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## Illustrations

*following page 164*

Robert E. Lee

Thomas Jonathan Jackson

Nathaniel Banks

John Pope

George and Mary Ellen McClellan

Cedar Mountain Battlefield

Attack by Sykes's division at the Railroad Embankment,  
Second Manassas

Railroad bridge at Harpers Ferry

Lower (Burnside's) Bridge at Antietam

## Preface

Yankees called it Cedar Run; Rebels termed it Cedar Mountain. Confederates used the name Second Manassas; their opponents remembered it as Second Bull Run. Both sides spoke of Chantilly or Ox Hill, while Confederates preferred the name Boonsboro to denote what Federals referred to as South Mountain. Both combatants called the capture of Harpers Ferry a crucial event worthy of but one name, but Northerners memorialized the bloodiest single day in American history as Antietam while their southern foe stuck to the name Sharpsburg. However designated, these events come to us today as part of a critical Civil War epoch. It stretched from the Virginia Peninsula, through the piedmont, to the hills of western Maryland. The period covered July to November 1862. The story began quietly, the principal characters almost supine. It built slowly through battle—Cedar Mountain, Second Manassas, Chantilly, South Mountain, Harpers Ferry—reaching a crescendo at Antietam only to recede once more in the quiet of death and renewal. Yet throughout, it was a pivotal moment in time.

As part of the Great Campaigns of the Civil War series, this volume treats a period that Professor James A. Rawley once styled “perhaps the most acute crisis of the war.” He suggested that the late summer and autumn of 1862 provided “a multiple crisis—military, diplomatic, and political.” He cited (a) the triple military offensives of a resurgent Confederacy, (b) European overtures toward mediation and intervention on behalf of that emerging nation and the ramifications of border state allegiance, and (c) northern popular discontent with military failure, the high cost of waging war, and the abridgement of civil liberties on the eve of off-year elections. Although Rawley treated emancipation as a separate issue, that too was an integral part of the

crisis.<sup>1</sup> He also might have included the changing nature of the conflict itself, passing as it did in this period from “soft” or conciliatory confrontation to “hard” or relentless subjugation. However defined, the period proved a decisive moment in the four-year struggle of national unification.

This book focuses on the major rollback of the Union offensives of Generals George B. McClellan and John Pope in Virginia and Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee’s subsequent counter-thrust that carried Confederate fortunes from the gates of Richmond to Union territory on the upper Potomac in Maryland. In short, it features the apex or high tide of Rebel fortunes at this stage of the war. Resurgent Union power parried the Confederate move, if not brilliantly at least sufficiently so that Abraham Lincoln might issue a presidential directive that forever changed both the course of the Civil War and eventually the future direction of human rights in a reunified country. The Confederate counteroffensive failed to deliver the resounding proof of sovereignty necessary to gain European intervention in an increasingly bloody struggle. Accelerating mobilization of northern will and power did convince British and French leaders not to join in overt intervention. Even then, it was a remarkably close-run thing.

The story has essentially four parts. In the first part, Lee determined to drive an invader from his native Virginia and redeem the northern part of the Old Dominion. The people and events speak to this theme, associated with the dramatic engagements at Cedar Mountain, Second Manassas, and Chantilly. They underscore Lee’s vow to punish Gen. John Pope and his perpetrators of a harsh war on innocent civilians. From the Tidewater to the Potomac, battles and maneuvers reflected new leadership at work on both sides. Buffeted by the coalescing field generalship of Lee and his chief lieutenants, James Longstreet and Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson, Pope’s headlong rush into central Virginia (only tepidly supported by his uncooperative partner, McClellan) represented disparate personalities and leadership styles. Moreover, a new general in chief in Washington, Henry W. Halleck, plus mounting pressure from abolitionist politicians for stronger suppression of the rebellion caused problems for President Lincoln and his administration. Lee’s classic triumph at Second Manassas—perhaps his greatest battle—capped a two-month operation whereby he and his army relieved pressure on Richmond and chased their opponents back to the suburbs of Washington.

Still, Lee and his Confederates could not annihilate the Federal armies or attack the enemy capital. An unheralded but key setback at Chantilly reflected that salient fact. So a second part of the story encompasses Lee's first ill-fated attempt to carry the war across the Potomac. The invasion of loyal border slave-states like Maryland in the east and Kentucky in the west formed part of a grand Confederate strategy. High stakes attended Lee's offensive into Maryland (as well as those of Braxton Bragg and other Confederate generals in northern Mississippi aimed at west Tennessee and southwestern Kentucky). In each case, southern success hinged partially on the speed of Confederate moves but also on the recovery of their antagonists. Lee failed to anticipate how rapidly McClellan, reappointed to unified field command, could rejuvenate defeated Federal forces around Washington and begin the pursuit that would end on the banks of the Antietam. Discovery of the famous "Lost Order" produced a foot-race to save Harpers Ferry, sharp fighting on South Mountain, and, finally, the seminal day of carnage at Antietam. McClellan's subsequent failure of nerve to destroy his opponent provided a strangely pyrrhic victory in turn. Underpinning the actions of an overstretched Lee and the ever-hesitant (yet confident) McClellan lay political and logistical issues and the omnipresent question of defending Washington, not to mention the anxious waiting by Americans and the issue of European intervention. Above all, the deceptive "Lorelei" of Maryland secession (together with acute resource issues) diverted Lee's celerity of movement and singularity of purpose on enemy soil. Controversial decisions on both sides became hidden in the fervor of the Confederate invasion.

