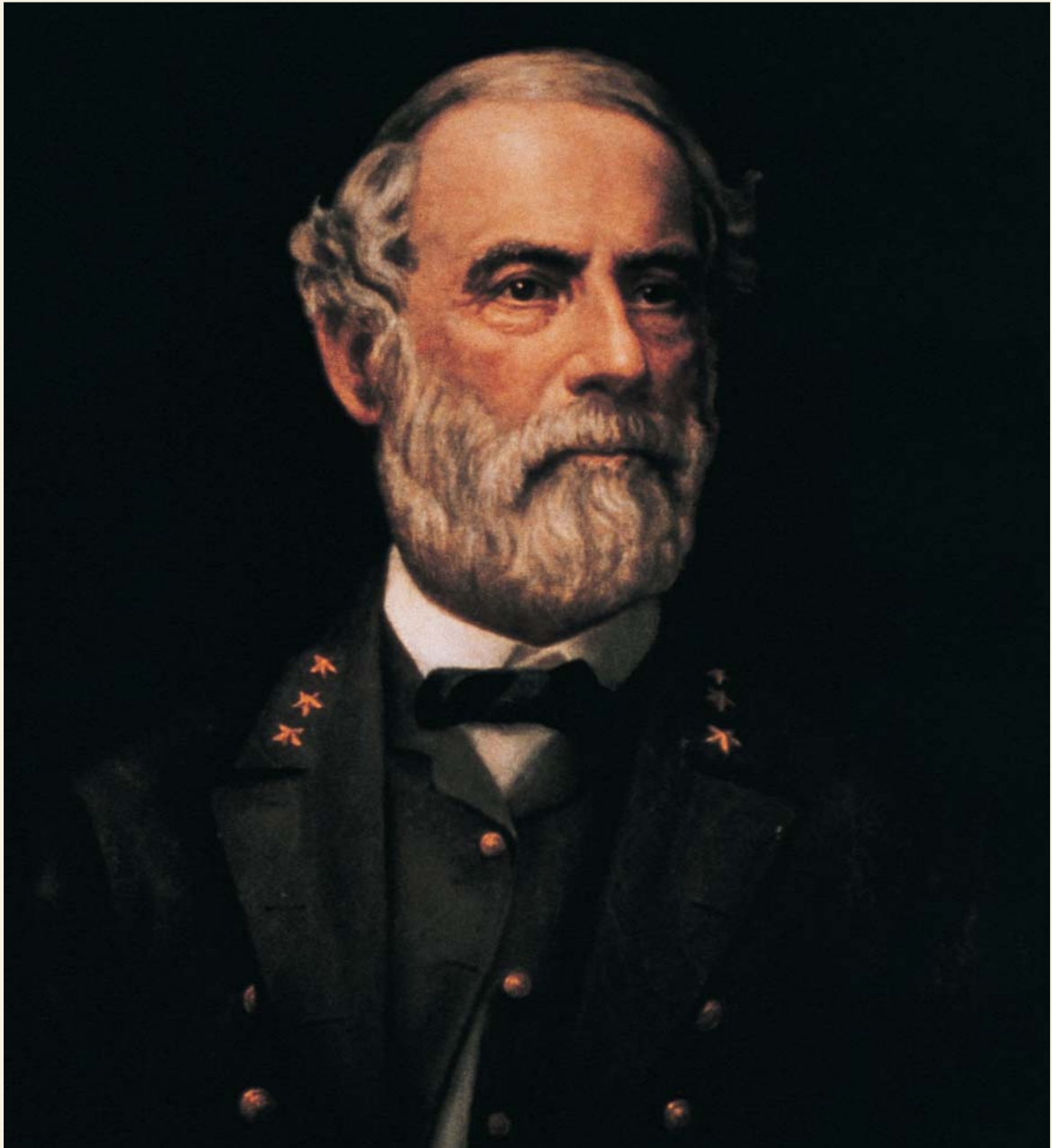


SECOND-GUESSING
BOBBY LEE

MARK GRIMSLEY

SECOND-GUESSING BOBBY LEE:

A COUNTERFACTUAL ASSESSMENT OF
LEE'S GENERALSHIP DURING THE OVERLAND CAMPAIGN



An 1870 portrait by Michael S. Nachtrieb. *Robert E. Lee Memorial Association, Stratford Hall Plantation.*

A MYSTERIOUS GENTLEMAN ARRIVES IN THE ENCAMPMENTS of the Army of Northern Virginia during the winter of 1864. He brings with him a remarkable new breech-loader—a thirty-shooter—which he proceeds to demonstrate to General

Robert E. Lee and his staff. At the conclusion of the demonstration, an impressed staff officer asks the man, “Mr. Rhodie, what do you call this rifle of yours? Is it a Rhodie, too? Most inventors name their products for themselves, do they not?”

“No, it’s not a Rhodie,” the man replies. “Give it its proper name, major. It’s an AK-47.”¹

So begins Harry Turtledove’s novel, *The Guns of the South*. Rhodie, it turns out, is a white supremacist from the future, intent upon ensuring the survival

of a white supremacist Confederacy. In this alternate history, a massive infusion of AK-47 assault weapons enables Lee's army to thrash the Army of the Potomac in the Wilderness, assume the offensive, and capture Washington, D.C. The Confederacy gains its independence.

