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Lee at Chancellorsville: The Wrong Battle

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LEE AT CHANCELLORSVILLE: THE WRONG BATTLE

A Master Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty

of

American Public University

by

Philip L. Burstein

In Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

of

Master of Arts

January, 2018

American Military University

Charles Town, West Virginia
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DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my wife, Nancy Burstein. For the past thirty years, she has not only allowed but encouraged me to spend time and money to pursue my interest in the American Civil War. Without her support and infinite patience, it is unlikely that this work would ever have been completed.
THESIS ABSTRACT

LEE AT CHANCELLORSVILLE: THE WRONG BATTLE

by

Philip L. Burstein

American Public University System, Approval Date: January 25, 2018

Charles Town, West Virginia

Professor Robert Young, Thesis Advisor

This thesis examines the generalship of Robert E. Lee during the Civil War battle of Chancellorsville, May 1-4, 1863. At the start of the battle Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia was in desperate straits. Outnumbered by more than two to one, with a Union force in front separated by only five miles from a second Union wing directly behind the Confederate fortifications, a Rebel defeat appeared to be inevitable. Yet five days later the vast Union host had been driven back to its starting point, having suffered some 17,000 casualties in the interim. The stunning contrast between the expected outcome and the actual one raised Lee’s reputation to new heights, with Chancellorsville being hailed by both contemporaries and future historians as his greatest battle.

The fact that Lee was in command while the victory was being won does not necessarily mean that Lee himself deserves all the credit. A link has to be shown to exist between Lee’s decisions on the one hand, and the final triumph of his army on the other. This thesis evaluates Lee’s actions in the light of the circumstances known to exist at the time, the available
alternatives, Lee’s stated strategic objectives, and the most likely outcome of his actions under reasonable assumptions about the behavior of the enemy army. The analysis is not favorable to Lee. His first decision, to fight a major battle at once under conditions of maximum disadvantage, could easily have led to the complete rout of the Confederate forces. His second decision, to divide his army and send Jackson marching toward the Federal rear, was even worse. The Union advance had already been halted; to take enormous risks in order to make an attack that had no possibility of achieving decisive results and would necessarily result in thousands of additional Confederate casualties made little sense. The fact that Lee was saved from most of the consequences of his own actions by three of the worst blunders made by any army during the entire war should not change our opinion of Lee’s generalship at Chancellorsville. His decisions were incorrect, and the fact that he held the field because his Union opponents showed truly extraordinary incompetence does not excuse him.
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Chapter 1: Introduction: The War Situation in Virginia, April 1863

During the last three days of April, 1863 the Union Army of the Potomac, 130,000 strong, conducted a successful flank march to place the much weaker Confederate Army of Northern Virginia, 60,000 men under the command of Robert E. Lee, in what appeared to be an untenable position. By midday on May 1, more than 70,000 Federals were directly behind the Rebel fortified line at Fredericksburg, with their advance within five miles of the town. Forty thousand more Union troops were in front of Lee’s army, poised to overwhelm the Confederates and cut their only good line of retreat if Lee made any significant detachments to protect his rear. Nine thousand Union cavalry were raiding almost unopposed against the railroads that supplied Lee’s army, ensuring that no reinforcements would be able to reach the Confederates in time for a battle. Lee had to deal with the most unfavorable numerical odds that he would face prior to the desperate days of 1865, and his tactical position was hazardous in the extreme.

One week later the vast Union host was back in the camps from which it had started, less seventeen thousand casualties and a great deal of its self-confidence. The stark contrast between the dire initial circumstances faced by the Army of Northern Virginia and the actual outcome of the battle have led to almost universal applause for the Confederate commander. Contemporaries showered Robert E. Lee with an adulation that has been largely accepted by historians ever since. The 1866 account of the battle published by a Confederate staff officer was entirely typical:

The short campaign of Chancellorsville was the most brilliant of all which Gen. Lee had hitherto conducted and stamped his fame as that of a commander of transcendent courage and ability. He had inflicted on them [the Federals] a total loss nearly equal to his own army...and in precisely a week had hurled back
the fragments of this multitudinous host to its starting point, baffled and broken.¹

