Week 5: Waging War: The Eastern Theater to Antietam/Citizen-Soldiers of the Civil War

Questions

1. An historian wrote that “An examination of the... leading... generals can yield an appreciation of the way each side fought the Civil War.” How is that assertion reflected in the careers of both Maj. Gen. George B. McClellan and Gen. Robert E. Lee?

2. Historian James McPherson says this: “The Civil War was pre-eminently a political war, a war of peoples rather than of professional armies.” Think about his statement in light of one or two of the following: war aims and strategies, the recruitment and enlistment of soldiers (both enlisted men and officers), the slavery issue, the First Battle of Bull Run, The Seven Days’ Battles, and the Battle of Antietam.

3. Historian Reid Mitchell contends that the “cause of the Union or of the South was bound up with one’s community, one’s home and family, and one’s God... that was why the Civil War volunteer not only submitted to his transformation into a soldier, but took pride in it.” How did the Civil War volunteer become a “soldier”?

Key Terms

- Robert E. Lee
- Thomas J. “Stonewall” Jackson
- George B. McClellan
- Clara Barton
- Sallie Putnam
- The Maryland Campaign
- Emancipation Proclamation
- Citizen-Soldier
- Volunteer Army

Building the Armies

Recruitment posters appealed to men’s sense of adventure and patriotism. Of course, recruiters did not hesitate to highlight the practical benefits of military service, like enlistment bounties.

The First Year in the Eastern Theater

The Union Army had upper hand in the Western theater early in the Civil War, while the Confederates generally had the advantage in the East. This included the Seven Days’ Battles, a series of six major engagements from June 25 to July 1, 1862, in which Robert E. Lee soundly defeated George B. McClellan.

We shall meet but we shall miss him. There will be one vacant chair. We shall linger to caress him, While we breathe our ev’ning prayer.

When a year ago we gathered, Jay was in his mild blue eye. But a golden cord is severed. And our hopes in ruin lie.

At our fireside, sad and lonely, Often will the bosom swell, At remembrance of the story, How our noble Willie fell.

How he strove to bear our banner, Thro’ the thickest of the fight, And uphold our country’s honor In the strength of manhood’s might.

Sleep today O’early fallen In thy green and narrow bed. Dirges from the pine and cypress Mingle with the tears we shed.

- “The Vacant Chair,” popular song about the home front, written November 1861

Gaines’ Mill
June 27

Beaver Dam Creek
June 26

Mechanicsville
May 5

Richmond

Seven Pines
May 31–June 1

Savage’s Station
June 29

White House

Drewry’s Bluff
May 15

Glendale
June 30

Malvern Hill
July 1

Hampton \\
York River

Harrington’s Landing

Williamsburg
May 5

James River

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Before the Battle of Antietam

Typically, Gen. Robert E. Lee (near left) remained on the defensive, well-aware that this made it easier for him to conserve his limited manpower and resources. However, Confederate grand strategy called for him to take the war to the Northern public whenever he felt he had a strong advantage in momentum. In view of his army’s successes in the Seven Days’ Battles and the Second Battle of Bull Run (Second Manassas) on August 28–30, as well as the timidity of Maj. Gen. George B. McClellan (far left), Lee decided the time was right.

Lee began his Maryland campaign in early September of 1862 with a series of small victories (top). This set the stage for the climactic Battle of Antietam, where Lee decided to take a daring gamble, dividing his army into two so that they might approach the enemy from multiple directions. Unbeknownst to Lee, a copy of his written orders—the “Lost Orders, as they became known—found their way into McClellan’s hands.
**Timeline**

6:00 a.m.: Hooker’s Federal Corps begins the attack but his left bogs down under artillery fire from Nicodemus Hill.

7:00 a.m.: Hood’s Confederates counterattack and stop I Corps’ advance at Miller Cornfield.

7:30-9:00 a.m.: Mansfield’s XII Corps attacks to the Dunker Church but fresh Confederate reinforcements drive them back.

10:00 a.m.: Sedgwick’s division of Sumner’s II Corps attacks into the West Woods but is flanked and repulsed with heavy losses.

10:00 a.m.-1:00 p.m.: Burnside’s IX Corps seize the bridge across the Antietam after repeated attempts to cross.

1:00 p.m.: Richardson’s and French’s division of Sumner’s II Corps capture Bloody lane and breach Lee’s center.

1:00 p.m.: Rodman’s division of IX Corps wades through Snavely’s Ford and flanks Toombs’ Confederates above the bridge.

3:00 p.m.: Burnside launches a general assault pushing Longstreet’s Confederates back to the outskirts of Sharpsburg.

4:00 p.m.: A.P. Hill’s Confederate division arrives from Harper’s Ferry just in time to cripple Burnside’s advance with a counterattack against the Federal left flank.

5:00 p.m.: Lee retreats, McClellan does not pursue.

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**Antietam: September 17, 1862**

We are in the midst of the most terrible battle of the war—perhaps of history...it will either be a great defeat or a most glorious victory. I think and hope that God will give us a glorious victory.

- George B. McClellan, Sep. 17, 1862

With virtually every advantage on his side—larger army, better armaments, fighting a defensive battle, foreknowledge of the enemy’s plans—George McClellan still struggled (top left). Particularly notorious were a series of assaults he ordered Maj. Gen. Ambrose Burnside to make against a bridge located on the Southern portion of the battlefield (center). Burnside could not hold the bridge—which would forever after bear his name—despite a frightful loss of life.

Ultimately, Lee was forced to retreat and to end his Maryland Campaign. This was enough of a victory to allow President Lincoln to issue the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation five days later. It was also enough of a draw that McClellan was removed from his command, never to be given another.

The Battle of Antietam remains the single bloodiest day in American history, with 12,401 casualties on the Northern side and 10,316 on the Southern side. This horrified the Northern public, particularly given that it was the first battle in which photographs of the carnage were captured, among them the image of Confederate dead awaiting burial (bottom). The most destructive battles prior to Antietam—Shiloh, for example—took place too far away from Northern photographers and their equipment to be practical as a subject.

To see thousands lying upon the field, some dead and others wounded, and to hear the cries of the wounded for help...some with an arm, leg, and even their nose or under jaw shot off; oh it is revolting to humanity. Oh, my God, can't this cruel strife be brought to an end?

- Lt. Thomas Taylor, Sep. 18, 1862
### Major Movements of the Eastern Theater, 1861-1865

**1861**

- **First Bull Run**

**1862**

- **Peninsular Campaign**
  - Siege of Yorktown
- **Seven Pines**
- **Seven Days’ Battles**
- **Jackson’s Valley Campaign**
  - Front Royal
  - First Winchester
  - Port Republic
  - Cross Keys
- **Second Bull Run Campaign**
  - Second Bull Run

**1863**

- **Chancellorsville Campaign**
  - Chancellorsville
- **Gettysburg Campaign**
  - Gettysburg

**1864**

- **Grant’s Overland Campaign**
  - Wilderness
  - Cold Harbor
  - Crossing of the James River
- **The Siege of Petersburg**
  - The Crater
- **Early’s and Sheridan’s Operations in the Shenandoah Valley**
  - New Market
  - Lynchburg
  - Monocacy
  - Second Kernstown
  - Third Winchester
  - Cedar Creek

**1865**

- **Appomattox Campaign**
  - Five Forks
  - Appomattox Court House
  - Lee Surrenders April 9, 1865
- **Sheridan Moves South**
  - Sheridan joins with Grant
- **Appomattox Campaign**
  - Five Forks
  - Appomattox Court House
  - Lee Surrenders April 9, 1865