Since all this occurs in the first chapters of the book, I haven't given much away. I have, however, presented almost the only means by which Robert E. Lee might have won his first campaign against Lieutenant General Ulysses S. Grant, at least if Douglas Southall Freeman can be believed. The chapter of his Pulitzer Prize-winning *R. E. Lee: A Biography* that reviews Lee's performance in the Overland Campaign identifies sixteen key decision points at which Lee potentially influenced the outcome.² In Freeman's view, Lee made most of these decisions correctly, and those he made incorrectly were not fatal. Freeman thinks that Grant, by contrast, made a number of bloody mistakes but nevertheless won by the unflinching application of superior force. His assessment of Grant's generalship is similar to that of Confederate artilleryman E. Porter Alexander: "[Grant] was no intellectual genius, but he understood arithmetic. . . . [He] knew that if one hundred thousand men couldn't [defeat Lee] two hundred thousand might, & that three hundred thousand would make quite sure to do it. That was the game which he deliberately set out to play."³ Grant in fact did *not* deliberately set out to wage a campaign of attrition, but for the sake of argument let's accept the assertion that he did. In essence, both Freeman and Alexander maintain that the strategy Grant selected was so robust that even serious mistakes on the part of Grant, and the most brilliant generalship on the part of Lee, could not defeat it. If such a view is correct, then only something as dramatic as an infusion of AK-47s could have changed the campaign's outcome.

But is such a view correct? And if so, how could we know? History is not a science experiment in which the variables can be adjusted and the experiment redone. Nevertheless, implicit in historical explanation is the idea that certain variables are crucial. Were it possible to change them, the historical outcome would also be changed. Thus, within the statement, "Slavery somehow caused the Civil War," is the implicit statement, "But

for slavery, the Civil War would not have occurred."

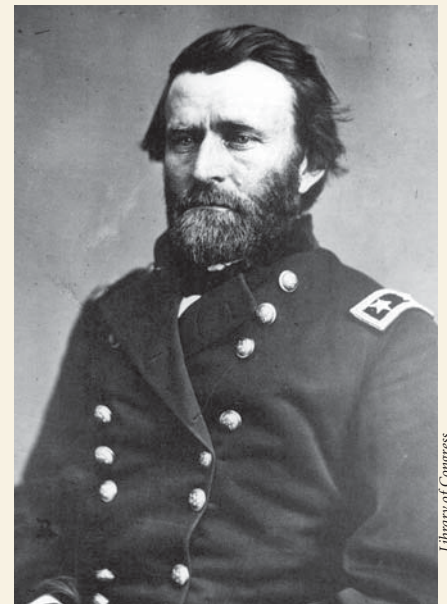
Popular history abounds with "what-ifs." What if Burgoyne had won the Battle of Saratoga? What if Stonewall Jackson had been present at Gettysburg? For the most part, this is the stuff of fun. Historians rarely take "what-if" scenarios seriously, and some are openly scornful. Nevertheless, as the British historian Hugh Trevor-Roper eloquently expressed it, "To assume that what happened was bound to happen is to beg the question of why it happened and to deprive history, at one blow, both of its lessons and its life. . . . If we are to study history as a living subject, not merely as a colored pageant, or an antiquarian chronicle, or a dogmatic scheme, we must . . . leave some room for the imagination."⁴

Partly for that reason, and partly because they realize that other fields—biology, political science, economics—routinely employ "what-if" thought experiments known as counterfactuals, some historians are edging toward greater acceptance of counterfactual history. The purpose is rarely to assert that if *this* had occurred instead of *that*, a specific alternate outcome would *definitely* have occurred. Rather, counterfactual history is simply a different but useful way to approach the same questions posed by "ordinary" historical methods. It is, in particular, a good corrective to the tendency to see developments as "overdetermined." "Few predicted World War I," writes political psychologist Philip E. Tetlock, a proponent of counterfactual theory, "the rise of the East Asian tigers, or the collapse of the Soviet Union but virtually everyone today—who claims professional competence in such matters—stands ready to trot out half a dozen 'fundamental' or 'structural' causes why these outcomes had to happen roughly at the time and in the manner they did. Indeed, given the overwhelming array of causal forces often invoked, it is difficult for some contemporary observers to resist the inference that the original historical players were a tad dense not to appreciate where events were heading."⁵

By the same token, it may seem to some present-day observers that Lee was "a tad dense" not to realize that by early 1864, if not sooner, the South had lost the war. Yet on the eve of the spring 1864, few observers regarded it as a foregone

conclusion that Grant would push Lee to the gates of Richmond and Petersburg but fail to destroy Lee's army, or that Lee would fail to defeat Grant as he had done previous offensives launched by the Army of the Potomac. One way, then, by which to evaluate Lee's generalship during the campaign is to emphasize this element of contingency, to employ counterfactual history—to ask "what-if" Lee had made certain decisions differently.

