H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Joseph L. Harsh. *Confederate Tide Rising: Robert E. Lee and the Making of Southern Strategy, 1861-1862.* Kent, Oh.: Kent State University Press, 1998. xviii + 278 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87338-580-0.

Reviewed by Steven Woodworth (Texas Christian University)
Published on H-CivWar (July, 1998)

In this book, Joseph L. Harsh presents a highly favorable account of Robert E. Lee's campaigns in Virginia during the summer of 1862, leading up to Lee's decision to cross the Potomac into Maryland for the campaign that would result in the battle of Antietam. Harsh gives a detailed and interesting account of Confederate operations and Lee's decisions in the Seven Days' campaign, the tense wait for Union general George B. McClellan to withdraw from the Peninsula, and the turning movement around the army of John Pope that culminated in the second battle of Bull Run and the encounter at Chantilly.

While the passages on Confederate operations are clear and engaging, it is not for this that Harsh has written his book, but rather to argue with much of previous literature on the Civil War in Virginia. He maintains that the aggressive offensive strategy espoused and carried out by Lee was not only a viable option for the Confederacy but in fact the only option that held out any chance of success. He argues persuasively that Lee sought dramatic victories that would demoralize the North into giving up the struggle before superior northern material and numbers could crush southern resistance, while rightly pointing out that Lee was at least as eager as such subordinates as Thomas J. Jackson to avoid costly frontal attacks. Harsh is also convincing in his assertion that the war was essentially aggressive on the part of the South and that southern public opinion demanded that its leaders adopt aggressive policies and win dramatic victories.

Harsh further maintains that Jefferson Davis, upon whom he heaps lavish praise, whole-heartedly favored precisely this offensive strategy. Taking at face value Davis's various statements that asserted his approval of offensive operations, Harsh accepts without demur the Confederate president's consistent disallowal of such operations, before Lee's accession to army command, on the grounds that they would have been too risky.

With Lee at last in command of what he would soon be calling the Army of Northern Virginia, that army's operations immediately shifted from defense to offense. Dismissing Davis's occasional cautionary statements as anomalies, Harsh points to Davis's acceptance of Lee's actions as proof of the president's prior approval and posits that unrecorded and unwitnessed conversations must have taken place between Davis and Lee, wherein they agreed upon the offensive operations Lee consistently pursued.

Of course, a book like this is intended to be controversial, and no doubt it will be. For those who enjoy controversy, or who seek a detailed and well-written account of Confederate decision-making and operations in the summer of 1862, it will be a welcome addition to the Civil War bookshelf.

Copyright (c) 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact <h-net@h-net.msu.edu>.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Steven Woodworth. Review of Harsh, Joseph L., *Confederate Tide Rising: Robert E. Lee and the Making of Southern Strategy, 1861-1862.* H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. July, 1998.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2183

Copyright © 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.