

A GLORIOUS ARMY



ROBERT E. LEE'S TRIUMPH

1862-1863

JEFFRY D. WERT

Author of Cavalryman of the Lost Cause: A Biography of J. E. B. Stuart

From the time Robert E. Lee took command of the Army of Northern Virginia on June 1, 1862, until the Battle of Gettysburg thirteen months later, the Confederate army compiled a record of military achievement almost unparalleled in our nation's history. How it happened—the relative contributions of Lee, his top command, opposing Union generals, and of course the rebel army itself—is the subject of Civil War historian Jeffrey D. Wert's fascinating and riveting new history.

In the year following Lee's appointment, his army won four major battles or campaigns and fought Union forces to a draw at the bloody Battle of Antietam. Washington itself was threatened, as a succession of Union commanders failed to stop Lee's offensive. Until Gettysburg, it looked as if Lee might force the Union to negotiate a peace rather than risk surrendering the capital or even losing the war. Lee's victories fired southern ambition and emboldened Confederate soldiers everywhere.

Wert shows how the same audacity and aggression that fueled these victories proved disastrous at Gettysburg. But, as Wert explains, Lee had little choice: outnumbered by an opponent with superior resources, he had to take the fight to the enemy in order to win. For a year his superior generalship prevailed against his opponents, but eventually what Lee's trusted lieutenant General James Longstreet called "headlong combativeness" caused Lee to miscalculate. When an equally combative Union general—Ulysses S. Grant—took command of northern forces in 1864, Lee was defeated.



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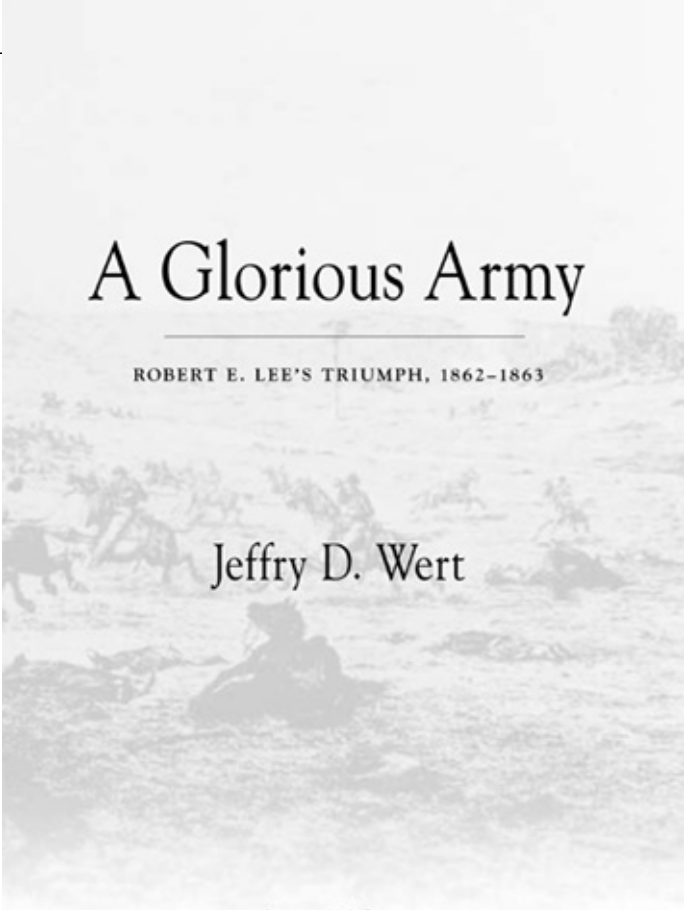
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Jeffry D. Wert

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To my mother, Kathleen M. Wert,
and my mother-in-law, Ethel L. Long

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Preface and Acknowledgments

In May 1863 Robert E. Lee confided to a subordinate, John Bell Hood, “There never were such men in an army before.” Lee wrote those words within weeks of the army’s recent victory at Chancellorsville. At that time, at the midpoint of the Civil War, the Army of Northern Virginia had come to embody Confederate nationalism and to fire southern aspirations of an independent nation. In less than a year Lee, his lieutenants, and the common soldiers who followed them had redirected the war’s course in the East.

Lee assumed command of the army on June 1, 1862. In the estimation of his foremost biographer Douglas Southall Freeman, his appointment marked “the turning point of the war in the East.” During the next thirteen months the Confederate commander and his army crafted a record of achievement unmatched by any army in the annals of American military history. They won four major victories—the Seven Days, Second Manassas, Fredericksburg, and Chancellorsville—held the bloody ground at Antietam, and were on the march to a reckoning at Gettysburg.

