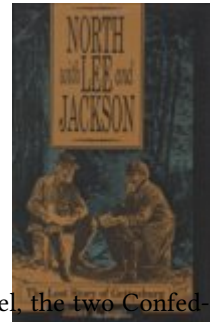


H-Net Reviews

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James A. Kegel. *North With Lee And Jackson: The Lost Story of Gettysburg*. Mechanicsburg, Pa.: Stackpole Books, 1996. xv + 459 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8117-1128-9.

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The military history of the Confederacy is a story replete with the question “what if?” What if the Confederates had pursued the retreating Yankees after First Manassas? What if Albert Sidney Johnston had not fallen on April 6 at Shiloh? What if Jefferson Davis could have employed Stealth bombers in Virginia? As the last query suggests, one can tire of these counterfactual fantasies—all of which seem to end with a Confederate victory (as if such a result were desirable). James A. Kegel’s study of Confederate grand strategy in the East between 1861 and 1863 rests in the end on two of the biggest “what ifs” that haunt these historians: What if Thomas J. “Stonewall” Jackson had not been mortally wounded at Chancellorsville? What if Robert E. Lee had won a decisive victory on northern soil instead of falling short as he did at Gettysburg? Although readers might find a few nuggets of interest here, as a whole the narrative covers well-mined areas of inquiry (although the author does not always seem aware of that fact); moreover, the book as a whole demonstrates the perils of counterfactual ruminations in military history.

Kegel seeks to answer one of the most persistent questions about Lee’s generalship: What exactly did he hope to achieve during the Gettysburg campaign? Did he order the Army of Northern Virginia across the Potomac in June 1863 simply to move the war out of his home state and raid northern resources? Or was he seeking a Waterloo-like battle of decision? Although Kegel clearly disagrees with those historians—most recently Emory Thomas—who argue that Lee sought a decisive battle from the outset of the campaign, he concedes that by the end of June, Lee had settled on such a plan. More important to his story, however, is his main argument—that Lee and Jackson had always envisioned taking the offensive, only to have their vision frustrated

by circumstances. According to Kegel, the two Confederate generals had targeted the anthracite mines of Pennsylvania for destruction—with factories and cities to follow. That goal seemed within reach in June 1863, as Richard S. Ewell’s Second Corps approached the Susquehanna River—only to be diverted southward when Lee learned that the Army of the Potomac had crossed its namesake in pursuit of the invaders. It was then, Kegel argues, that Lee turned his attention to seeking battle.

Readers will find Kegel’s insistence that historians have “overlooked” (p. 3) the larger context in which Lee undertook his invasion of the North frustrating and uninformed. In *Davis and Lee at War* (1995), Steven Woodworth notes Lee’s preference for offensive operations, as does Emory Thomas in his 1995 biography of the Confederate leader. Nor is the assertion that Jackson favored such operations new, as readers of Charles Royster’s *The Destructive War* (1991) and Bevin Alexander’s somewhat curious *Lost Victories: The Military Genius of Stonewall Jackson* (1992) will attest. One might excuse Kegel’s omission of Woodworth and Thomas from the bibliography as a result of publishing schedules, but the same excuse cannot hold in the cases of Royster and Alexander. An examination of the bibliography reveals that Kegel consulted nothing published since 1991, and he failed to cite recent classics such as Herman Hattaway and Archer Jones, *How the North Won* (1983) and James M. McPherson’s *Battle Cry of Freedom* (1988). To present an argument that historians have overlooked something while overlooking books that have something pertinent to say about that very subject is rather curious practice, although it is less unusual among Civil War military historians than one might think or desire.