This thesis raises the question of whether the victory gained at Chancellorsville on May 1-4, 1863 could have been won at less cost, and without taking risks that repeatedly exposed the entire Confederate army to total destruction. Lee’s two key decisions of the campaign—(1) to fight at Chancellorsville even after the Union had succeeded in placing a large force directly behind the main Confederate defensive lines, and (2) to force a major battle by dividing his army in order to attack the enemy right flank—will be carefully examined. It will be argued that both of these decisions were incorrect, and put Lee’s army into a position of potential disaster from which it could only save itself by the unnecessary and disproportionate loss of many thousands of men.

The most vital fact facing the Confederacy in April, 1863 was an inferiority in numbers and material conditions, that had so far been outweighed (in Virginia if not elsewhere) by an immense advantage in military leadership. During the Seven Days, at Second Bull Run, at Antietam and at Fredericksburg, the Army of Northern Virginia was always outnumbered (see Table 1). Even so, under the command of Robert E. Lee, Confederates fighting on their own soil had never failed to drive the Union forces from the field. Even on the Northern side of the Potomac, at Antietam an ill-fed and ragged Rebel force, already driven to the limits of physical endurance, had fought their opponents to a tactical standoff at odds of nearly two to one. In spite of this record of success, Lee was always conscious of his inherent numerical disadvantage and in his earliest Virginia campaigns did what he could to improve the situation. Bringing Jackson down to Richmond before his Federal pursuers could react helped to equalize numbers at the

---

Table 1: Union vs. Confederate Numbers in Battle, June 1862 – May 1863

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Battle</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Union Strength</th>
<th>Confederate Strength</th>
<th>Ratio: Union to Confederate</th>
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<tr>
<td>Seven Days</td>
<td>June 1862</td>
<td>104,100</td>
<td>92,000</td>
<td>1.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second Bull Run</td>
<td>August 1862</td>
<td>75,000</td>
<td>55,000</td>
<td>1.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antietam</td>
<td>September 1862</td>
<td>82,000</td>
<td>42,500</td>
<td>1.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fredericksburg</td>
<td>December 1862</td>
<td>113,000</td>
<td>74,000</td>
<td>1.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chancellorsville</td>
<td>May 1863</td>
<td>130,000</td>
<td>61,500</td>
<td>2.11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Seven Days, and attacking Pope at Second Bull Run before he could be joined by McClellan’s entire army from the Peninsula removed tens of thousands of potential Union reinforcements from that battlefield. With the exception of one special circumstance that would occur during the late spring and early summer of 1863, it was unlikely that relative numbers of troops available in Virginia would ever move in favor of the Confederacy. If Lee did not want to fight his battles against Union armies that outnumbered his own by fifty or even one hundred percent, he would have to undertake tactical and strategic maneuvers to gain some short-term advantage. Lee would also have to keep in mind that engagements that resulted in Federal losses less than half again greater than his own were generally not favorable to the long-term prospects of the Confederacy; his enemies could absorb losses from their superior manpower pool far better than he could. As Lee himself put it:

The lives of our soldiers are too precious to be sacrificed in the attainment of successes that inflict no loss upon the enemy beyond the actual loss in battle. Every victory should bring us nearer to the great end which it is the
object of this war to reach.2

Lee also had to worry about resources, particularly food and forage. The Antietam campaign had shown that the combat effectiveness of his army could be sharply reduced if he marched them away from regular sources of supply. The winter of 1862-63 was the first ‘Valley Forge’ of the Army of Northern Virginia, during which it was shown that the Confederacy was not capable of feeding a force located less than fifty miles north of the capital. Lee described the situation of his army to Secretary Seddon in late March:

The troops of this portion of the army have for some time been confined to reduced rations, consisting of 18 ounces of flour, 4 ounces of bacon of indifferent quality, with occasional supplies of rice, sugar, or molasses. The men are cheerful, and I receive but few complaints; still, I do not think it is enough to continue them in health and vigor, and I fear they will be unable to endure the hardships of the approaching campaign. Symptoms of scurvy are appearing among them.3

