

### General Lee's Army: From Victory to Collapse

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## Interview

### GENERAL LEE'S ARMY: FROM VICTORY TO COLLAPSE

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Interview with Joseph T. Glatthaar

Interviewed by Christopher Childers

**Civil War Book Review (CWBR):** In *General Lee's Army*, you have combined the use of personal diaries and letters with a carefully developed data sample to gain a better understanding of the makeup of Lee's army. How did you conceptualize this project? Did the mixture of traditional archival work and statistical sampling present any special challenges in writing this book?

**Joseph T. Glatthaar (JTG):** As far back as 1985, when I published *The March to the Sea and Beyond* on Sherman's army, I employed some statistics. In this book, I wanted to generate more statistics to understand these soldiers, their backgrounds, and their wartime experiences. By relying on letters and diaries alone, it was too easy to present soldiers' attitudes in a light that was not reflective of their overall sentiments. Historians need statistical evidence to buttress arguments about soldiers' opinions and feelings. I think a blending of qualitative with quantitative evidence is the best means of researching a project like Lee's army.

Certainly the compilation of data was complicated and lengthy, but writing it up in a narrative fashion was an unusual challenge. I did not want to overwhelm the reader with statistics. Nor did I want to turn off readers. When many people see statistics, their eyes roll into the back of their heads. I did not want to intimidate or discourage readers by tossing into the text all sorts of statistics. The key was introducing them gently, in ways that people could envision easily. Instead of writing 62%, I would phrase it, slightly more than three of ever five.

I also knew the book needed a rough chronological flow but it also had to include topical chapters. I had to plot the book carefully.

**CWBR:** Many historians have criticized the Confederate army structure (and for that matter, its Union counterpart) for infusing the high command with political appointments. You seem to downplay this concern. How did politics affect the army's command structure?

**JTG:** High command has always been infused with politics. These were appointments made by politicians. West Pointers received nominations from politicians and used their connections for choice assignments, promotions, and the like. For that matter, politicians enjoyed associations with high-ranking military officials and got relatives on generals' staffs, to give just two examples. It cut both ways.

Many politicians felt that service in leadership positions in the national or state government offered experience that would prove valuable in wartime. They believed that prewar Regular Army duty in an infantry or cavalry company or an artillery battery did not qualify an individual any better to hold a commission as a general officer than did extensive political service.

Many officers in Lee's army, including those who had come from the Regular Army, attempted to use their political connections to advance in rank and responsibility. Lee was very careful about getting individuals whom he trusted in positions of great responsibility.

**CWBR:** How did the demographic makeup of General Lee's Army change throughout the war's course? What does your research suggest about the old argument that the Confederate war effort constituted a rich man's war and a poor man's fight?

**JTG:** There was a surprising degree of consistency among soldiers who entered the war in 1861 and 1862. The median degree of wealth placed them solidly in the middle class. Compared to the South in 1860, a much high percentage of soldiers in Lee's army (both officers and enlisted men) came from slaveholding households. The actual and sample numbers tapered off for men who first entered the army in 1863 and 1864, but if we combine those two year groups, we find more extremes--older and younger men, more rich and more poor--, but backgrounds quite similar to the soldiers of 1861 or 1862.

The fact is that rich or well-to-do men were overrepresented in Lee's army, deserted less frequently (this is understandable, because war's hardships affect poorer people more severely), and were more likely to be killed in action than their poorer comrades.

**CWBR:** In one section, you explain that Confederate soldiers saw their Yankee counterparts as invaders, vandals, mercenaries, hirelings, or Hessians. How did Southerners arrive at these conclusions about their former countrymen? In what way did these sorts of beliefs justify the brutality of civil war?

**JTG:** Confederate soldiers could not understand why their former countrymen would attempt to subjugate them. They separated from the Union to preserve their civil liberties. Confederates could not imagine that northerners would voluntarily join the Union army to oppress them out of some sound ideology, so they assumed Federals must be doing it for pay. Those were mercenaries or hirelings. Foreign-born soldiers were Hessians. Union armies penetrated the Confederacy, threatening the homes, property, and loved ones. Confederates saw them as invaders and the destruction those armies wreaked made them vandals.

**CWBR:** Why did Lee's campaign into Union territory fail and why were the Confederates so much more comfortable on their side of the Potomac?

**JTG:** On the first major raid into Maryland in the late summer and fall, 1862, Lee's army suffered from all sorts of problems: exhaustion from extensive campaigning and long marches, heavy losses in combat that compelled survivors to assume greater burdens, a lack of adequate clothing and footwear, some food shortages, disciplinary problems, and in some cases a reluctance to take the war into enemy country. Confederate soldiers were also disappointed in the support they received from Marylanders. And, of course, the Lost Order gave the Union an advantage.

The movement into Pennsylvania in 1863 was more complex. Stonewall Jackson had died, and Lee had just implemented a three-corps system. The high command, including Lee, did not perform at a high level. Lee himself explained to Davis that he called on his men to accomplish more than they were capable of doing. The army had to disperse to forage; discipline declined and plundering increased. Federals were fighting on their soil, in defense of their people, which

made their resistance all the more intense. Despite Jed Hotchkiss's maps, Federals had better sense of the countryside and road network. Little but important breaks went the Federals' way. Even the fuses used to explode artillery shells burned slower than Lee's gunners were accustomed, and rounds passed well overhead of the vital Union position on the third day.

