

Robert E. Lee and the Fall of the Confederacy, 1863-1865

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Review

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Rafuse, Ethan S. *Robert E. Lee and the Fall of the Confederacy, 1863-1865.* Rowman & Littlefield, \$34.95 ISBN 9780742551251

Seeking to Answer Why the Army of Northern Virginia Lost

On the morning of May 3, 1863, one of the fiercest and most important battles of the Civil War reached its crescendo around Chancellorsville, Virginia. Two separate wings of the Army of Northern Virginia reunited after inflicting a stunning defeat on the Army of the Potomac, and Confederate General Robert E. Lee rode forward through the haze of battle to the exuberant cheers of his men. This would be Lee's greatest triumph, a victory on par with Napoleon's achievement at Austerlitz. Outnumbered almost two to one and commanding an army dangerously divided, Lee demonstrated his audacity, the fighting ability of his men, and the staggering incompetence of his opponents. Yet, despite this incredible victory against great odds, in less than two years, Lee and his army surrendered to Union forces--essentially ending the American Civil War. The question of how and why that army and its commander fell from the heights of Chancellorsville to the depths of Appomattox is the subject of Ethan S. Rafuse's *Robert E. Lee and the Fall of the Confederacy, 1863-1865*.

The author asserts that historians have struggled to explain Lee's ultimate defeat in spite of his obvious brilliance and the combat prowess of his army. He argues that Lee was a perceptive strategist who clearly understood that the Confederacy's best if not only hope for independence lay in breaking Northern morale. The general intended to do just that by waging an offensive war designed to inflict crushing defeats on his opponents. Rafuse also presents the Army of the Potomac as a solid fighting force with capable if not brilliant leadership. The Union army eventually used its abundant resources to outlast the Confederates and limit Lee's options. In the end, even Lee's battlefield savvy could not win the day for the southern republic. Rafuse actually offers little if anything new or innovative to his audience. In reality, virtually every study of

Lee, his Union antagonists, the Army of Northern Virginia, the Army of the Potomac, and the campaigns of the Eastern Theater all touch on the issue of why Lee failed. Indeed, myriad hypotheses have been asserted. Even Lee himself told his army upon their surrender that they had been defeated by superior Union resources. Interestingly, Rafuse painstakingly analyzes each action of the Army of Northern Virginia from Chancellorsville to Appomattox to end up with the same conclusion as Lee and a host of latter historians. Again, none of this is new. In fact, this study of the last two years of Lee's struggle can only serve as a general account of the Army of Northern Virginia's slow but steady decline in the face of superior numbers and resources.

Rafuse's work does, however, stand out in two areas. First, it is nicely done. It is well-written, well-organized, and well-argued. He ably weaves together an analysis of both the political and military context in which Lee and his enemies operated. Unfortunately, too many military studies fail to take into account the political and economic limitations of commanders. Second, Rafuse uses common sense and clear analysis to present and argue his case. Again, too many Civil War military studies are tied to the biases of the authors, who often launch into long diatribes. Moreover, there is currently a strong bias against Lee's brilliance among many historians. Rafuse's work puts that to rest. Therefore, in the end, while Rafuse offers Civil War historians nothing new in terms of argument, he does present an example of lucid writing and balanced analysis. This is an excellent book for students, and it serves as an example of how history should be recorded.

John D. Fowler is the B.J. and Dicksie Bandy Chair of History at Dalton State College. His publications include Mountaineers in Gray: The Nineteenth Volunteer Infantry Regiment, CSA (2004) and The Confederate Experience Reader (2007). He is currently completing a work on the Civil War in Tennessee and editing a collection of essays on the Civil War in Georgia.