A further communication four weeks later indicated little improvement, with Lee being ‘painfully anxious lest the spirit and efficiency of the men should become impaired’. Lee’s cavalry faced particular difficulties, for ‘That winter the army faced a critical shortage of horses...A major contributor to the problem was a general scarcity of forage in the Fredericksburg area.’4

The only solution to the supply problems of the Army of Northern Virginia that was available to the Confederate authorities was dispersal. If the entire army could not be fed where it was, part of it would have to go elsewhere. Stuart was directed to send two of his three cavalry brigades to distant areas where forage was more abundant. Even worse for the army’s fighting

strength was the removal of one-fourth of its infantry. The Confederate artillery officer E. P. Alexander noted that ‘The great need of rations for the coming summer led the War Department to send Longstreet with two divisions for a campaign in the vicinity of Suffolk’, more than one hundred miles away from the rest of the army. It was highly unlikely that these fifteen thousand veteran troops could be returned to the Fredericksburg area in time to assist Lee in the event of a sudden movement by the Union army.\(^5\)

Lee’s logistical situation helped to inspire his preferred strategy, while at the same time rendering the execution of that strategy more difficult. If there were insufficient resources to support his army in Virginia, Lee had a solution: March his army north across the Potomac, and live off the prosperous, untouched farms of Unionist Maryland and Pennsylvania. In April, 1863 Lee wrote the Confederate Secretary of War, James Seddon, that

\[
\text{Should Gen. Hooker’s army assume the defensive, the readiest method for relieving the pressure upon General Johnston and General Beauregard would be for this army to cross into Maryland. This cannot be done, however in the present condition of the roads, nor unless I can obtain a certain amount of provisions and suitable transportation. But this is what I would recommend, if practicable.}\(^6\)
\]

Lee followed this up a week later with a message to President Jefferson Davis: ‘I think it all-important that we should assume the aggressive by the first of May’. The fact that his army was twice outnumbered did not seem to bother Lee, but he did not wish to repeat the mistake of the Antietam campaign when his army suffered greatly for lack of supplies during a hastily arranged movement north. If Hooker did not take the offensive, Lee intended to make the appropriate preparations and move around the right flank of the Union army on his way to the Potomac. The whole shape of the spring campaign in Virginia would be determined by the question of which

\(^6\) Robert E. Lee to James A. Seddon, April 9, 1863, *OR*, v. 25, Part II, 713.
army would seize the initiative and be the first to leave its own camps.  

Lee’s adversary, the Union Army of the Potomac, had spent the first month of the winter of 1862-63 in wretched condition in terms of morale, command structure, and resources. This army reached its nadir at some point during January, 1863. The crushing defeat it had suffered at Fredericksburg the previous month was only the beginning of the story. The army commander, General Ambrose Burnside, had shown his total incompetence by ordering repeated piecemeal attacks on the immensely strong Confederate positions on Marye’s Heights west of town. The Federals had lost 12,000 men and inflicted less than half this loss on the enemy. On January 19 Burnside had attempted a new maneuver against Lee’s left, but winter rains caused this effort to disintegrate into the infamous ‘Mud March’. As one historian described it,

The advance bogged in a hopeless mass of mud and slime...ammunition trains and supply wagons mired, horse and mules dropped dead... Artillery pieces literally sank into the mud….until only the muzzles showed.  

After two days of this even Burnside gave up, and allowed the army to wallow back to camp. That same week General Joseph Hooker replaced Burnside at the head of the Army of the Potomac.