My book examines that span of time, from the weeks immediately before the Seven Days Campaign through the three-day engagement at Gettysburg. A final chapter covers the twenty-one months of warfare after Gettysburg, which ended for Lee’s army at Appomattox Court House. My intent is not to offer detailed tactical studies of each battle, for there are excellent works on all of the engagements, but to offer a narrative and analysis of the fighting, with a focus on leadership and on the experiences of men on the firing lines. I have drawn heavily from the letters, diaries, and memoirs of the army’s veterans and from the fine recent scholarship of fellow historians.

In a sense this is an exploration, a search for answers to questions and controversies. I address Lee’s strategic and tactical boldness, its cost in staggering casualties, the performances of his senior lieutenants—Stonewall Jackson, James Longstreet, Jeb Stuart, A. P. Hill, and Richard Ewell—the morale and discipline of the men in the ranks, the roles of brigade and regimental commanders, and the misfortunes and failings of the Union Army of the Potomac. My judgments and conclusions will surely not end the debates nor resolve the controversies. The craft of history is never stagnant; it is ongoing, offering new insights and fomenting more disagreements. I hope my book contributes to the discussions.

Decades ago, as a college freshman, I first read Freeman’s three-volume *Lee’s Lieutenants: A Study in Command*. Although I was already a Civil War buff, my fascination with the Army of Northern Virginia began when I sat hour after hour with Freeman’s elegant prose. Since then the writing of history has taken me with Lee’s men as they defended an unfinished railroad bed at Second Manassas, stood in the sunken road at Antietam, manned a stone wall at Fredericksburg, crossed farmers’ fields toward Cemetery Ridge at Gettysburg, and marched the final steps on a road at Appomattox. This book is a return for me. I am surely not alone in being drawn back to their story.

As always, my book has benefited from the assistance of others. All errors of omission and commission are, however, entirely mine.

I wish to thank the archivists and librarians at the institutions cited in the bibliography for their assistance and understanding. The following individuals deserve my particular gratitude and recognition:

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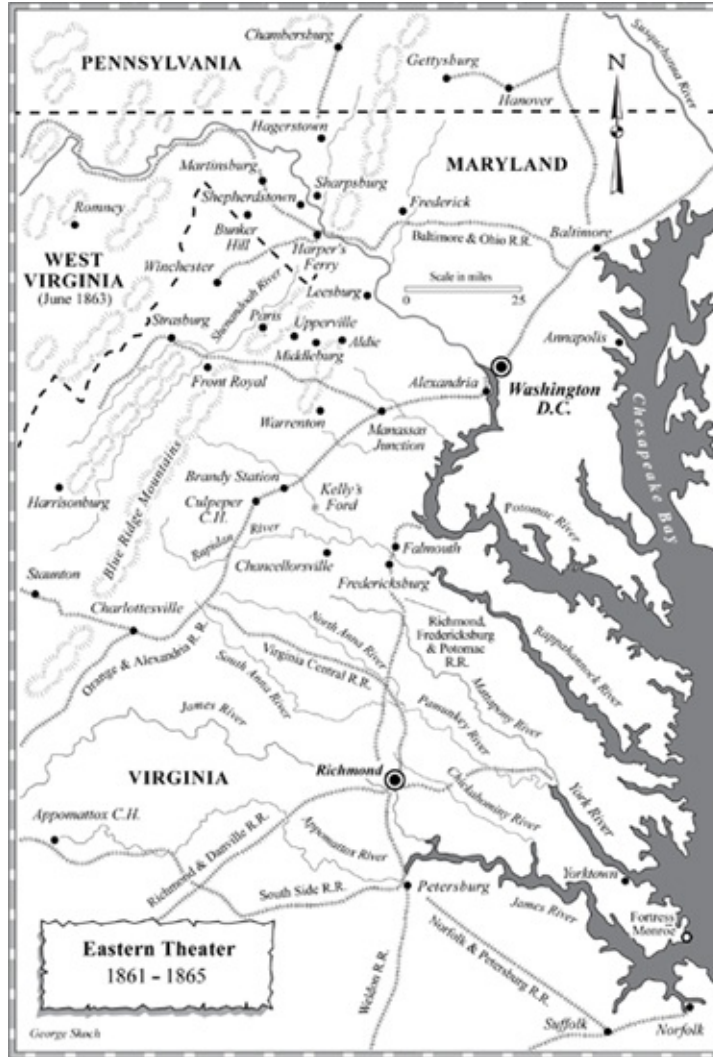
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My wife, Gloria, my best friend and cherished love, who has shared all this work throughout the many years. Without her, none of this is possible or of meaning.

