

General Lee's Army: From Victory to Collapse

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Recommended Citation

Ural, Susannah J. (2009) "General Lee's Army: From Victory to Collapse," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 11 : Iss. 2 .

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol11/iss2/19>

Review

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Spring 2009

Glatthaar, Joseph T. *General Lee's Army: From Victory to Collapse*. Free Press, \$35.00 hardcover ISBN 9780684827872

The Rise and Fall of the Army of Northern Virginia

Historians of the U.S. Civil War era do not lack biographies of Confederate General Robert E. Lee. Nor do we suffer too few examinations of the other officers, military units, and battles that comprised that army's history. Never before, however, has a scholar tied those stories together so well and presented his case with such strong evidence. With *General Lee's Army*, Joseph T. Glatthaar, Stephenson Distinguished Professor of History and chair of the Curriculum in Peace, War, and Defense at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, offers an incomparable narrative history of the rise and fall of that army and the Confederacy. He proves his argument that "Lee's army explains both why the Confederacy almost won, and why it lost" (xv).

This is a socio-military study of the Army of Northern Virginia organized topically and chronologically, which is an impressive feat. Chapters focus on a wide range of issues and often compliment earlier sections, showing how an issue evolved over the course of the war. For example, discussions of motivation for service are complimented by his analysis of sustaining motivations later in the war, as well as chapters on manpower and desertion. Equally significant is Glatthaar's ability to prove his theories. He observes, for example, that frustrations over limited supplies, loss of friends and family, lack of pay, and concerns about home increased desertion from the Army of Northern Virginia in 1864. Deserters, he found, were often the poorest in the ranks, the least likely to own slaves or be tied to families that did, and were "only 10 percent more likely to be married... but almost 50 percent more likely to have children" than those who stayed (409-410). He insists, though, that most men stayed in the ranks in 1864, faithful in victory and their obligation to fight.

This evidence is rooted in a database that is central to the success of this book. Glatthaar gathered a sample of 600 veterans of Lee's Army which he then broke down to statistically represent the number of soldiers in the infantry, cavalry, and artillery (see "Appendix I: The Sample"). Data for each of these men came from U.S. Census Records, Compiled Service Records, as well as archival collections, newspapers, and other resources. This ensured that Glatthaar was not allowing the views of two or three soldiers to speak for a whole army. In discussing the issue of slavery, for example, Glatthaar demonstrates that just over one in ten enlistees in 1861 owned slaves and more than one in four lived with parents who owned slaves, increasing to 36 percent the number of men in *General Lee's Army* whose lives were significantly influenced, and thus motivated, by the continuation of slavery (19-20). Every argument he makes is supported with statistics from his study, and usually woven into the narrative to keep the average reader from becoming bored while still satisfying the scholar stuffing the book full of tags and flipping to the endnotes.

Chapter by chapter, Glatthaar highlights the tremendous fighting abilities of the men of Lee's army, and documents how difficulties with the supply of weapons, food and other resources drastically limited their abilities. Like Gary Gallagher in *The Confederate War* (1997) and William Blair in *Virginia's Private War* (1998), Glatthaar insists that the Confederacy was responding to these needs. He details General Lee's proposals to restrict train transportation for military needs only (218), the production miracles performed by Josiah Gorgas and the Confederate Ordnance Bureau, and talents of the soldiers who fought astonishingly well with inferior weaponry and the sacrifices made on the home front (258-267). Glatthaar demonstrates that the Confederacy was producing sufficient food for the army by the end of 1864 and in early 1865. The problem was getting it from places like East Tennessee to the army in Virginia (447). There is a downward spiral for Glatthaar's Confederacy, but this story embraces the complexity of the Confederate response to the war found in the modern historiography; this is anything but the story of the Lost Cause.

Readers seeking traditional battle narratives will not be disappointed. Whole chapters focus on the experience of combat and the battles that defined Lee's Army. Other readers will enjoy Glatthaar's discussion of the religious revivals of 1862 and 1863 (233-241) and the impact of the "ceaseless danger, the staggering loss of life, and the enormous psychological strain of continuous combat" in the spring and summer of 1864 that limited organized prayer service and led soldiers to rely more on "private prayer" (380).

If there are any complaints, some may wish that Glatthaar had enhanced his discussion about the soldiers' families at home and their influence on the men. He shows continued Confederate faith in the war in early 1864 (303), but concludes that by the fall "so many impassioned letters reached Lee's troops that many abandoned the army in droves to go home and protect their families." (450) These sections will have fans of Jacqueline Campbell's *When Sherman Marched North from the Sea* (2003) scouring Glatthaar's endnotes and reaching for Drew Gilpin Faust and George Rable's studies to renew this debate on the influence of the suffering Southern home front on the men in the ranks. Admittedly, this is about "General Lee's Army," but if Glatthaar argues that the fact that these men were tied to slave owning families even if they did not actually own slaves themselves and from this concludes—brilliantly and correctly—that this influenced their motivations, we need to know more about the other influences these families had on the men over the course of the war.

This is a minor complaint that reflects the high standards the rest of the book encourages readers to expect. Grounded in impeccable research (reinforcing Glatthaar's reputation among some readers who value his books as much for the endnotes and bibliography as for the narrative), Glatthaar proves his argument that an understanding of the rise and fall of the Army of Northern Virginia allows readers to more fully grasp the history of the Confederacy. This is more than a "must-read." Scholars and enthusiasts will be reading, digesting, and debating this work for years to come.

Susannah J. Ural is Associate Professor of History at Sam Houston State University. She is the author of The Harp and the Eagle: Irish-American Volunteers in the Union Army, 1861-1865 (NYU Press, 2006) and she is currently writing a socio-military history of John Bell Hood's Texas Brigade for LSU Press.