Hooker rapidly dealt with some of the worst problems bedeviling the Army of the Potomac. In spite of his reputation as ‘Fighting Joe’, Hooker’s immediate contributions turned out to be administrative. Federal soldiers in Virginia were suffering deprivations of the necessities of life almost as badly as their Confederate opponents. For the bluecoats, however, the problem was not actual shortages in supplies or transportation, but sheer administrative incompetence. Hooker dealt quickly and efficiently with the most harmful problems. Rations

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7 Robert E. Lee to President Jefferson Davis, April 16, 1863, Dowdey and Manarin, 435.  
were drastically improved, and the army was paid for the first time in six months. Furloughs were granted on a wide scale, but only to those units performing well on the new army-wide system of drill and inspection. The vicious infighting between the various factions of the officer corps was suppressed, with one of the primary participants (Fitz-John Porter) disgraced via court-martial and the worst of the remaining corps commanders—Sigel, Sumner, Franklin, and W.F. Smith—being removed from the Army of the Potomac. The morale of the troops skyrocketed, if not to McClellan levels at least to the point where the average soldier once again had a reasonable faith in the army’s leaders.

Hooker also carried out two major reforms that considerably increased the effectiveness of his army. First, he drastically altered the cavalry balance in favor of the Federals by organizing his horsemen into a single corps, that could be massed as appropriate to fight the dreaded J.E.B. Stuart on close to equal terms. Second, he created a Bureau of Army Intelligence, under Col. George Sharpe, so that for the first time the commander of the Union forces in Virginia would have access to systematically collected and analyzed data on the numbers and positions of his Confederate opponents.

There were certain considerations that affected Hooker’s planning. Hooker wanted to move out against Lee as early as possible, not only to satisfy the demands of his superiors but to overcome to the extent possible the one tangible handicap that the Army of the Potomac would face at this time. During the months of May and June his army would lose forty-four regiments, amounting to almost twenty-three thousand men, to expiring enlistments. About 6,400 of these soldiers were nine-months enlistees of uncertain value, but the rest were two-year
veterans. Thus, the later Hooker began his offensive, the less his numerical strength. Hooker also wanted to move rapidly to ensure that the detachments of both cavalry and infantry that Lee had been compelled to make for supply purposes did not have time to return before the fighting began. A direct attack on the Confederate lines extending twenty-five miles along the south bank of the Rappahannock was unlikely to be successful, for the formidable entrenchments that had confounded Burnside in December had been improved in the interim. The Confederate right could not be outflanked on land, so a maneuver beyond the Confederate left was the obvious alternative. Hooker also to take into account the advice that the President and the general commanding the armies (Halleck) had given to his predecessor. Lincoln had written in November that ‘I wish the enemy to be prevented from falling back, accumulating strength as he goes, into his intrenchments at Richmond.’ Lincoln wanted two separate corps to operate from Chesapeake Bay, one up the Rappahannock and the other up the Pamunkey, to cut Lee’s communications to the south while the main army advanced directly on the Confederate positions near Fredericksburg. Then,

if Gen B. succeeds in driving the enemy from Fredericksburg, the enemy no longer has the road to Richmond but we have it and can march into the city. Or possibly, having forced the enemy from his line, we could move upon and destroy his army.\footnote{President Abraham Lincoln to Maj. Gen. Henry W. Halleck, November 27, 1862, in Abraham Lincoln, \textit{Speeches and Writings 1859-65}, ed. Don Fehrenbacher (New York: Library of America, 1989), 390-91.}

Halleck had sent his own suggestions to Hooker’s predecessor:

I urged that you should cross by the fords above Fredericksburg rather than to fall down to that place... When the attempt at Fredericksburg was abandoned, I advised you... to keep the enemy occupied till a favorable opportunity offered to strike a decisive blow. I particularly advised you to use your cavalry and light artillery upon his communications, and attempt to cut off his supplies and engage

\footnote{Joseph Hooker to Lorenzo Thomas, April 22, 1863 in U.S. Congress, \textit{Report of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War}, 38\textsuperscript{th} Congress, 2\textsuperscript{nd} session, v. 1 (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1865), 218-19.}
him at an advantage. In all our interviews I have urged that our first object was,

Map 1: The Virginia Theater

Source: George Skoch in Sears, Chancellorsville, 30.
was, not Richmond, but the defeat or scattering of Lee's army.\textsuperscript{11}

Thus, both Lincoln and Halleck urged a flanking movement combined with a major effort against Lee’s rear areas. When the President’s plan was found to be impossible due to its requirement for two new supply ports, Hooker began to look closely at Lee’s left flank.