**CWBR:** Your discussion of religion and morality in army life suggests that soldiers grappled with these issues constantly. How did the war challenge men's beliefs about God and their moral code?

**JTG:** War almost always challenges religious and moral beliefs. It calls on soldiers to cast aside traditional taboos, such as killing fellow human beings. It brings together huge numbers of young males, many free from the constraints of home for the first time, and it places them in situations in which life is in jeopardy. Many of them misbehave, according to normal societal standards. Part of it may be peer pressure; part may be a desire to live fully today because they may not be here tomorrow; part of it may be an outlet for fears and insecurities; and part of it is a product of their youth, their feeling of indestructibility and a lack of respect for the full consequences of their actions.

Statistically, young adult males are the least likely group to attend religious services. Lee's army was no different in that respect. I found that perhaps 25% regularly attended some kind of religious services. My friend George Rable, who is writing a major book on religion in the Civil War, finds similar levels of participation in other armies. Yet failure to attend church or prayer meetings regularly does not mean that soldiers neither believed in God nor drew on God in their time of need.

Soldiers understood the precarious nature of life in the army. The only way they could make sense of why they lived and why others alongside them fell, and the only way they could confront the incredible danger of combat and the disease of camp life, was to place their faith in God or fate. God alone would determine if they should live through the battle or fall in it. Or, they might attribute survival to mere chance. Either way, it removed the burden from their shoulders, lifted some of the fear, and placed it with some higher power over whom they had no control.

**CWBR:** States rights and localism have occupied the attention of historians for some time. In an interesting note, you state that this mentality actually

benefited those suffering on the home front as the national government lost its power and communities had to fend for themselves. How did the states rights mentality affect the army and those at home supporting it?

**JTG:** Southerners had looked toward their state and local government and community for help in time of need. That concept carried over into the Confederacy. The war itself and the threat of Union invasion galvanized communities. People came together to support the cause. Those who could not serve in uniform supported others. Everyone knew servicemen. They were their fathers, sons, relatives, and neighbors. Those away in uniform drew strength and comfort from the notion that people left behind would help their families.

As the war dragged on into the second, third, and fourth years, the burdens compounded. Hardships abounded; everyone knew someone who gave his life for Confederate independence. Yet the local community was much better at fulfilling the needs than the central Confederate government, which had no tradition of performing those duties.

**CWBR:** You suggest that desertion and straggling posed a problem for the Confederate army, especially later in the war. Did the traditional southern code of honor become blurred on the field of battle? How did these deserting and straggling soldiers justify their conduct and how did their comrades judge them?

**JTG:** Soldiers straggled for all sorts of reasons. Some were too ill or improperly clothed to keep up; others sought a chance to forage or slip off to home temporarily. And some dodged duty.

Desertion was a much more complicated issue. Among the components of the concept of southern honor was certainly courage. By and large, Lee's soldiers were excellent in combat. Lee himself believed they were the best infantrymen in the world. But a central tenet of honor was responsibility toward one's family. As the war dragged on and hazards and hardships in military life and on the home front abounded, soldiers had to confront a difficult question: Where did their ultimate loyalty rest? Was their primary responsibility to their country or to their family? Should they continue to serve in the army when Federal armies overran their homes, or when their families were suffering severe hardships? Or, should they return home to care for their loved ones?

Other times, soldiers believed that the Confederacy's inability to feed and clothe them were signs that the Confederacy was collapsing. It made no sense to continue the fight and to bear the burdens any longer, when the cause was hopeless.

**CWBR:** Based on your study of Lee's army, how has your assessment of the general changed and how do you seek to revise our understanding of the man?

**JTG:** What emerges in these pages is not so much new information about Lee's personality; rather, it is a deeper understanding of Lee as a military man. The Lee whom I see is one who is an excellent administrator, a general who understands fully the kinds of sacrifices his army and the Confederate people must make in order to win the war. The Confederacy must make up for inferior manpower and materiel by compensating in commitment and by husbanding precious resources. Lee was forever attempting to instill greater discipline and alter the army culture, one based heavily on the culture that these citizen-soldiers brought into military service. It was a culture that he inherited from his predecessor. Unfortunately, the officer corps largely shared that culture, and his army campaigned too frequently, endured too many hardships, and had a steady influx of individuals from civil life, which helped to refresh that influence from civilian culture.

Lee was, as Walter Taylor described him in a letter home, one of those rare individuals who could fully comprehend a major military movement. By that Taylor meant that he could plan and execute all facets of a major operation. Lee bore the hardships and frustrations of service in the Confederacy and worked incredible hours to provide for his men. Logistics were a continual nightmare for him. He suffered severe health issues and was at times short of temper with his staff. Late in the war, he assumed such heavy burdens that he slept little (for the first three weeks of the Overland Campaign, Lee never slept more than two consecutive hours). Losses were so heavy among the high-ranking officers that he was army commander and had to devote enormous time to overseeing corps and cavalry movements, tasks that corps commanders should have performed. Lee was both a great combat commander and a talented administrator.

**CWBR:** Thank you.