stonewall Jackson's Valley campaign was a minor affair compared to the Seven Days and would have meant very little had Lee not stopped McClellan's offensive against the Confederate capital) and beginning the process by which Lee would shift the military frontier in the Eastern Theater from the outskirts of Richmond to the Potomac River. I believe too few military accounts of the war have emphasized the full ramifications of the Seven Days.

cwbr: What do you see as the most common misperceptions about Lee?

gg: One of the most durable misperceptions about Lee is that he was an old-fashioned general who did not understand modern war in the mid-19th-century context. He often is compared unfavorably in this regard with

soldiers such as U.S. Grant and William Tecumseh Sherman, Union leaders singled out as forward-looking men who anticipated the direction warfare would take in the 20th century. In fact, Lee understood very well the kind of war in which he found himself, arguing for massive national mobilization, insisting that civilian needs must give way to the requirements of the Confederate military effort, and fully grasping the ways in which his operations influenced morale behind the lines. Another common misperception is that Lee was too much of a gentleman to make hard decisions in respect to subordinates. His smooth style of administrative leadership masked his many decisions that sent officers he considered less than effective out of the Army of Northern Virginia. His removal of Richard S. Ewell in May 1864 stands as one of the most obvious examples of this behavior on Lee's part.

cwbr: Did misrepresentation of Lee begin during the Civil War or only years later? If later, when?

gg: Lee has been misrepresented in various ways from the beginning of the Civil War down to the present. At the time he took command of the army defending Richmond in June 1862, for example, many Confederates criticized him as a timid leader who would never take aggressive action against McClellan. Little did they know just how aggressive Lee would turn out to be. That aggressiveness recently has been put forward as evidence that Lee did not understand how best to wage the Confederacy's war for independence. His offensive generalship cost too many lives, argue modern critics, bleeding the Confederacy at an unacceptable rate. These authors fail to take into account the impact of Lee's admittedly bloody operations on Confederate morale, overlooking the fact that Lee's successes in 1862-63 convinced many Confederates that they had an excellent chance to win independence. That expectation continued among many white southerners as long as Lee and his army were in the field.

cwbr: Do you think revisionist history is a problem throughout Civil War studies, or is it confined mostly to Confederate studies/Lost Cause theory?

gg: I do not believe revisionist history is a problem at all unless it seeks to overturn sound interpretations simply for the sake of novelty or to make political points. History is a process of constant revision, as each generation of historians and readers looks to the past to find meanings that resonate with their interests. Having said that, I will add that many Lost Cause writers, as well as many of

their northern counterparts, wrote with a clear agenda. They hoped to place their actions and their respective causes in the best possible light, often straying far from established facts in the process.