Our mothers, Kathleen M. Wert and Ethel L. Long. For all that mothers do and for all that they mean to Gloria and me, this book is dedicated to them.

A Glorious Army



Prologue

The musketry and artillery fire had died away with nightfall on May 31, 1862. For several hours during the day the fighting had raged in the woodlots and clearings around Seven Pines and Fair Oaks Station, several miles outside of Richmond, Virginia. The combat's fury and the bloodletting surpassed anything in the experience of those trapped within its confines. A Virginia soldier confessed to his wife that it was a "miracle" that he passed through unscathed as "every body else was falling around us." A regimental commander who survived the conflict's four years admitted afterward that the engagement was "one of the bloodiest of my war experience."¹

The day had not gone as planned by the attacking Confederates. Muddy roads and flooded bottomlands from the previous night's thunderstorms, a misunderstanding of orders, and piecemeal assaults had hampered the Southern operations and shaped the struggle. Consequently the error-plagued offensive did not go forward until early afternoon, hours behind schedule. The attackers gained successes, overrunning a Union redoubt and wrecking the enemy's front line. But Federal resistance stiffened, and reinforcements blunted a final Rebel thrust. The opposing ranks lay close to each other at day's end, with more carnage awaiting sunrise.²

The Confederate commander, General Joseph E. Johnston, rode away from his headquarters late in the day to examine the terrain and the army's lines. Johnston had spent the entire morning and most of the afternoon waiting anxiously for word of the attack at Seven Pines. Instead of learning for himself why his orders had miscarried, he remained at headquarters. It was not until nearly 3:00 P.M. when the commander received a dispatch that reported the action. Now, as he rode on his personal examination of the situation, a piece of an artillery shell struck him in the chest, breaking some ribs. Staff officers secured a litter, and the painfully wounded general was carried to the rear.³

Confederate President Jefferson Davis and his military advisor, General Robert E. Lee, met the litter party. The relations between Davis and Johnston had been strained for months, exacerbated by disagreements over military policy and both men's proud and thin-skinned personalities. At that moment, however, Davis spoke kindly to the wounded general, expressing his hope that Johnston would soon be able to return to duty.⁴

With the expectation that fighting would continue the next day, Davis assigned Johnston's senior subordinate, Major General Gustavus W. Smith, to command of the army. In the past, when confronted with responsibilities in the field, Smith had become indisposed with unspecified illnesses. Davis had little confidence in his generalship, but Smith would have to do for the present. The president also knew that no other ranking officer in the army could replace Johnston until the wounded general recovered.⁵

Davis started back toward the Confederate capital, accompanied by Lee. Since March Lee had served as the president's military advisor, and during those months the two men had developed mutual trust. At some point, as they rode through the darkness, Davis asked Lee to replace Smith and to assume command of the army. It was to be a temporary assignment.⁶

So it was—a beleaguered chief executive turned to a general whose standing with the public had been diminished because of a failed campaign in western Virginia in the fall of 1861. At the time

newspapers derisively called him “Granny Lee” for his perceived indecisiveness and even timidity. Unlike Johnston or Smith, however, Lee possessed the confidence of Davis, having worked well with the difficult president. And, with a crisis at hand, Davis had no one else.⁷

The magnitude of the crisis extended far beyond the lines at Seven Pines and Fair Oaks. For months a darkening, foreboding shadow had settled in across the Confederacy. Defeat had followed defeat—forts Henry and Donelson, Nashville, Shiloh, New Orleans, and Roanoke Island. Finally, with the Union Army of the Potomac at the outskirts of Richmond, the independence of the Confederacy seemed to be a short-lived dream. In words unspoken, Lee had been asked to stay the darkness. He and those who awaited him in the army’s ranks would do more. At about midday on June 1, 1862, Robert E. Lee dismounted at army headquarters. It marked the beginning.⁸

Chapter One

The Man and the Army

A MEMBER OF THE 4TH South Carolina, writing home on June 2, 1862, noted the appointment of Robert E. Lee to command of the army and stated: "I know little about him. They say he is a good general, but I doubt his being better than Johnston or [James] Longstreet." The South Carolina undoubtedly spoke for thousands of his comrades. Few officers or men had served with Lee in the antebellum army, and fewer had sat with him in councils or ever spoken to him. An officer who knew Lee and his family, Brigadier General James Ewell Brown "Jeb" Stuart, had confided earlier, "With profound personal regard for General Lee, he had disappointed me as a General."¹