The real problem with counterfactual history, proponents maintain, is not that there is anything inherently wrong with the approach but rather that it is often done so sloppily. To make it a useful tool for examining the past requires adherence to rules, in much the same way as is true for the "factual" approach. Political scientist Richard Ned Lebow offers a number of criteria that a good counterfactual must meet, and I will try to follow them here.⁶



Lieutenant General Ulysses S. Grant

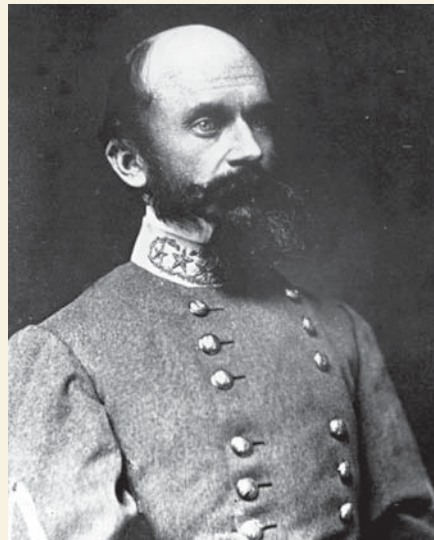
One of these criteria asks the researcher to be as clear as possible about both the antecedent (the variable that is to be changed) and the consequent (the projected outcome). Douglas Southall Freeman begins the chapter that reviews Lee's generalship during the Overland Campaign in a counterfactual mood, and provides us with a good, reasonable consequent. Picturing his subject ensconced in his headquarters tent at Petersburg in the summer of 1864, Freeman writes, "There must have been rare hours when [Lee] could look back and ask himself whether anything that he might have done, or left undone, after May 4, could

have saved his army from the ordeal of the long and ghastly siege.”⁷ To put it another way, how could Lee have recovered the operational freedom that Grant took from him as soon as the campaign began? How could he have achieved at least the same degree of victory over Grant that he had earlier won over George B. McClellan, John Pope, and Joseph Hooker?

Counterfactuals can be of two kinds: “plausible world” counterfactuals, intended to impress readers as realistic, which must work within the framework of what was historically possible; and “miracle” counterfactuals—like the sudden influx of AK-47s that opens *The Guns of the South*. Although proponents of counterfactual theory argue that both kinds of thought experiment are useful, we will stick with the “plausible world” variety. Lee will receive no AK-47s or B-52s. Instead, we’ll consider three possible decision points where Lee chose one way and might have chosen another. These aren’t the only available decision points—Freeman, to repeat, listed sixteen, and one could easily add to his list—but they should be enough to give us a thoughtful way to assess Lee’s generalship. Two of these are based on the recognition that Lee confronted a significant numerical superiority on the part of his opponent (who for the sake of expedience I will refer to as Grant, although technically the Army of the Potomac was led by Major General George G. Meade), and that Lee’s best hope for victory rested upon (a) gaining success early, when his army was at its strongest; or (b) gaining a sizeable influx of reinforcements—by realistic means—that would have evened the odds. The last of these will address a different sort of decision: What if Lee had decided to replace a key subordinate sooner than he did historically?

The first decision point occurred on the eve of the campaign. Lee had his three infantry corps positioned in a triangle, with the primary mission of defending the key railroad junction at Gordonsville, where the Virginia Central Railroad (which linked Richmond with the vital Shenandoah Valley) intersected the Orange & Alexandria Railroad, which in turn offered the Federals an obvious line of communications if they tried to advance south. The Third Corps, under Lieutenant General A.P. Hill, was behind

the Rapidan River near Orange Court House. Lieutenant General Richard S. Ewell’s Second Corps was behind the Rapidan east of Orange Court House, more or less near the hamlet of Verdierville. The First Corps under Lieutenant General James Longstreet was encamped near the hamlet of Mechancisville, on the Virginia Central Railroad a few miles southeast of Gordonsville. Longstreet was Lee’s most experienced senior lieutenant and, after the death of Lieutenant General Thomas J. “Stonewall” Jackson in May 1863, the one on whom he most relied.

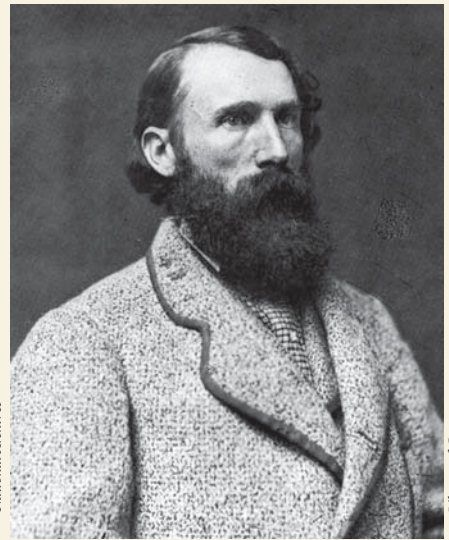


Lieutenant General Richard S. Ewell

On May 2 Lee met with his senior officers atop Clark’s Mountain, an eminence in Ewell’s sector that offered a good view of the Rapidan River valley and the Union encampments around Culpeper Court House. By this time Lee was certain that Grant would not strike directly at his army. Instead the Union general-in-chief would try to turn or envelop Lee’s position—go around it or hit it on one end or the other. One possibility was to envelop Lee’s left, but Lee thought it much more likely that Grant would move around his right, crossing the Rapidan at Germanna and Ely’s Fords. Once across the river, Grant would immediately enter the Wilderness. Lee predicted to his subordinates that Grant would do this, and explained that his own plan would be to strike Grant in the Wilderness, where Grant’s superiority in men and artillery would be partially offset by the dense thickets, which would confine the fighting to the few open fields in that region.