This is not to say that Kegel fails to offer anything

refreshing. That Lee may have planned to inflict material damage upon Union resources is something not always appreciated by historians, although even in this case Kegel fails to acknowledge Alexander's argument about Jackson's desire to carry the war to the Susquehanna in the spring of 1862. On the whole, however, Kegel's insistence on offering a detailed (and traditional) narrative of the operations of the Army of Northern Virginia in 1862 and early 1863 obscures his argument without adding anything to what we already know of these operations. Kegel also reminds us of Lee's postwar interest in preparing an account of his army's operations, although (again) other historians have also acknowledged this. Perhaps it was better for Lee that he did not prepare this account, for his comments indicated that he would have distributed blame as well as praise among his subordinates and would have overlooked what a good number of historians of the Army of Northern Virginia often forget—that the Yankees had something to do with what happened. In the end, however, Kegel's insistence on the innovative nature of his argument simply falls flat, resting as it does upon a rather selective reading of available scholarship and the creation of historiographical straw men.

Kegel's treatment of specific issues is also open to question. Take, for example, his discussion of the relationship between the Gettysburg campaign and Ulysses S. Grant's operations against Vicksburg. He argues that Lee believed that invading the North would cause a panicky Lincoln administration to call off the campaign against the Confederate citadel on the Mississippi. Although Lee mentioned such a possibility, he did so in order to fend off proposals to transfer west part of the Army of Northern Virginia. He reasoned that the summer weather, bringing with it disease, would eventually sap Union strength and persistence, thus ending the siege. "I still hope that all things will end well for us at Vicksburg," Lee wrote Davis on June 25: it would be the only time he mentioned the city in correspondence during his drive north. In contrast, he had much to say on how other Confederate forces might exploit the opportunities opened by Union reactions to his invasion.

Had Lee actually thought that his actions might save Vicksburg, he would have been engaging in some rich fantasizing of his own, despite Kegel's assertion that such a conclusion was "reasonable" (p. 265). It is highly unlikely that anything but a quick and decisive victory in the East would have had any impact on events along the Mississippi. By the time Lee began to move, it was too late. The siege of Vicksburg was well under way by the

first week of June; it would have been far more likely that the Lincoln administration would have shifted the Ninth Corps, on occupation duty in Kentucky, east to shore up the Army of the Potomac instead of dispatching it to Grant (and so Lee speculated when he heard that the Ninth Corps was indeed moving somewhere). That the Ninth Corps moved to Vicksburg and not to Pennsylvania was indicative of the Lincoln administration's priorities. No one in Washington contemplated abandoning the siege against Vicksburg. This reflected pragmatism more than confidence in the ultimate outcome in Pennsylvania; even had Lincoln succumbed to alarm about Lee's invasion, it would have taken the better part of the week to get word to Grant, and it is unclear exactly how Grant could have extricated himself from Vicksburg and brought a sizable force east in timely fashion. Some Union authorities did panic, and Lincoln and his subordinates were concerned about growing dissent and disillusionment with the war effort in south central Pennsylvania. But from the beginning, Lincoln saw in Lee's movement an opportunity to strike the Confederate army; his impatience with Hooker (and later with Meade) was due to his dissatisfaction with their unwillingness to strike the enemy. Lee did not worry him half so much as did his own generals; the president was deeply disappointed when Lee retreated back across the Potomac.

Thus, if we accept Kegel's interpretation about the role of Vicksburg in Lee's thinking, we must conclude that the Confederate commander was not thinking things through in the spring of 1863. The available evidence, however, confirms the position of Woodworth and Thomas that Lee chose to indulge his superiors' concern about the West in order to get his way in the East. As Kegel himself notes elsewhere, Longstreet later recalled that Lee was rather selective about what he revealed to Davis and his advisers. Left with a choice between a deceptive Lee and a stupid Lee, most people will wisely prefer the former. Besides, the question of whether Lee invaded the North to take the pressure off Vicksburg is not essential to Kegel's argument. If anything, it takes away from his insistence that Lee had always desired to undertake such a campaign.