Lee was fifty-five years old, a son of the Revolutionary War hero "Light Horse" Harry Lee. An 1822 graduate of West Point, ranking second in his class, Lee served primarily on engineering and staff assignments in the antebellum army. During the Mexican War he rendered distinguished service as an officer on General Winfield Scott's staff. Scott regarded his fellow Virginian as the finest officer in the Regular Army. In April 1861 Union authorities offered Lee command of an army, but when Virginia seceded, Lee resigned his commission, traveled to Richmond, and was appointed commander of the state's volunteer forces. He directed the mobilization with skill until Virginia formally joined the Confederacy.²

In late July President Jefferson Davis assigned him to conduct operations in western Virginia, where the Federals had achieved minor successes. The duty was difficult and frustrating for Lee. The mountainous terrain, foul weather, feuding subordinates, sickness, and undisciplined troops resulted in disappointment and failure. By year's end, Lee was in South Carolina, overseeing the construction of coastal defenses. At last, in March 1862, Davis recalled Lee to Richmond as his advisor on military affairs.³

A day after he assumed command of the army, Lee confessed to his daughter-in-law, "I wish had [Johnston's] mantle had fallen on an abler man." Despite this modest assertion, Lee was an enormously talented man. Edward Porter Alexander, the army's chief of ordnance, stated, "No one could meet Lee and fail to be impressed with his dignity of character, his intellectual power, and his calm self-reliance."⁴

A handsome man, Lee possessed an imposing physical presence and a reserve that shielded an essentially private man. But in his dealings with government officials, fellow officers, and common soldiers, he was habitually courteous and kind. A staff officer said that he was "approachable by all." A private who had served under him in western Virginia remembered that Lee "soon won the affection of all by his politeness and notice of the soldiers." Another officer believed "no man was so tender to the faults of others as he was or so ready to assume his own."⁵

Lee's dignified calm, noted by many, resulted from a "remarkable self-control," in the words of Walter Taylor, a member of Lee's personal staff. "General Lee was naturally of a positive temperament, and of strong passions," continued Taylor, "and it is a mistake to suppose him

otherwise; but he held these in complete subjection to his will and conscience.” When angered, Lee revealed it with a “little nervous twist or jerk of the neck and head,” a reddened face, a brusque manner, and clipped words. His ill humor or “occasional outcropping of temper” fell mainly upon his staff members, who called him “The Tycoon” out of his hearing.⁶

Few things irritated Lee more than the mounds of paperwork that he had to deal with daily as an army commander. As he soon demonstrated, he understood the workings of an army, the constant requirements of supply, ordnance, and organizational changes. His work habits acquired over decades as a soldier stood him well; he was attentive, industrious, and meticulous. Henry Heth, a general and friend, asserted “Lee was the embodiment of order and punctuality.” As the strains on Southern resources deepened, the demands on his time and skills mounted. A hallmark of his generalship was his ability to maintain the army’s prowess despite the crippling scarcities of rations, clothing, ordnance, and animal fodder.⁷

Walter Taylor served on Lee’s personal staff through most of the war, until the end at Appomattox. For him, a defining characteristic of the general was his “sublime devotion to duty.” In the soldier’s trade, duty governed a man’s life and prescribed its limits. For Lee, it was an uncompromising principle; it meant to him, in the words of the historian Joseph Harsh, a “pragmatic acceptance of the hand dealt him by fate.” The performance of his duty would, like a lodestar, lead the way.⁸

Harsh has argued that Lee’s “greatest assets grew from the strength of his own character.” His most renowned biographer, Douglas Southall Freeman, attributed his consummate skill as a general, however, to his intellect. “The accurate reasoning of a trained and precise mind is the primary explanation of all these achievements,” wrote Freeman. “Lee was preeminently a strategist, and a strategist because he was a sound military logician.”⁹ In time Lee’s personal attributes and habits inspired confidence and instilled loyalty.

Lee possessed an intellect of exceptional depth and discernment. He excelled at deductive reasoning. He sifted through reconnaissance reports, information from spies, captured documents, Northern newspaper articles, and prisoner interrogations to formulate strategy across a broad landscape. Where opponents might see the dim outline of possibilities, Lee perceived opportunities. With his character strengths, intellectual acumen, and the training and experience of a career soldier, he would be a formidable enemy, a general with an aptitude for the art of warfare.¹⁰

By the time Lee assumed command of the army, he had formulated ideas on overall Confederate strategy. During the previous several months he had witnessed the string of Union victories and the loss of Southern cities and territories as the Davis administration followed a defensive strategy. By June 1862, in the view of the historian Gary W. Gallagher, Rebel “armies had been losing ground every quarter... as a cancer eating at southern morale and will.” Perhaps worst of all, the North’s largest force, the Army of the Potomac, lay at Richmond’s doorstep.¹¹

