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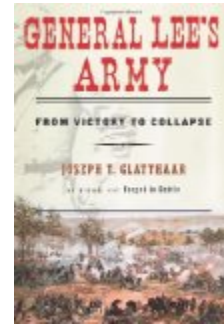
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Joseph T. Glatthaar. *General Lee's Army: From Victory to Collapse*. New York: Free Press, 2008. Plates. xv + 600 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-684-82787-2.

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Published on H-CivWar (March, 2009)

Commissioned by Hugh F. Dubrulle



A Clear View of a Contested Topic

General Lee's Army combines the best elements of Joseph T. Glatthaar's previous work on the Civil War. Like his book on William Tecumseh Sherman's troops in the Georgia and Carolinas campaigns (*March to the Sea and Beyond: Sherman's Troops on the Savannah and Carolinas Campaigns* [1985]), the present work blends extensive quantitative research with sensitive reading in the primary sources of the soldiers themselves. Like his work on Civil War leaders (*Partners in Command: Relationships between Civil War Leaders* [1994]), this one connects soldiers and officers and judiciously evaluates what worked and what did not inside the Army of Northern Virginia. And like his study of black soldiers and white officers (*Forged in Battle: The Civil War Alliance of Black Soldiers and White Officers* [1990]), *General Lee's Army* connects the experiences of soldiering to the larger issues that initiated and sustained the war. All of Glatthaar's books have staying power and this one is no exception. *General Lee's Army* will serve as a standard reference work for the Confederate army after which it is entitled, for the Civil War soldier, and for military history more generally.

Glatthaar's story tells the birth, life, and death of one of the most storied armies in American military history. Rejecting the Lost Cause hagiography that can see Robert E. Lee and his men do no wrong, Glatthaar's narrative grows out of a rigorous evaluation of the evidence. If there was courage in Lee's army, there was also cowardice. If there was steadfast loyalty, there were also deserters. Glatthaar's achievement consists not merely of puncturing myths for their own sake, but also of return-

ing the army and its soldiers to the realm of history and humanity. The men he describes are real people with all their foibles and flaws.

At the heart of the book are conclusions drawn from a six hundred-man sample that Glatthaar created and analyzed. Among the many important statistics to come out of this work is an assessment of the physical toll of military service. Over the course of the war, three-quarters of Lee's men were either killed or wounded in action, died of disease, or were captured. The impact of this figure is important not just for understanding the experience of the war but also for assessing how the war shaped the era that followed it. Given their experiences, few of Lee's Confederates could have looked on reconciliation with enthusiasm. The median age of 1861 enlistees was twenty-four, and these men came from a wide variety of wealth backgrounds and family arrangements. The myth of an army of second sons and eighteen-year-olds can finally be put to rest.

Quantitative history has fallen out of favor in recent decades, but Glatthaar's work shows the value that can be gained from its practice. The data his research generated confirms some established conclusions—that desertions from Lee's army increased substantially in late 1864 and early 1865—and refutes others—that rich men shirked service. Perhaps because the book was published by a trade press, it contains no tables.[1] Instead, all of the quantitative data is incorporated into the text. However it is presented, statistical material is central to many of the

major issues within the field, though few scholars gather it. The question of class conflict within the Confederacy has been plagued by this problem in recent years. Although it has proven a hard dragon to slay, the myth of a “rich man’s war and a poor man’s fight” receives a thorough skewering here. Glatthaar offers solid evidence to buttress his conclusion that the Civil War “was, in short, a rich, poor, and middle-class war. Rich and poor tended to be overrepresented, because the skilled workers were at their jobs by design” (p. 468). He does not argue for a natural Confederate solidarity or adopt a Lost Cause notion of white Southerners bound together by honor and courage. He concludes (again with solid evidence) that “all social classes supported the institution of slavery for racial, familial, friendship, and economic reasons” (p. 468). Early in the book, Glatthaar explains that nearly half of the 1861 volunteers lived in slaveholding households. This figure underscores the extent of slavery’s reach in the antebellum South and explains these Southerners’ ample incentive for fighting.