In light of Lee’s expectations, critics have faulted Lee for leaving Longstreet’s

First Corps so distant from the probable battlefield. The Second and Third Corps could reach the Wilderness quickly—in about a day—but the First Corps was nearly two days’ march distant. As matters turned out, the Second and Third Corps became engaged with Grant’s army around midday on May 5, but the First Corps did not arrive until the morning of May 6—and when it did, Hill’s Third Corps was on the verge of destruction. Even so the First Corps was able to unleash a powerful counterattack that relieved the pressure on the Third Corps and might have achieved greater results

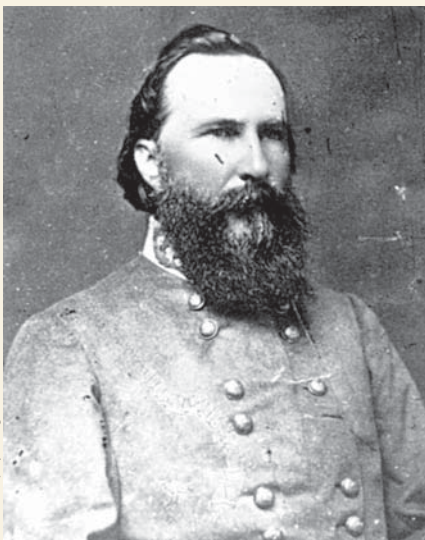


Lieutenant General A.P. Hill

if Longstreet had not been seriously wounded at a critical moment.

In his postwar memoirs, the First Corps chief of artillery, E. Porter Alexander, regretted that Lee had positioned the corps so far from the likely scene of the battlefield. He reasoned that the Confederate army did very well with the force with which it was able to confront Grant on May 5, and that with 11,200 additional infantry—the number in the two First Corps divisions with Longstreet—Lee might well have won the battle outright.⁸ Gordon C. Rhea, in *The Battle of the Wilderness*, endorsed Alexander’s opinion and went further, arguing that Lee should also have posted cavalry close to the river and contested the crossings. He was very hard on the Confederate chieftain: “*Inexplicably, Lee neglected to take any steps calculated to influence [Grant’s] advance or to ensure that the Confederates would reach the Wilderness ahead of him. . . . [C]avalry patrols were instructed to sound the alarm on [Grant’s] approach, but they*

were not expected to offer any serious obstacle to the Union army's progress. No attempt was made to fortify the Rapidan crossings or to hold rebel infantry in readiness to offer resistance. And not a single Confederate unit was ordered toward the Wilderness to get a jump on the northerners." (Emphasis supplied.) By leaving the pace of the Federal movements to chance, Rhea continued, Lee made a gamble that "exposed the Army of Northern Virginia to fearsome risks. . . . By failing to take steps to ensure that his army would meet the enemy on advantageous terms,



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Lieutenant General James Longstreet *Lee was courting disaster.*" (Again, emphasis supplied.)⁹

Taken at face value, Rhea accused Lee of culpable negligence on the basis of (a) hindsight and (b) the fact that evidence of Lee's reasoning in making his pre-campaign dispositions has not survived. But it is a long jump from absence of evidence to evidence of absence—in this case, that Lee's accustomed thoroughness was absent. Are we really to believe that Rhea's alternatives never occurred to Lee? Perhaps the better way to proceed would be to assume that Lee was a competent commander who did in fact make his pre-campaign arrangements with care.

On the basis of this assumption, we could at least make plausible guesses about why Lee did what he did and omitted what he omitted. For instance, if Lee *wanted* his opponent to enter the Wilderness, it was probably a good idea to make the move as attractive as possible. Posting cavalry to oppose the Rapidan crossing, and shifting infantry closer to the desired Wilderness battlefield, would be

a very good way to telegraph to Grant that Lee expected him to enter the Wilderness, thereby increasing the chance that Grant would decide to do something else. (Another rule concerning counterfactuals is: It may not be assumed that if one historical variable is changed, other variables that depend on it will remain constant.)

Even so, it does seem possible that Lee could have placed Longstreet within a day's march of the battlefield without arousing too much suspicion. So why didn't he? We know that Longstreet was at Mechanicsville for a reason—to have immediate access to the Virginia Central Railroad in case it became necessary to shift him to another threatened sector in the state, particularly the eastern approaches to Richmond, where Lee had correctly judged a Federal attack would be made. In that case, Alexander wrote, Lee could have kept the First Corps near the railroad, but farther east, say near Louisa Court House.¹⁰

Unlike Rhea, however, Alexander did not think Lee was negligent. Instead he opined: "I think this is but one more illustration of one of the inherent weaknesses of our army in its lack of an abundance of trained & professional soldiers in the staff corps to make constant study of all matters of detail. The enemy were far ahead of [us] in that, & they owed their final success to the precision with which they combined some of their great movements, which are models of logistics—the science of moving armies."¹¹ It's an interesting point, and one that implicitly faults Lee for not taking greater pains to create a more effective staff. If Lee was negligent, then his negligence lay in assuming he could think of everything himself.