Joseph Johnston supported a defensive strategy. He told fellow generals “that the true policy of the Confederacy was to save men & only fight at an advantage—that we had plenty of territory, but not troops to spare.” In March he withdrew the army from the Centreville, Virginia, area, abandoning and destroying more than a million pounds of critically needed foodstuffs and forage. When the Federals disembarked on the Peninsula east of Richmond in early April, Davis ordered Johnston’s army to the capital and down the Peninsula to confront the 100,000 Federals. Within weeks, however, Johnston retreated toward Richmond, trailed by the enemy. Finally, confronted by the possible advance of a second force south from Fredericksburg, Johnston struck at Seven Pines and Fa

Johnston's passive defensive strategy had resulted in the conflict in the East being perched on the edge of the Confederate capital. If the Union commander, Major General George B. McClellan, closed the vise tighter and rolled up heavy cannon to within range of the city, Richmond could be doomed. This had been the inherent danger in Johnston's withdrawal into the defenses. As Gallagher has argued in a study of the Confederate war effort: "Even leaving aside surrendered troops, strategically defensive campaigns often drained manpower at a rate almost equal to that lost by the side on the offensive. The problem lay in the fact that defenders usually reached a point where they had to attack in order to avoid a siege."¹³

Lee had watched with mounting concern Johnston's withdrawal up the Peninsula into the fieldworks outside of the city. With Major General Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson Lee had fashioned an offensive operation in the Shenandoah Valley that had stalled, for the present, an overland advance by the Federals from Fredericksburg. When Davis and his advisors discussed the possibility of abandonment of the city, at a May 14 Cabinet meeting, Lee stated his position on the security of the capital, exclaiming with uncharacteristic fervor, "Richmond must not be given up; it shall not be given up!" The passion of his words stunned his listeners.¹⁴

Charles Marshall, Lee's military secretary, wrote later, "It was a saying of General Lee that Richmond was never so safe as when its defenders were absent." An integral component of Lee's strategic views was an unbending commitment to the defense of the capital. He understood clearly the strategic, industrial, and symbolic importance of Richmond. If Confederate independence were to be attained, Richmond must not fall. The security of the capital lay well beyond its environs.¹⁵

Lee saw the civil conflict for what it had become, a struggle between two democratic societies. Each side had to sustain the support of its respective populaces, their willingness to accept the sacrifices and casualties to achieve ultimate victory. He directed his strategy against the will of the Northern people. In the enemy's newspapers he watched the political climate closely. He believed an overall military victory lay beyond the resources of the Confederacy. The goal of independence could be achieved only by a political settlement with the Lincoln administration. In turn Lee realized that Southern civilian morale could be upheld only by battlefield victories.¹⁶

In the struggle between North and South time was the silent enemy of the Confederacy. A protracted war meant almost certain defeat for the eleven seceded states, whose human and economic resources paled before those of the Union. The harvests of Northern farms, the furnaces of steel mills, the web of railroads, and the reservoir of manpower composed the sinews of an unsheathed, terrible sword of military power. If the will of the Northern citizenry held firm, the outcome appeared inevitable.¹⁷

Against these long odds Lee would act. When the time came, he led the army down a fork in a road no other Confederate general dared to follow. Within the broad offensive-defensive strategy of the Confederacy, Lee rejected the passive defensive stance of the previous winter and spring. As he wrote to Davis later in the war, "If we can defeat or drive the armies of the enemy from the field, we shall have peace. All our efforts & energies should be devoted to that object." It was his belief then; it was his belief in June 1862.¹⁸

Within days of Lee's assuming command of the army, Porter Alexander spoke with Captain Joseph C. Ives of Davis's staff. Alexander inquired if Lee was audacious enough as a general, believing that such an attribute was an "absolute requisite" if the South, with its inferior resources and manpower

were to have “any chance at all” in gaining independence. “Alexander,” replied Ives, “if there is one man in either army, Federal or Confederate, who is head & shoulders, far above every other one in either army in audacity that man is Gen. Lee, and you will very soon have lived to see it. Lee is audacity personified. His name is audacity, and you need not be afraid of not seeing all of it that you will want to see.”¹⁹

A private from Texas subsequently compared Lee’s temperament to that of “a game cock,” adding that the “mere presence of an enemy aroused his pugnacity and was a challenge he found hard to decline.” James Longstreet described it as “headlong combativeness,” and Alexander called it Lee’s “combative instinct.” Perhaps the Confederate commander possessed an innate aggressiveness, perhaps his soul burned when confronting an opponent on a battlefield. In his words, he strived to “destroy,” “ruin,” “crush,” and “wipe out” enemy forces.²⁰