Glatthaar’s discussion of motives for enlistment and retention in service does not focus on slavery alone. Social pressure, government coercion, defense of home, notions of manhood, patriotism, and hatred of the Yankees all spurred men to enlist and stay in the armies. At the same time, Glatthaar offers an evenhanded discussion of desertion. He concludes that one-seventh (or 14 percent) of Lee’s army deserted over the course of the war. Enlistees from 1861 and 1862 were less likely to desert than later volunteers, while poor men and those closer to home were more likely to desert. As in his discussion of enlistment, Glatthaar refuses to reduce desertion to a single argument—the motives are simply too complex. He can draw this conclusion because of his extensive research into traditional written sources that supports and informs his reading of the data. Manuscript collections from forty-five different archives in seventeen states testify to the breadth and depth of Glatthaar’s research base.

This deep reading in primary sources is reflected in the narrative strategy. Topical chapters are interspersed with chronological ones. The book flows smoothly from a brief overview of secession and mobilization through Appomattox. The chronological narrative—following Lee’s army in the eastern theater—relates a story that will be familiar to many, but Glatthaar’s deft pen and cogent summaries deliver an immensely readable story. The book includes clear and cogent descriptions of all manner of soldiering—with chapters on arms and ammunition and combat, for instance—which will benefit lecturers for years to come. Glatthaar covers all aspects of soldiers’

experiences and does so within an analytical framework, something that Bell Irvin Wiley’s classic accounts, *The Life of Johnny Reb: The Common Soldier of the Confederacy* (1943) and *The Life of Billy Yank: The Common Soldier of the Union* (1952), often failed to do. An important example of this analysis is Glatthaar’s emphasis on problems of discipline within Confederate armies. What could have been routine discussions of camp life and religion reinforce Glatthaar’s argument that “Lee believed his enlisted men lacked discipline, and the officers could not instill it in them because they lacked discipline themselves. It was central to their military culture” (p. 199). He traces this problem back to the sense of entitlement bequeathed by mastery and white supremacy before the war.

Although written for a popular audience, Glatthaar’s narrative does not seek to uplift the reader with stories of courage or heroism (though evidence of both is abundant in the actions of the soldiers he describes). Instead, he describes the full experience of Civil War soldiering, and much of it was frankly unpleasant. Medicine and food were insufficient and often facilitated the illnesses they were supposed to cure or ward off. There is no brother’s war here. The Union invasion, and especially the policy of emancipation, enraged Southerners and led them to demonize their enemies. “Before the war, many had held Northerners in disdain, and some even despised them. But the war enriched their venom and universalized it” (p. 150). This oppositional quality, combined with the success of Lee’s army for so long, made them a focus for Confederates all across the new nation. Glatthaar concludes that by early 1863, “Lee’s army had emerged as the one great nationalizing institution” (p. 257). This assessment supports an argument suggested by Gary W. Gallagher several years ago, but Glatthaar might have done more here to spell out the consequences of his conclusion.[2] He does show change over time. By late 1864, he argues that a “death spiral” consumed Confederates (p. 455). The pressures of war applied by the Union caused the Confederacy to collapse.

General Lee’s Army will no doubt successfully bridge popular and academic history. It demonstrates that authors can meet the expectations of both audiences. Rigorous research can be explained in the context of a compelling story. For practitioners of soldier studies, Glatthaar’s work can serve as a model for future work. Quantitative research must form a part of that. Others may view this book as the last word on Lee’s army—surely there isn’t more left to study? In his introduction, Glatthaar asserts that “the saga of Lee’s army especially

tells the broader story of the entire Civil War” (p. xiii). While there is much to learn from Lee’s army, we now know that the war spilled beyond the bounds of regular armies and established battlefields. Recent scholars have developed community studies that incorporate the home front and the battlefield into a single frame of reference. Others have used soldiers as the basis for topical evaluations—of religion or racial attitudes—that connect the pre- and postwar periods. While Glatthaar’s conclusions may have answered most of our questions about the operation of this uniquely important institution within the context of the war, his book, as a whole, reminds us

of how fruitful research into this era can be for understanding the human past.

Notes

[1]. A companion volume of the tables and quantitative data is planned for publication by the University of North Carolina Press. This volume will be of particular value to researchers in the field who will be able to mine the material for additional uses.

[2]. Gary W. Gallagher, *The Confederate War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 58-59, 110-111.

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Citation: Aaron Sheehan-Dean. Review of Glatthaar, Joseph T., *General Lee’s Army: From Victory to Collapse*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. March, 2009.

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