Whatever the reason that Longstreet's corps was at Mechanicsville, suppose that it *had* been placed within a day's march of the prospective battlefield. How might it have influenced the combat in the Wilderness? Rhea and Alexander believe that if the troops that fought on May 5 were able to achieve good results, more troops would have achieved even better results. This is reasonable, but it is also an example of linear thinking: small inputs produce small outcomes, large inputs produce large ones. A great deal of historical explanation is really done by way of implicit or explicit analogy and metaphor, and some of the basic meta-

phors regarding causation are borrowed from Newtonian physics. Complexity or chaos theory invites us to extend our metaphoric palette to encompass nonlinearity—the idea that small changes in inputs can produce huge changes in outputs. This is the well-known "butterfly effect"—the idea that a butterfly flapping its wings in the Amazon River basin can produce a typhoon in the far reaches of the Pacific Ocean. It is also exemplified by the famous lines:

For want of a nail the shoe
was lost
For want of a shoe the horse
was lost
For want of a horse the rider
was lost
For want of a rider the
message was lost
For want of a message the
battle was lost
For want of a battle the
kingdom was lost
And all for the want of a
horseshoe nail.

In the actual battle of the Wilderness, several instances occurred in which the intervention of a few hundred troops halted an attack by a force several times larger. There was also an instance in which the *absence* of a Confederate division—that of George E. Pickett, which was over fifty miles from the battlefield—significantly retarded Federal movements because Union intelligence could not find it but it was rumored to be approaching the Union army's left flank. I do not say Longstreet's earlier arrival would not have benefited Lee. Linear thinking is not wrong; after all, the Apollo program sent men to the moon and back on the basis of Newtonian physics. I merely point out that it would not *necessarily* have improved matters.

Even if we assume that it would, it is worth asking more specifically how Lee would have employed Longstreet's two divisions had they been available to him on May 5. We know that he gave orders to Ewell and Hill not to bring on a general engagement until Longstreet arrived, and the two corps present on May 5 achieved their success by standing on the defensive and delivering adroit local counterattacks. But we also know that given Lee's preference for the offensive, if possible he would have used Longstreet's troops, directly or by freeing up other troops, to launch a massive coun-

terattack of the sort he had previously delivered in the battles of the Seven Days, Second Manassas, and Chancellorsville.

The Chancellorsville counterstroke is particularly instructive. Often considered Lee's greatest triumph, it was fought just a few miles east of the Wilderness battlefield and stopped the Union spring 1863 campaign in its tracks. Indeed, it comes very close to replicating precisely the sort of counterattack we are trying to imagine. Yet it came nowhere near destroying the Army of the Potomac, then under Major General Joseph Hooker. Instead, the Union army took up a strong defensive position with both flanks firmly anchored on the Rapidan and Rappahannock Rivers. Lee then wanted to launch a frontal assault on this position, despite the fact that the Federals had entrenched, but Hooker retreated before he could do so.

Could Lee have broken through and destroyed the enemy army for good and all? Certainly he was furious to have lost the opportunity. But more likely a frontal assault upon an entrenched enemy would have ended in a bloody repulse. Lee was fortunate that Hooker quit the battlefield. He had in essence beaten the enemy commander, not the enemy army. Put Grant in Hooker's place and Grant would have stayed, as he did under far worse circumstances at Shiloh. Most likely, given his superiority in numbers and his advantage in having uncontested control of the Chesapeake Bay and Virginia's tidal estuaries, he would have eventually found a way to turn Lee's right and continue his offensive, as he did repeatedly in the historical campaign.

On balance, then, I am skeptical of the idea that if Lee had positioned Longstreet more aggressively just before the campaign began, the resulting battle would likely have achieved Lee's aim of defeating Grant and gaining the initiative. Another rule for a good counterfactual asks the researcher to make explicit the historical interpretations and assumptions on which his analysis rests, and I will state mine now. My two biggest assumptions are these: Lee could not have mastered Grant psychologically no matter what he did, and Grant's superiority in numbers and resources, coupled with the resilience of Civil War armies, would have enabled him to absorb the worst blow Lee could deliver and keep going.

The other decision point at which Lee may have had a chance to defeat Grant

occurred two weeks into the campaign—and it is one that Freeman, incidentally, does not consider. Lee and Grant were at Spotsylvania. Both sides had lost heavily, Grant's army perhaps more so than Lee: a mid-May field return showed that, excluding the army's cavalry corps, which was raiding to the south, and recent reinforcements, the Army of the Potomac was down to 56,000, just sixty-four percent of the infantry and artillery with which Grant had crossed the Rapidan on May 4.¹²

Miles to the south, the Union Army of the James, led by Major General Benjamin F. Butler, had landed at Bermuda Hundred, a peninsula formed by the James and Appomattox Rivers. From that point, Butler could threaten the cities of Richmond and Petersburg. He in fact had orders to go for Richmond. Luckily for the Confederates, Butler was a non-professional of limited tactical ability, appointed to high command because of his political clout. Opposing Butler was General Pierre Gustave Toutant Beauregard.

Butler had about 33,000 men. When he first landed at Bermuda Hundred the Confederates had almost no one in position to oppose him, but thanks to their rail net and Butler's cautious initial moves, by mid-May the Confederates had 20,000 troops facing him. With that number, Beauregard believed he could neutralize Butler, but he thought it would take another 15,000 troops to win a decisive victory. Those 15,000 men could only come from Lee's army.