Lee’s aggressiveness or boldness arose from his reasoned assessment of how the numerically inferior Confederacy could achieve independence. To await the onslaught of Union might was to await a slow death. A realist acting on the disadvantages faced by all Confederate field commanders, Lee chose boldness, a calculated gamble that, with a series of battlefield victories and heavy enemy casualties, could discourage the Northern populace. “Lee’s willingness to take the risk of action lay at the core of his generalship,” the historian Charles Roland has written.²¹

Audacity meant risky, even desperate measures, but these offered opportunities. The offensive allowed Lee to dictate operations and to seize and to retain the strategic or operational initiative in the theater. He could frustrate Union plans, form the contours of a campaign, and maneuver the Federals onto fields advantageous to his own army. Celerity of movement and the concentration of forces became hallmarks of his strategic operations. Together they presented the possibility of inflicting a decisive, if not fatal, blow upon the enemy. According to the historian Harsh, Lee would “force the issue,” and so “control the tempo of the war.”²²

Jefferson Davis and pro-Confederate Southern civilians supported an offensive strategy; they wanted to force the issue. Recent Union victories and advances into Southern territory had drawn criticism of the Davis administration and sapped civilian morale. Southerners believed in the region’s military heritage and the prowess and bravery of their soldiers. Newspapers urged aggressive action. In his June 2 letter to his daughter-in-law Lee expressed not only his belief but mirrored the thoughts of his fellow countrymen, that they must “drive our enemies back to their homes.”²³

With such a purpose, with personal attributes unmatched by any other Confederate commander, and with authority from the president over a theater of operations not given to Joseph Johnston, Lee and a handful of staff officers dismounted at army headquarters east of Richmond at about midday on that Sabbath, June 1, 1862. Uncertainty about him hung over the city and the army. The *Richmond Examiner* railed against his appointment, but a clerk in the War Department jotted in his diary, “The may be hailed as the harbinger of a bright future.”²⁴

Gustavus Smith relinquished command of the army to Lee and would leave the army permanently the next day. Davis had preceded Lee to the headquarters, and the two men surely conferred before the president returned to the city. Lee went to work.²⁵

The order that appointed Lee read, in part, that he “will assume the immediate command of the armies of Eastern Virginia and North Carolina.” His authority embraced Johnston’s five infantry divisions, Major General Benjamin Huger’s division from Norfolk, Stonewall Jackson’s Valley District command, and the 33,000 troops in the departments of North Carolina and Henrico. By the

last week of June, a new infantry division, the "Light Division" of Major General Ambrose Powell Hill, had been organized, and an additional twenty-seven regiments joined Lee's force outside Richmond. By the opening of the Seven Days Campaign, Lee had amassed 112,000 present for duty as compared to George McClellan's Union army of slightly more than 100,000. Lee's was the largest army ever assembled by the Confederacy.²⁶

In October 1861, Johnston's command had been designated the Department of Northern Virginia. Over time the units were referred to as the Army of the Potomac, the same designation as that of the Union army in the East, and as the Army of Northern Virginia. On the day Lee assumed command he issued Special Orders No. 22, appealing to the officers and men "to maintain the ancient fame of the Army of Northern Virginia," and so it would be known. Continuing, Lee directed, "Commanders of divisions and brigades will take every precaution and use every means in their power to have their commands in readiness at all times for immediate action."²⁷

In fact, the army was ill-prepared for "immediate action." The fighting at Seven Pines and Fair Oaks lasted into the afternoon of June 1. When it ended, Confederate casualties exceeded 6,000, Union losses, some 5,000. A Southern staff officer described the two-day engagement as a "waste of life and a great disappointment." In a letter to his mother Lieutenant Colonel William W. Bentley of the 24th Virginia complained, "Everything is managed so badly when going into battle." The army's senior leadership had mishandled the attacks, resulting in the Federals achieving a tactical victory.²⁸

The problems within the army extended into its very fabric. Johnston had been a popular commander but a poor administrator, neglecting paperwork and procedures. Discipline was lax, desertions depleted units, and illnesses stalked the camps. Major General Daniel Harvey Hill grumbled to his wife on June 10, "There are hundreds and thousands of skulkers, who are dodging off home or lying around the brothels gambling saloons & drinking houses of Richmond." Writing at the same time, a South Carolinian described "a great deal of sickness in our army, and soldiers are dying at the hospital almost daily."²⁹

Colonel Robert H. Chilton, Lee's chief of staff, described the army as a collection of "undisciplined individuality" when Lee assumed command. "It was extremely wasteful," Chilton said, "little observant of the relations which should exist between commanders and the commanded, and absenteeism without proper authority, prevailed largely amongst both officers and soldiers, which greatly reduced effective strength." Like Chilton, James Longstreet attributed the difficulty with discipline to the spirit of individuality of the troops.³⁰