Chapter 2: Historiography of the Battle of Chancellorsville: Lee as Demigod

The pattern for the historical evaluation of the generalship of Robert E. Lee was largely determined by the political and social needs of the Reconstruction South, within ten years of the end of the Civil War. That pattern, viewing Lee as a virtual demigod, persisted almost unchallenged right through the Civil War centennial, in the North as well as the South, and in Great Britain as well as the United States. In this chapter we shall present a brief chronological survey of historians’ perception of Lee, showing that even now objective analysis of that general is often lacking. This is particularly true when considering some of Lee’s decisions at the battle of Chancellorsville.

Immediately after the end of the Civil War writers both North and South began to make public their accounts of the conflict. In general, Robert E. Lee fared quite well in these histories, whose authors generally ‘described him as a superb officer and the South’s most distinguished general’. However, Lee was depicted as bearing some responsibility for Confederate military defeats, and other officers such as Stonewall Jackson were given almost equal status. This viewpoint soon became unacceptable to southerners, as their failed struggle to preserve their way of life became idealized as the ‘Lost Cause’. In their misty recollections, the antebellum South …became a superior civilization of great purity which God, in his mysterious wisdom, had sacrificed to the materialistic Yankees.’ The fact that the South had produced the greatest leader of the Civil War supported its claim to possess ‘every element of purity, stability and greatness’. The more the perfection of Robert E. Lee’s military skill and character could be exalted, the more obvious the overall excellence of the South--the perfect man could only be produced by a
righteous cause.\textsuperscript{12} 

The Lost Cause mythology created an atmosphere in which objective historical work on Lee could not be tolerated. A group of former officers of the Army of Northern Virginia, headed by Lt. Gen. Jubal Early and Maj. Gen. Fitz Lee, took control of the Lee Memorial Association of Lexington, the Lee Monument Association of Richmond, and the Southern Historical Society, and undertook to defend the orthodox point of view. The history of the Civil War as written through the remainder of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century is a testimonial to their success. The tone was set by a famous address delivered by Early in 1872, that summarized Lee’s flawless Confederate military career: ‘those grand achievements which have placed the name of Robert E. Lee among the foremost of the renowned historic names of the world’. The avowed purpose of the speech was to remind all Southerners that

\begin{quote}
We cannot turn our backs on the graves of our fallen heroes, and we will cherish the remembrance of their deeds, and see that justice is done to their memory… without resorting to the maxims and policy of those who have ravaged and desolated their homes… remain true to the memory of your venerated leaders, and the principles for which you fought.\textsuperscript{13}
\end{quote}

Resistance to the North was to be continued, and the history of the war was a weapon to be wielded in defense of Southern unity. All dissenters ‘who have proved renegade to our holy cause’ were to ‘go out from among us with the brand of Cain upon them!’ In practice, this meant that all non-conformist works were to be ruthlessly criticized, and their authors were to be subject to personal attack, ostracized from Southern society, and deprived of their livelihoods to the extent possible.\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{14} Early, 72.
General Early himself was to be the chief enforcer. Whether the offender was a Confederate general, a southern biographer, a foreign prince, or a northern historian, the response was swift and brutal. No topic escaped Early’s pen, whether it be the extent to which Lee’s army was reinforced before the Seven Days, the relative strength of the armies of Lee and Grant during the Overland Campaign, Longstreet’s role at Gettysburg, or Confederate numbers at that battle. The editor of the *Southern Historical Society Papers*, William Jones, wrote to Early describing the proper approach to critics of Lee:

> When a paper containing grave errors is sent to us, and quietly filed, the errors are simply put away to turn up at some future time when, perhaps, those capable of correcting it have passed off the stage. But where the papers are published some vigilant sentinel, like yourself, detects the errors, and makes the corrections and the antidote goes down with the poison.