Beauregard thought the gamble worth taking. Have Lee send the needed 15,000 at once, he argued, then have Lee fall back swiftly to the Richmond defenses where he could fend off Grant's much larger army. As soon as the new troops arrived, Beauregard would attack, destroy Butler's army, then turn with his full command, join up with Lee, and together deliver a crushing blow against Grant's army. Without pausing to commit the plan to paper, Beauregard sent a staff officer, Colonel W. H. Stevens, to Richmond with instructions to lay it verbally before President Jefferson Davis or his military adviser, General Braxton Bragg. Both officials eventually heard the scheme and went to Beauregard's headquarters to discuss it, but purely as a courtesy, since both had already rejected the plan. Bragg, in fact, had seven different objections, the most important of which

were that Lee's army could not retreat such a distance (sixty miles) without grave danger and that the withdrawal was unnecessary: Beauregard's present force was ample to crush Butler "if promptly and vigorously used." Beauregard did attack, in the battle of Drewry's Bluff on May 16, but as he predicted, he lacked the strength to destroy Butler's army outright.¹³

Here I need what is termed an "enabling counterfactual": What if Davis had referred Beauregard's scheme to Lee? That allows me to proceed to the main counterfactual: What if Lee endorsed the plan and it was implemented?

In that event, Lee would have fallen back from Spotsylvania, as he did anyway just six days after the plan was discussed. Beauregard's plan called for Lee to withdraw sixty miles into the Richmond entrenchments, but Beauregard did not know, as Lee surely did, that a good defensive position was available behind the North Anna River, where high bluffs on the southern bank handily dominate the northern bank. The North Anna line would have met Bragg's objection about the danger of a sixty-mile retreat—historically, Lee was able to fall back to the North Anna with no trouble—and it would have served admirably as a place to fend off Grant while

Opposite (left to right): Major General Joseph Hooker, Major General Benjamin F. Butler, and General P.G.T. Beauregard. Below: Confederate earthworks at Fort Darling on Drewry's Bluff overlooking the James River. Beauregard attacked Butler in the wooded country behind the fort.



Beauregard eliminated Butler. Since Butler is widely considered one of the worst generals of the war, and since he would have fought with his back to a tidal estuary, with no means of escape aside from what few troops might be able to scramble aboard transport ships, I think the chances of Beauregard achieving his objective are substantial.

Such a disaster would have caused considerable damage to Grant's military reputation—after all, he had ordered Butler into that position, which in hindsight would have seemed like asking Butler to stick his head in a sausage grinder. The defeat, involving the loss of an army belonging to a general who was a darling among Radical Republicans, might even have diminished Lincoln's chances of renomination at the party convention in early June.

These potential ramifications, though interesting, do not touch upon the “consequent” under direct consideration: whether Lee, reinforced by Beauregard's victorious forces, could then have defeated Grant. The situation had the “Beauregard option” been adopted

would have developed rapidly and in a variety of potential ways. Grant would surely have pursued Lee and looked for a chance to attack him. If he got a clear glimpse of the Confederate gambit, he might have tried to reinforce Butler, using Federal sea power to counter the rail transfer of Lee's troops to Beauregard. Or he might have hit Lee hard in the hope of destroying Lee's reduced army. The elimination of Lee's army would not only have nullified Beauregard's counterstroke, it would probably have been fatal to the defense of Richmond. Basically, then, the plan Beauregard proposed involved creating a very fluid situation and betting that the Confederates could capitalize on it more effectively than the Federals.

Because of the situation's fluidity, it is unprofitable to speculate about specific scenarios—the possibilities would soon have multiplied exponentially. It is perhaps more useful to think about the major structural considerations that would have shifted the balance of favorable “outcome sets” toward one side or another.

First, the odds of Grant decisively beating Lee in a single battle were slim. Lee was a good defensive commander against even long odds, as his handling of the Battle of Antietam illustrates.

Second, Civil War armies were inherently resilient. Their destruction occurred through encirclement and siege (think of Fort Donelson and Vicksburg) rather than open battle. Nashville is usually considered the only time a major Civil War army was more or less destroyed in open battle.

Third, the Confederates could shift troops faster by rail than the Federals could by river—even assuming equivalent travel speeds, the river lines of communication were several times longer than the railroad lines. This would have given the Confederates the major advantage of having interior lines.

Fourth, Beauregard was arguably among the better Civil War generals, Butler among the worst.

Fifth, Butler occupied an unusually vulnerable position, given that his line of retreat was cut off by the James River estuary.

Taken together, these key factors favored the Confederates.

The only wild card is that at this point in the campaign, Major General Philip H. Sheridan with 10,000 Union cavalry was at Haxall's Landing, on the north bank of the James River a few miles east of Bermuda Hundred. Provided that Grant recognized the danger to Butler fast enough, he could have transferred Sheridan to Butler's aid by river transports shuttling the short distance up the James River estuary. That would have given Butler a good chance of fending off Beauregard long enough to do what he did historically—barricade himself behind a belt of entrenchments between the James and Appomattox Rivers.

The utility of this counterfactual is not so much whether Beauregard's plan would have worked. Rather, it prompts reflection on a question that might not otherwise get raised: If Beauregard could come up with such a plan, why didn't Lee?