Many veterans, the volunteers of 1861, stood in the ranks, but thousands of recruits had joined the army within the past two months. In February 1862, the Confederate Congress had enacted a national conscription law, the first of its kind in American history. The legislation granted the men the opportunity to transfer to another unit and to elect their company and regimental officers. These reorganizations occurred during April and May, resulting in the replacement of 155 field officers by newly elected men. "The whole effect," wrote Porter Alexander, "was very prejudicial to the discipline of the army."³¹

Whether green recruits or veterans, soldiers grated against authority. A Virginian argued that he and his comrades were ready to fight, "but never ready to submit to the routine duty and discipline of the camp or the march." Private John Casler of the 33rd Virginia said that each Southern-born man "felt himself a king." A Georgian wrote: "A feeling of very democratic equality prevailed.... Officers were no better than the men." He added, "The process of disciplining them took away none of the

personal spirit or their personal interest in the war.”³²

They came into the army from a society whose touchstones of belief were duty, honor, and liberty. The political controversies of the 1850s deepened their sense of the South’s cultural superiority. With the outbreak of the war they enlisted in defense of their homes, of their individual and states’ rights, and of the institution of slavery, the economic, political, and social foundation of their way of life. “In these revolutionary times,” wrote a Virginia volunteer, “individual life is much less regarded than ordinarily. The issues are so momentous that the blood of the present generations must be their purchase money.”³³

“We were rather a devout army,” contended a staff officer. Their faith reassured them of the righteousness of their cause. “Religion supplied the overarching framework for southern nationalism,” the historian Gallagher has observed, “as Confederates cast themselves as God’s chosen people.” In turn, they viewed the enemy as “ungodly,” a “depraved Yankee race,” “wretches,” and “devils.” The belief in ultimate victory, willed by God against such a foe, was to sustain them in their worst times amid the worst of the carnage.³⁴

Defense of home and family was woven into the certitude of their cause and contrasted with the barbarity of Northerners. Explaining to his sons why he had enlisted in the 2nd Virginia, Lieutenant Samuel Moore answered for many fathers: “They [the Yankees] might go into the State of Virginia and burn our houses and kill all the men and the women and children, and do a great deal more harm, and I am sure I would rather see a thousand of them killed around me, than to know that they had done any harm to my wife and dear little boys.” A Virginia infantryman expressed similar reasons to his wife. “I feel that it is for you that I fight, that while I render my country service I am as a shield between my love, my darling & danger.”³⁵

Although the Yankee “devils” too believed in the justness of their cause and of God’s blessing upon it, the defense of their homeland instilled in these Confederates a heightened fighting spirit or élan in battle of inestimable value. They had shown it at Seven Pines and Fair Oaks, fiercely charging the Federal works and a redoubt. One story, most likely apocryphal but ringing with truth, circulated in Richmond after the battle of a Yankee prisoner exclaiming, “The Southern soldiers would charge into hell if there was a battery before them—and they would take it from a legion of devils!”³⁶

To an astute observer, those Rebels had the makings of a formidable opponent. They had embraced the cause, said one of them, with “fervent feeling.” But the illusions of a quick victory and a short war had passed with the reality before them. They remained undisciplined in camp, straggled on marches, and bristled under the authority of officers, whom they often viewed as their equals. “I never had any doubt that our people would make good fighters,” stated James Longstreet after the war, “but I knew that the issue must at least be put upon organization.” Like a steel blade tempered in a forge, organization meant the molding, if not recasting, of an army composed of fiercely independent souls. That task fell to Lee and his subordinate officers.³⁷

The army’s officer ranks, from regimental to divisional command, consisted of a core of professionally trained or experienced men. Scores of them had attended or were graduates of West Point, Virginia Military Institute (VMI), South Carolina Military Academy (today’s Citadel), North Carolina Military Institute, and other antebellum private military schools. Veterans of the Mexican War, prewar army and navy, and state militia units held commissions. More of these educated and experienced officers served with the army in Virginia than with any other Confederate command.³⁸

In the reorganization of the army in April and May roughly one-third of the majors, lieutenants,

colonels, and colonels with prewar education or service were removed through elections. The number of experienced captains and lieutenants voted out at company level is difficult to quantify. As noted previously, the turnover of officers caused a further erosion of discipline in the ranks. But a majority of experienced officers secured reelection, often at a higher rank; for instance, nearly every Virginia infantry and cavalry regiment had VMI alumni on their rolls. The presence of such men provided the army with, in the words of the historian Richard McMurry, “a much sounder command and administrative structure than... any other Civil War army.”³⁹