Even if we accept Kegel's outline of what Lee intended to do prior to the opening of his drive northward, events altered his original plan. Battles and campaigns are not fought on maps in one general's tent (where the enemy often proves rather cooperative); they are fought by real people on actual terrain against opponents who have different ideas in mind. Few operational plans survive their implementation intact; it is how a general re-

sponds to these changes and unanticipated events that is the mark of a great captain. Kegel forgets this. For example, he returns time and again to his insistence that Lee originally intended to send only one corps into Pennsylvania—an intention not conveyed to several of his subordinates, including Longstreet—and blames the alteration of the plan upon the actions of Ewell and Longstreet in the early stages of the campaign, although by then Lee was well aware of the qualities of his subordinates. To point out that with Jackson alive things might have been different is in some sense irrelevant: Jackson was dead. If Longstreet and Ewell were not Jackson, no one should have been more aware of that than Lee. For a general who was aware that the success of his plans depended in large part upon the ability of subordinates to execute them—and who thus accordingly tailored his plans to comport with those abilities—Lee’s own indulging in the “if Jackson were here” exercise is a bit pointless. Jackson was not there. Get over it.

Somehow Kegel cannot get over it; he concludes his text by remarking: “One can only wonder what the outcome might have been if Jackson had been there to march north with Lee on the route of the invasion plan he had proposed” (p. 380). Let’s indulge him for a moment. Let’s say, for argument’s sake, that Jackson had not been seriously wounded at Chancellorsville (for the counterfactual argument should always offer carefully considered stipulations; had Jackson survived the amputation of his arm, he might have returned to combat a vastly different individual psychologically as well as physically). Forget the debates over what Jackson might have done on July 1 or 2; had Stonewall been alive, there may have been no battle at Gettysburg, and in any case it would not have evolved as it did, for the three corps organization that Lee settled upon was a result of Jackson’s death (although Lee had contemplated a reorganization for some time, he always concluded that no one was ready to take command of a third corps). The rest should be left to one’s imagination—for one can make equally plausible (and unprovable) cases for several outcomes. Perhaps Jackson would have dazzled Hooker (and maybe Meade); perhaps he would have regressed to the Jackson of a year earlier; perhaps he would have hallucinated on painkillers and led his men in a suicidal charge; perhaps he would have sucked on some bad citrus and gotten sick. Perhaps ... perhaps ... perhaps.

To indulge in these counterfactual fantasies is another way of avoiding the question of evaluating Lee’s performance at Gettysburg. Suffice it to say that several factors proved pivotal in determining the outcome of that

battle. For the Confederates, there is plenty of blame to go around: it was probably the Army of Northern Virginia’s worst-fought battle. The fact that historians still argue over what Lee intended to do during the campaign suggests that the Confederate commander did not do a good job of conveying his intentions in an unmistakable fashion to others. Yet one must also observe that for once his Yankee counterparts did not fold under pressure. Say what one might about George G. Meade, but at least he was no McClellan, Pope, Burnside, or Hooker, whose incompetence did much to make Lee, Jackson, and company look so good. Union generalship was far from mistake-free, but the army and its leaders moved quickly to repair the consequences and thus staved off disaster. If Lee and his generals were unlucky at Gettysburg, luck as well as skill had played a role in their previous successes: a strategy that in the end depends upon an opponent’s incompetence has a slim margin of error.

Here and there the narrative is unintentionally amusing. After a long discussion of various exchanges and recollections in late June, which collectively offer contradictory impressions about what Lee intended to do, we learn that “Alexander Butterfield” was Joseph Hooker’s chief of staff (p. 302). Things would have been so much easier for military historians had Lee, Hooker, and other Civil War generals shared Richard Nixon’s desire to prepare a record for history—and Butterfield would have known how to do it (although in fact Daniel Butterfield, correctly identified elsewhere as the Army of the Potomac’s chief of staff at Gettysburg, was a master at distorting that very record).

In short, this is ultimately a very frustrating, unfinished book, far too concerned with promoting its own argument as novel to resolve inherent contradictions and tensions in that argument. For this Stackpole Books bears some responsibility. Kegel’s manuscript is obviously a labor of love fashioned by a very devoted buff; even if he finds his interpretations original, an accomplished outside reader would have known better. Many of the book’s shortcomings should have been caught in the review process. Yet many commercial presses (and the occasional university press as well) are so eager to capture a portion of the sizable Civil War market that the result is the publication of much substandard and undigested material. Armed with the services of a good editor, Kegel might well have offered readers an interesting, engaging book; instead, *North with Lee and Jackson* contributes little that is new to informed discussion about Confederate strategy and generalship.

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