We have no documentation to suggest that Lee considered such a plan and rejected it. But that should not lead us to assume that he never pondered the option. We know from other events—for example, the encouragement that Lee gave Stonewall Jackson, while Lee was Davis' military adviser in 1862, to under-



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take the Valley Campaign—that Lee understood the exploitation of interior lines and the value of using victory over a smaller force to create the conditions for victory over a larger one. We also know from the record of Lee’s whole career that he did not mind taking risks, even long ones, if a chance existed for a big pay-off. And we know that the development Lee most feared was getting backed into the Richmond entrenchments and besieged. Taking these factors together, it seems to me that it would be surprising if Lee did not at some point toy with an idea similar to Beauregard’s.

If he did, he apparently did not think the plan favored the Confederates more than the Federals. Or he may have thought he had an even better chance to defeat Grant from the position he already occupied at Spotsylvania. Or perhaps regardless of the potential merit of falling back toward Richmond temporarily in terms of assisting Beauregard, retreat involved unacceptable trade-offs. If, for example, Lee had to retreat precipitately from the North Anna line in order to parry an attack by Grant, he probably could not have prevented Grant from gaining control of the Virginia Central Railroad, which in turn would have denied Richmond and Lee’s army easy access to the grain-rich Shenandoah Valley. And if he had to retreat into the Richmond trench system, he may well have considered the most likely outcome would be a siege, especially if he harbored doubts about Beauregard’s ability to gain a *complete* triumph over Butler.

The efficacy of the “Beauregard option,” then, likely turned in large measure upon the perceived quality of Beauregard’s generalship. That suggests another key dimension in assessing Lee’s own generalship: not just the decisions he made with the troops at hand, but also his decisions regarding key subordinates.

Beauregard was not under Lee’s command during the campaign, so Lee had neither the option of taking personal command over Beauregard nor of placing someone in charge in whom he may have held greater confidence. However, during the course of the campaign, Lee made numerous personnel changes within the Army of Northern Virginia. Many were thrust upon him: fully thirty-seven percent of the brigade, division, and corps commanders who served with Lee during the campaign were killed,

wounded, or captured. Several changes involved senior personnel. Longstreet’s wounding in the Wilderness on May 6 and the death of cavalry commander “Jeb” Stuart after the Battle of Yellow Tavern on May 11 necessitated the replacement of both men. Lee selected Major General Richard H. Anderson to take Longstreet’s place, while Major General Wade Hampton succeeded Stuart. Anderson and Hampton served Lee adequately, even ably, for the balance of the campaign, but Lee clearly would have preferred to have kept the services of Longstreet, “his old war horse,” and Stuart, “the eyes of the army.” One senior command change, however, was not forced upon Lee by enemy action. On May 29 he wrote an order relieving Lieutenant General Richard S. Ewell and turning his Second Corps over to Major General Jubal A. Early.

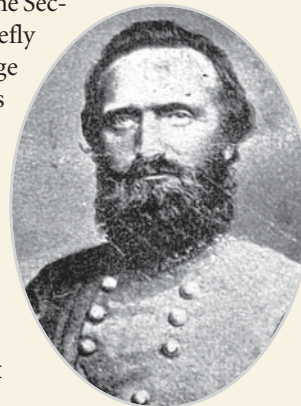
Lee made the change as tactfully as he could, taking advantage of a period in which Ewell fell sick. Lee himself became seriously ill during the course of the campaign, and A. P. Hill’s health had also collapsed seriously enough that a few days before he took charge of the Second Corps, Early had briefly led the Third. That change had been temporary. As

soon as Hill reported himself fit, Lee restored him to command of his corps. Ewell’s relief was permanent, as Ewell discovered when he, too, reported himself fit for duty. Lee blandly told him to take further time off for recuperation, and although Ewell remained with the army for several days to demonstrate his good health, Lee firmly retained Early in command of the Second Corps.

Why did Lee lose confidence in Ewell? According to historian Gary W. Gallagher, Ewell’s performance had disappointed Lee almost from the time Ewell replaced Stonewall Jackson in charge of the Second Corps ten days after Jackson’s death following the Battle of Chancellorsville. In Lee’s view, Ewell had turned in a mediocre performance during the Gettysburg Campaign and took sick leave too often, thanks to his amputated leg. Ewell’s performance during the Battle of the Wilderness did not impress Lee, either. And his behavior during the near-disaster on May 12, when Union forces pierced the Mule Shoe salient, offended Lee to his core. Officers in the Second Corps noted “a strong contrast in the

Lieutenant General Thomas J. “Stonewall” Jackson (left) and President Jefferson Davis.

Below: Union soldiers cut a road along the south bank of the North Anna at Jericho Mills.



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demeanor” of Ewell and Lee as both men struggled to rally the troops and restore the line. Ewell seemed off-balance, filled the air with obscenities, and denounced those who were running away as cowards. Lee maintained his composure, spoke encouragingly, and seemed much more effective at steadying the men. Finally Lee told his subordinate, “General Ewell, you must restrain yourself; how can you expect to control these men if you have lost control of yourself? If you cannot repress your excitement, you had better retire.”¹⁴ Following a similar episode on May 19, Gallagher believes, Lee made up his mind that Ewell must be relieved, though it took ten days for him to implement the decision.