The third part of the saga features measurement of performance and results. From whatever combat success he obtained in Maryland—and McClellan remained convinced that he had saved the Union by his bloody victory at Antietam—the primary result was Lincoln's issuance of a preliminary Emancipation Proclamation. This singular event aimed at destroying the economic fiber of the Confederacy's war-making apparatus and the southern way of life. However, other actions by the president at this time held equal portent. His willingness to suspend the writ of habeas corpus throughout the Union in order to stifle opposition to the war and to prosecute conscription evasion in the loyal states produced equal controversy. Moreover, the impact of the Proclamation, the continuing sanguinary character

of the war, and the inability of either side to consummate annihilative battles kept both North and South off balance. The refusal of Confederate leaders, soldiery, and populace to regard Lee's abortive expedition (as well as those in Kentucky and elsewhere) as defeats renders questionable modern assertions that Antietam in particular was the pivotal turning point of the war. The *New York Times* might well suggest on September 21, 1862, that the effects of Antietam "will be seen and felt in the destinies of the Nation for centuries to come." Approximately a hundred thousand casualties incurred by both sides in the eastern theater alone from July to November underscored that point. The conflict remained unresolved as McClellan and Lee resumed maneuvers back in Virginia by fall. McClellan's lackluster performance after Antietam led to his replacement—a move that meant other campaigns would continue the story of the war. Hence this series of books.

There is a fourth part to the story, however muted by the predominantly operational flavor of the series. It remains critical to broadening our understanding of the period. This dimension involves civil-military relations. On one end it surfaced at the local level whenever the populace rubbed against military authority. At the national level, on the other end, the issues reflected larger questions of war and politics, the interplay of elective officials with professional soldiers and with one another. Cut a different way, as National War College professor Charles Stevenson suggests, such relations involved a "reluctant dictator" (in this case, Lincoln), "a coalition of rivals" (at both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue), an evolving national institutional and organizational team for victory (management and administration in both mufti and uniform), and even an emergent new strategy for that victory (a fateful shift from conciliatory to relentless conflict).<sup>2</sup> Behind the operations, then, lay wartime considerations of civil-military tension absent the modern structure, policy, and strategic synthesis more familiar to us today. Transformational techniques from militia mobilization to conscription, confiscation to emancipation of property, and states' rights localism to national centralism emerged against traditional democratic checks and balances in American governance.

Conduct of the war and politics necessarily spotlighted Lincoln and the Radicals, the president and his search for a winning general, as well as Lincoln's personal role in preparing both domestic national will and the international environment for his shift from

constitutional reconciliation to expansion of the Rights of Man in the conduct of the war. The Confederate experience pales in comparison, although Confederate President Jefferson Davis shared similar travails of a chief executive plagued by balky military and political teams, citizen concerns about government intrusion via conscription, confiscation, and a discernable inability to defend hearth and home of the realm. Davis's principal military and civilian difficulties lay distant from Richmond and the Virginia theater of war in this period, just the reverse of Lincoln and the Union. Yet almost perversely, the actions and issues of Lincoln and the Union as seen through the prism of the eastern campaigns of 1862 would ultimately contribute to the Confederacy's demise, notwithstanding the South's apparent success at the time.<sup>3</sup>

Most certainly the period from the Virginia Peninsula to Antietam Creek underscored Professor James McPherson's contention that "the American Civil War could not end with a negotiated peace because the issues over which it was fought—Union versus Disunion, Freedom versus Slavery—proved to be non-negotiable."<sup>4</sup> Perhaps only Lincoln and Davis saw this hardening of the conflict's direction at the time; certainly many of their contemporaries in uniform and sack coats did not. Indeed, the Civil War continued for another two and a half years following the events covered here. A revolution in firepower on the battlefield stalemated the quest for a single military stroke to end the carnage. Neither side was ready for peace following the Seven Days, after Second Manassas, or at the end of the Maryland campaign (with or without outside mediation, a mediation that evaporated suddenly as Europeans became concerned with their own strategic needs and fear of becoming mired to little purpose in America's conflict). Victory thus remained elusive, and the months between June and November reflected that fact in the changed nature of the war itself.

Conciliation and moderation were swept aside by a new sternness, even harshness, of a people's war, fought not merely for restoration of the Old Union but for creation of something new, governed by new people with new purpose under redefinition of the sacred Compact and God's beneficence. From it all shone forth the singularity of purpose and strength of conviction driving Abraham Lincoln in particular past the bitter defeats of summer and indecisive victories of autumn toward his elusive goal of national unity and freedom for man. Was this the ultimate meaning behind Professor

McPherson's contention that Antietam provided the battle that changed the course of the Civil War? Or, as one reviewer queried, should we term Antietam's legacy "the event of the war," with a question mark? Hopefully, *Counter-Thrust* and the study of the period from the Peninsula to the Antietam will suggest answers. As such it builds upon such pioneering efforts as the original Scribner's *Campaigns of the Civil War* volumes *The Army under Pope* by John Codman Ropes and Francis Winthrop Palfrey's *The Antietam and Fredericksburg*, published in 1881 and 1882, respectively.<sup>5</sup>