The army was composed of units from all eleven of the Confederate states and Maryland. By the beginning of the Seven Days Campaign, Virginia accounted for a small plurality of infantry regiments and battalions, trailed by units from Georgia and North Carolina. In fact, the majority of infantry units hailed from the lower South, from South Carolina to Texas. Conversely Virginia had organized a large majority of the artillery batteries and nine of the fourteen cavalry regiments. The assignment of so many foot soldiers from beyond the borders of the Old Dominion indicated the importance of the theater to Confederate authorities.⁴⁰

With the influx of reinforcements and the reorganization of units during June, the army had thirty-five brigades of infantry. Nineteen of the brigade commanders were graduates of the United States Military Academy, Virginia Military Institute, and the South Carolina Military Academy. Among the West Pointers, John Bell Hood, Jubal A. Early, Richard H. Anderson, George Pickett, William Dorsey Pender, Charles Field, Isaac Trimble, and Cadmus Wilcox were destined for division or corps command. Graduates of VMI included brigadiers of outstanding promise, Robert E. Rodes, Samuel Garland Jr., and William Mahone.⁴¹

Among the remaining sixteen brigade commanders, half of them had served in the Regular Army and/or were veterans of antebellum conflicts. The other eight generals included three graduates of either Princeton or Yale, a militia officer, and four politicians, most notably the Georgians Howell Cobb and Robert Toombs. Like many of the professionally trained brigadiers, men such as Maxon Gregg, Lawrence O'Bryan Branch, Joseph Kershaw, James Kemper, James Archer, Ambrose E. Wright, and George T. Anderson became reliable, if not excellent, combat leaders. With a few exceptions, Lee's brigade commanders—men generally in their early to midthirties—were talented men, unmatched by Union officers of similar rank.⁴²

The army's senior leadership and infantry division commanders were composed entirely of West Point graduates. Until resigning their commissions in 1861, most of them had been career officers in the Regular Army. Except for William H. C. Whiting, all of them had been with the army in Mexico, many earning a brevet or temporary rank for distinguished service. Several would help to forge the army's character and be an indelible part of its history, while others would be gone from it after one campaign.⁴³

If Lee were to correct the army's administrative and discipline problems and weld it into a weapon, he had to rely on his senior officers. He knew none of them well, nor they him. Lee had sat in meetings with James Longstreet, offered advice on operations to John Bankhead Magruder and Benjamin Huger, and by correspondence crafted with Stonewall Jackson and Richard S. Ewell the Shenandoah Valley campaign. The others—Daniel Harvey Hill, William H. C. Whiting, David R. Jones, Ambrose Powell Hill, and Lafayette McLaws—Lee knew either through reports or by reputation. In time, in councils, and by observations on a battlefield, Lee would evaluate the strengths and weaknesses. For the present the defense of Richmond would take the measure of all

them.⁴⁴

The army's artillery and cavalry commanders, by contrast, had known Lee since their cadet years at West Point. The chief of artillery, Brigadier General William N. Pendleton, had been in the class behind Lee, graduating in 1830. Pendleton left the army within a few years to become a teacher and then an Episcopalian minister. When his native Virginia seceded, he organized a battery and commanded it at First Manassas. Johnston appointed him to the post for his administrative abilities, not for his tactical control of cannon on a battlefield. A day after Lee assumed command of the army, he kept Pendleton as chief of artillery.⁴⁵

No subordinate commander enjoyed Lee's personal affection more than the twenty-nine-year-old cavalryman Brigadier General Jeb Stuart. A Virginian, Stuart was a cadet at West Point when Lee served as its superintendent. Stuart's best friend was fellow classmate Custis Lee, Lee's oldest son, whom Stuart joined often for Saturday dinners at the family's quarters. Later Captain Stuart served under Lee in the capture of abolitionist John Brown at Harper's Ferry, Virginia, in October 1859. He joined fellow Virginians in Confederate service, was appointed lieutenant colonel of cavalry, and led his regiment with distinction at First Manassas. In the fall of 1861 Johnston organized the army's mounted regiments into a brigade and assigned Stuart to command. The army commander called the horse soldier "a rare man."⁴⁶

This was the army that Robert E. Lee joined on Sunday, June 1, 1862. If Richmond were to be saved, if the Confederacy were to survive, a trial awaited both him and them. Despite the administrative and discipline problems, the shortages of supplies, ordnance, and quality firearms, the fiber of these officers and men defined the army. Duty, honor, the cause, and the safety of loved ones kept them in their camps, behind fieldworks, and along skirmish lines. Months earlier Lee had written to a son, "All must be sacrificed to the country." An army was to be reborn, fittingly on Sabbath day.⁴⁷

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