Judged by his performance, Early was a definite improvement over Ewell, a difference most clearly evident in his bold raid down the Shenandoah Valley to the outskirts of Washington in July 1864 and his tough, though ultimately losing, defense of the Valley against Sheridan in the late summer and autumn of that year. During the Overland Campaign, however, Early’s abilities did not clearly break through. Although Lee quickly made use of him to undertake counterblows against Grant’s army shortly before the Battle of Cold Harbor, by that point the Second Corps, like the rest of Lee’s army, was too weary and had lost too heavily to make an effective attack. But what if Lee had relieved Ewell earlier in the campaign—say, after his shocking lapse in composure on May 12?

A “what-if” of this sort is really too murky to make an effective counterfactual, at least in the sense that there is no satisfactory way, in this instance, to go from “antecedent” (Early takes command of the Second Corps on May 12) to “consequent” (Lee defeats Grant). As a thought experiment, its utility lies in asking us to question Lee’s tough-mindedness in making hard choices about subordinates. Lee has often been criticized, even by admirers, for being too soft-hearted. In an essay that addresses Lee’s handling of Hill and Ewell during the Overland Campaign, Gary Gallagher concludes that such criticism is mistaken. Lee, he believes, did not shy away from confrontations with subordinates. That is correct up to a point, yet Gallagher’s own presentation suggests that a gap of at least ten and perhaps seven-

teen days elapsed between the time Lee decided Ewell must be replaced and the time he actually did so.

Against this, the only ready defense—though it is a good one—would seem to be that for part of this period, Early was in temporary command of Hill’s Third Corps. But this raises the question of whether, at that time, Early was really the sole remaining general capable of exercising corps command. If so, it suggests that Lee was doing a less than adequate job of developing his subordinates.

Ultimately, however, the game of second-guessing Bobby Lee is sterile and even a little crass. One can certainly locate numerous moments in the campaign when he might have done better, but such is the nature of war. “In war,” notes the Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz, “everything is simple, but the simplest thing is very difficult.” On the whole, Lee came surprisingly close to maximizing the numbers and defensive advantages he possessed. Even if he had arranged to have Longstreet’s two divisions on the battlefield on May 5, rather than a day later, it is hard to imagine him landing a counterblow against Grant hard enough to compel Grant to turn back. An arguably better opportunity, the “Beauregard option,” may have been available for exploitation at mid-month, but the potential success of such a venture would have depended all too greatly upon Beauregard’s generalship, and Lee, if consulted, would probably have joined Davis and Bragg in preferring to rely on his own abilities rather than Beauregard’s. As for the military abilities of key subordinates within the Army of Northern Virginia, it would appear from the way in which he held on to Ewell that perhaps Lee regarded generals with undeniable capacity for corps command as being in short supply.

There remains, perhaps, one final counterfactual: Suppose that, by whatever means, Lee *had* succeeded in wresting the initiative from Grant. As Michael Palmer points out in his provocative study *Lee Moves North*, Lee’s record on the strategic offensive—Antietam, Gettysburg, Bristoe Station—is a zero-for-three series of defeats.¹⁵ Against McClellan in the first instance, and Meade in the other two, Lee escaped destruction. But against Grant? □

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NOTES:

1. Harry Turtledove, *The Guns of the South* (New York, 1992), p. 12.
2. Douglas Southall Freeman, *R.E. Lee: A Biography*, 4 vols. (New York, 1935), vol. 3, pp. 426-47.
3. Gary W. Gallagher (ed.), *Fighting for the Confederacy: The Personal Recollections of General Edward Porter Alexander* (Chapel Hill, 1989), p. 346.
4. Qtd. in Philip E. Tetlock, “The Logic and Psycho-logic of Counterfactual Thought Experiments” (unpublished paper in author’s possession), 2. A revised version of this chapter will shortly be published in Philip E. Tetlock, Richard Ned Lebow, and Geoffrey Parker (eds.), *Unmaking the West: Explorations of Alternative Histories and Counterfactual Worlds* (New York: Columbia University Press, forthcoming).
5. Tetlock, “The Logic and Psychologic of Counterfactual Thought Experiments,” 4.
6. For the complete list, see Richard Ned Lebow, “Counterfactual Thought Experiments: A Necessary Research Tool.” This essay, which in revised form will also appear in *Unmaking the West*, is available online at http://www2.rz.hu-berlin.de/gesint/lehre/2002_2003/counterfact/lebow_ch2.pdf (Accessed April 5, 2004).
7. Freeman, *R. E. Lee*, vol. 3, p. 426.
8. Edward Porter Alexander, *Military Memoirs of a Confederate: A Critical Narrative* (1905; reprint., New York, 1993), pp. 497-98; Gallagher (ed.), *Fighting for the Confederacy*, 348-49.
9. Gordon C. Rhea, *The Battle of the Wilderness, May 5-6, 1864* (Baton Rouge, 1994), pp. 28-29.
10. Alexander, *Military Memoirs*, p. 498.
11. Gallagher (ed.), *Fighting for the Confederacy*, 349.
12. *War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 128 vols. (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), Series I, vol. 36, pt. 1, p. 71.
13. For a more extended discussion of the Bermuda Hundred Campaign, including Beauregard’s proposal, see Mark Grimsley, *And Keep Moving On: The Virginia Campaign, May-June 1864* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), pp. 118-28.
14. Qtd. in Gary W. Gallagher, *Lee and His Army in Confederate History* (Chapel Hill, 2001), p. 204.
15. Michael Palmer, *Lee Moves North: Robert E. Lee on the Offensive* (New York, 1998).