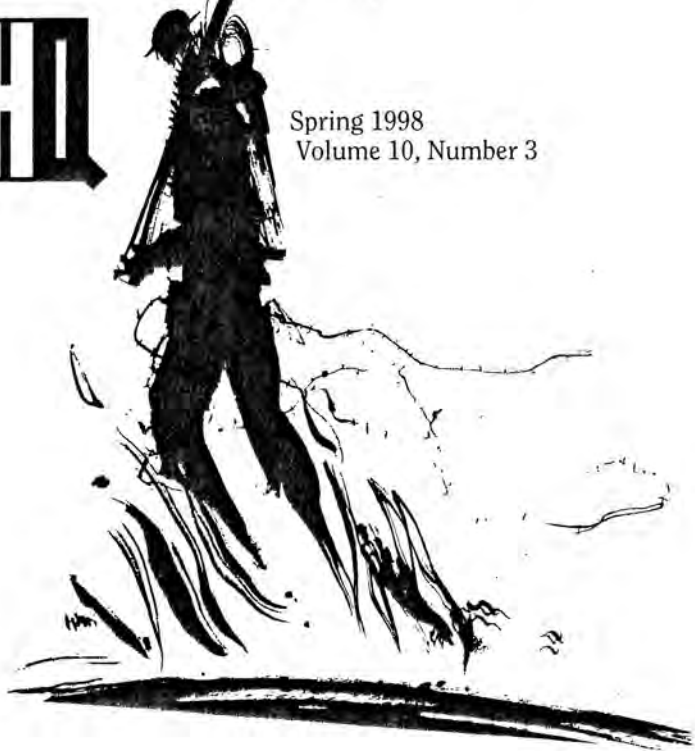


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WHEN LEE WAS MORTAL

For much of the Civil War, Robert E. Lee was idolized by his fellow Southerners, but early in the conflict—if you asked the Confederate in the street—the man couldn't do anything right.

by Gary W. Gallagher

James Longstreet's First Corps awaited an important review on the afternoon of April 29, 1864. Recently returned to the Army of Northern Virginia after several trying months in north Georgia and east Tennessee, Longstreet's soldiers stood in ranks extending across a broad field partially framed by oak woods. About one o'clock, under a bright spring sun that played off the burnished metal of thousands of muskets, music and an artillery salute announced the appearance of Robert E. Lee. The general guided Traveller between a pair of square gate posts and onto the crest of a knoll opposite the waiting infantry. "As he rode up to the colors, and the men caught sight of his well-known figure," reported a witness two days later, "a wild and pro-

longed cheer, fraught with a feeling that thrilled all hearts, ran along the lines and rose to the heavens. Hats were thrown high, and many persons became almost frantic with emotion." Longstreet waved his hat enthusiastically, and Lee uncovered his head in restrained acknowledgment of the demonstration. Shouts mingled with tears among the veteran soldiers: "What a noble face and head!" "Our destiny is in his hands!" "He is the best and greatest man on this continent!" An artillerist described a "wave of sentiment . . . [that] seemed to sweep over the field. Each man seemed to feel the bond which held us all to Lee. . . . [T]he effect was that of a military sacrament, in which we pledged anew our lives."

The soldiers at this memorable review—the last ever held by Lee—hon-

ored their unspoken pledge during bitter fighting over the next six weeks. They joined the rest of the Army of Northern Virginia to provide Lee with an instrument capable of blocking Ulysses S. Grant's powerful offensive blows. Taking heart from Lee's effective leadership during the Overland campaign, Confederate civilians articulated their own bond with the general. Typical was Catherine Ann Devereux Edmondston, a North Carolinian who followed events in Virginia very closely. "This constant anxiety & watching must tell on our men!" she wrote on June 11, 1864. "How does Gen Lee support it? God's blessing only & God's strength enables him to bear up under [the strain]. What a position does he occupy—the idol, the point of trust, of confidence & repose of thousands! How nobly has he won the confidence, the admiration of the nation. . . ." Edmondston believed "'Marse Robert' can do any & all things. God grant that he may long be spared to us. He nullifies [Braxton] Bragg, [Robert] Ransom, & a host of other incapables."

The emotional review and Edmondston's comments illuminate Lee's profound impact on the men in his army and on civilians behind the lines. Well before the mid-point of the Civil War, most Confederates looked to him as their greatest hope for winning independence. He and his army came to occupy a position in their fledgling nation much like that of George Washington and the Continental Army during the American Revolution. Repeated disasters in the Western Theater and along the Confederacy's coasts took a toll on Southern morale throughout the war, but news from Virginia provided an effective counterbalance. Thousands of Confederates believed that their struggle for nationhood might succeed so long as Lee and the Army of Northern Virginia remained in the field, an attitude that persisted despite mounting evidence of Northern superiority. As late as mid-March 1865, an astute foreign visitor commented about the degree to which Confederates drew strength from Lee: "*Genl R. E. Lee* . . . [is] the idol of his soldiers & the Hope of His Country," wrote Thomas Conolly, a member of the British parliament: "[T]he prestige

ture. In the East, McClellan's army closed in on Richmond. Although Stonewall Jackson's small victories in the Shenandoah Valley in May and early June lifted Southern spirits, the loss of Richmond, coming on the heels of so much defeat west of the Appalachians, almost certainly would have doomed the Confederacy.

