

A Glorious Army: Robert E. Lee's Triumph, 1862-1863

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Review

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Wert, Jeffrey *A Glorious Army: Robert E. Lee's Triumph, 1862-1863*. Simon & Schuster, \$30.00 ISBN 978-1-4165-9334-8

Exploring Lee's High Tide

Jeffrey Wert, a free-lance historian of the Civil War, focuses on the Eastern Theater of operations. Some of his best work includes biographies of James Longstreet and Jeb Stuart and a history of the Shenandoah Valley Campaign of 1864. Wert is remarkably successful at avoiding, on one hand, the "gunpowder and magnolias" romanticism still prevalent in the subject, and on the other, rejecting the currently fashionable root-and-branch revisionism that presents Lee and his men as pawns in a war not merely hopeless but bungled.

A Glorious Army shows Wert at his best. He begins before the Army of Northern Virginia became the force of myth and legend, when it was still little more than an aggregation of regiments and brigades, learning its collective craft and commanded by officers still learning theirs. He introduces Lee when he was not "mares Robert" to his men, but "Granny Lee" and "The King of Spades." The time was June, 1862; a seemingly overwhelming Union army was at the gates of Richmond. Lee understood that to lose the Confederate capital was to lose the war. But battlefield victories by themselves would not achieve Confederate independence: the ultimate objective must be the North's will. That will must be broken; wearing it down would exhaust the South's lesser resources first. The best way to secure independence by negotiation was through a series of victories spectacular enough to demonstrate that restoring the Union by force carried a price tag too high even for that result.

Wert depicts Lee's strategic vision as resembling that of a short-money player in a table-stakes poker game. Audacity, risking and accepting heavy losses, was both a desperate approach and a rational calculation. The immediate result was an operational counterattack that, in a week, had driven a discomfited

Army of the Potomac back to its James River base. Immediately turning north, The Army of Northern Virginia won what Wert legitimately calls “Lee’s Masterpiece” at Second Manassas, and then took the war to northern soil. Sharpsburg, as the Confederates called it, may have been tactically indecisive. It may have resulted in Lee’s retreating to Virginia, but the battle was also a moral triumph, confirming the Army of Northern Virginia’s fighting power beyond dispute.

Three months later, Fredericksburg, “the easiest battle of the war,” established Lee and his army more firmly as symbols and bearers of Confederate identity (173). Any lasting doubts were erased in May 1863 at Chancellorsville. Wert calls it Lee’s finest tactical victory. The army’s collective belief in its invincibility approached hubris. The *annus mirabilis* had cost heavy casualties, especially at the middle-levels of command. But Lee was convinced that the North’s growing clamor for peace could become decisive with one more victory on Yankee soil. On June 10 the Army of Northern Virginia began its decisive march northward—to Gettysburg.

In his initial report of the battle, Lee stated “More may have been required of [the troops] than they were able to perform.” Without editorializing, Wert agrees. After Gettysburg the war in the East developed into precisely the kind of attritional struggle Lee knew the South could not win. The twenty-one month end game only confirmed Lee and his army as “the icons of Confederate history.” Wert makes a convincing case that they followed the best possible route to a Confederate victory against objectively formidable odds. Lee imprinted the Army of Northern Virginia; the army forged Lee’s military legacy. In less than a year, the synergistic relationship forged a combat record unmatched in US history, and fundamentally altered the Civil War’s direction.

Dennis Showalter is Professor of History at Colorado College and Past President of the Society for Military History. Joint Editor of War in History, he specializes in comparative military history and the military history of modern Germany. His recent monographs include The Wars of Frederick the Great, Patton and Rommel: Men of War in the Twentieth Century, and Hitler’s Panzers.