Apart from the purely military dimension of his challenge, Lee had to deal with a restive Confederate populace. No analysis of his generalship should overlook the importance of civilian expectations. He served in a democracy at war, and the key to success lay in providing the type of leadership that would generate continued popular support for the national military effort. Since the victory at First Manassas in July 1861, it seemed to many Confederate citizens that their armies had forged a record dominated by defeat and retreat. The result had been an erosion of public morale and an almost frantic yearning for offensive victories. During the winter of 1861-62, a Richmond newspaper alluded to a "public mind . . . restless, and anxious to be relieved

by some decisive action that shall have a positive influence in the progress of the war." In late June 1862, from his vantage point as a clerk who served successive Confederate secretaries of war, John B. Jones observed that whenever combat ceased "our people have fits of gloom and despondency; but when they snuff battle in the breeze, they are animated with confidence."

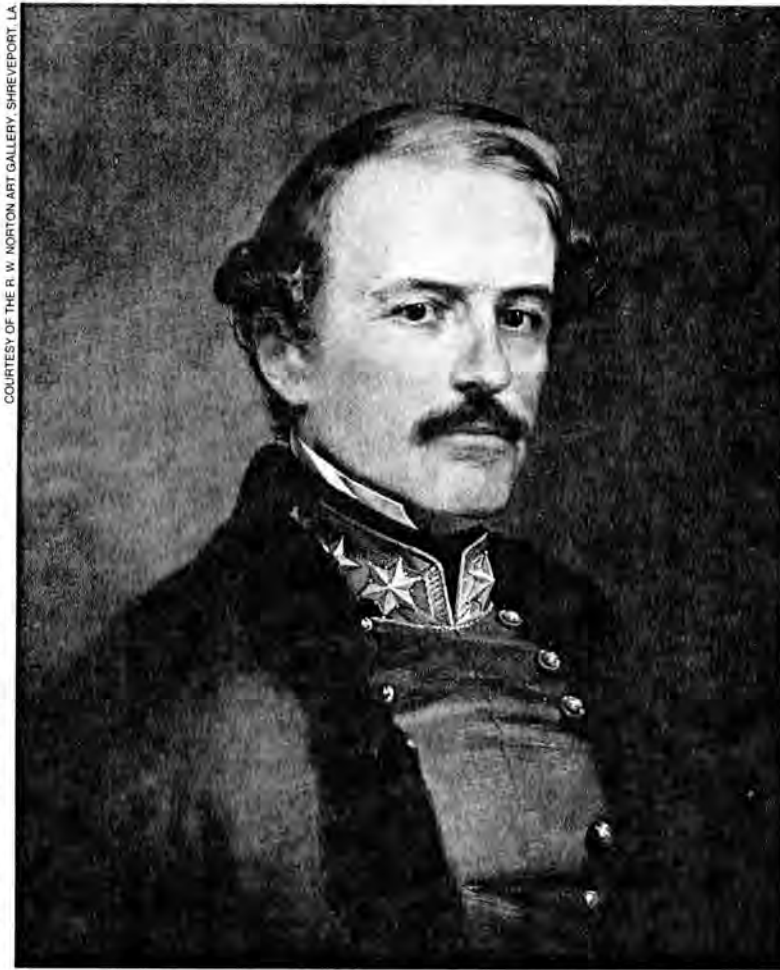
Lee certainly understood the state of Confederate morale as he prepared to face McClellan outside Richmond. As he would do in all of his subsequent campaigns, Lee sought to take the initiative, to force the enemy to react to his moves

rather than waiting to respond to theirs. Aggressive by nature, he must have known that his preference for dictating the action suited his people's temperament. This was not a "new" Lee. Public criticism over the preceding months had not persuaded him that he must alter his

with more than 100,000 men, and Irvin McDowell menaced the capital with another 30,000 Federals at Fredericksburg. Additional Union forces lurked in the Shenandoah Valley and northern Virginia. Three months later, Lee's bold strategic and tactical movements had

won victories at the Seven Days' and Second Manassas and had pushed the military frontier in the Eastern Theater across the Potomac River into western Maryland. The Civil War witnessed no other strategic reorientation of such magnitude in so short a time.

The battle of Antietam ended this spectacular run in mid-September, but Lee already had accomplished immense good in the crucial area of civilian morale. Confederates exulted at the thought of an aggressive posture that took the war to the enemy. A newspaper in Macon, Georgia, struck a familiar note in applauding Lee's decision to march northward toward Maryland: "Having in this war exercised Christian forbearance to its utmost extent, by acting on the defensive, it will now be gratifying to all to see . . . the war carried



A young-looking Lee posed for Benjamin F. Reinhardt in 1861, just before he grew his beard. The artist completed the painting in 1862.

strategic and tactical outlook. He had tried to be aggressive in western Virginia; along the south Atlantic coast, he had lacked the resources and opportunities to strike the enemy. His new position and the strategic situation he inherited presented him a chance to fly his true colors as a field commander.

Lee used his first three weeks in charge of the Army of Northern Virginia to plan an offensive against McClellan in the Seven Days' Battles, a decision that saved Richmond and laid the groundwork for his later fame. When Confederates attacked at Mechanicsville on June 26, McClellan lay at Richmond's doorstep

upon the soil of those barbarians who have so long been robbing and murdering our quiet and unoffending citizens."

Lee's offensive successes swept away doubts about his willingness to take chances and thrust his name to the front rank of Southern generals. The Richmond *Dispatch* commented about how quickly the transformation occurred. "The rise which this officer has suddenly taken in the public confidence is without precedent," noted the paper eight days after the conclusion of the Seven Days': "At the commencement of the war he enjoyed the highest reputation of any offi-

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