By 1875 Early was triumphant. ‘No man’, wrote Confederate veteran Robert Stiles, ‘ever took up his pen to write a line about the great conflict without the fear of Jubal Early before his eyes’; William Payne wrote Early that ‘the fear of your rebuke has held many a weak-kneed Confederate to his duty’. The Lee cult, through organizational leadership, manipulation of the facts, and the association of dissent with betrayal of the South, had taken firm control of the historiography of the Confederacy.

The general picture of General Lee’s ability and character during the rest of the nineteenth century, when the history of the Civil War was dominated by those who had directly participated in the conflict, was drawn according to the wishes of General Early and his colleagues. Early’s keystone address, cited previously, set forth two more key points in its

---


16 J. William Jones to Jubal A. Early, March 9, 1875, Early Papers, Library of Congress.

conclusion. The first was Lee’s greatest opponent, the Union Lt. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant, triumphed not through comparable military abilities but rather because he was supported by the overwhelming resources of the North. Having scornfully denigrated one of Lee’s most outstanding contemporaries, Early made his second point, which was that the greatest generals of the past, from Alexander the Great through Napoleon and Wellington, could not be compared to Lee either:

Shall I compare General Lee to his successful antagonist? As well compare to the great pyramid which rears its proportions in the valley of the Nile, to a pygmy perched on Mount Atlas...It is a vain work for us to seek anywhere for a parallel to the great character which has won our admiration and love. Our beloved Chief stands, like some lofty column which rears ahead among the highest, in grandeur, simple, pure and sublime, needing no borrowed lustre; and he is all our own. 

Major General John Gordon wrote in a similar vein:

as one of the great captains of the world he [Lee] will...pass review and inspection before the criticism of history...Lee was never really beaten. Lee could not be beaten. Over powered, foiled in his efforts he might be; but never defeated until the prop that supported him gave way.

The distinguished British officer, Field Marshal Viscount Wolseley, added this:

I believe all will admit that General Lee towered far above all men on either side of that struggle: I believe he will be regarded not only as the most prominent figure of the Confederacy, but as the great American of the 19th century, whose statue is well worthy to stand on an equal pedestal with that of Washington.

In terms of Lee’s general character and overall military ability, there was little dissent from the views expressed above.

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18 Early, 71.
Concerning the battle of Chancellorsville itself, the encomiums to Lee’s generalship have been accumulating almost unchecked right down to the present. This is not surprising, granted that Lee’s army had been flanked out of its defenses and was more than twice outnumbered. The Army of Northern Virginia had been caught squarely between the two halves of the federal army, each of which were approximately equal to Lee’s entire force. For Lee to escape without serious harm would have been a considerable achievement; to drive the enemy back across the Rappahannock in defeat seemed to verge on the miraculous.

In the latter part of the 19th century, Lee’s Virginian comrades in arms again set the tone. Col. David G. McIntosh, a participant in Jackson’s flank march, well summarized the situation facing Lee at dawn on May 1:

The battle of Chancellorsville was probably the most difficult of all General Lee’s battles, at the same time it was his greatest success…Having to protect a front of over 20 miles, he only learned that Hooker was moving…when he was already upon his flank. At the same time Sedgwick with two army corps and a third in reserve was crossing the Rappahannock in his front…The situation was full of peril and might well appall the stoutest heart. That General Lee was able to meet it successfully proved him to be a master of the art of war…The unusual conditions …afforded…the opportunity for the display of Lee’s masterfulness in grappling with new and unexpected emergencies while they at the same time exhibited his wonderful poise and his fighting tenacity and his heroic courage. 21

Robert Dabney, one of Jackson’s staff officers, agreed that the situation was dangerous, because in order to assemble a force large enough to check Hooker’s main force near Chancellorsville, Lee had reduced the garrison of the Fredericksburg position below the minimum necessary to hold off Sedgwick’s wing:

To hold the stationary defensive…would therefore be equivalent to the loss of the whole line of the Rappahannock with a hazardous retreat along a new and crooked line of operations… General Jackson now proposed to throw his command entirely into Hooker’s rear…The short campaign of Chancellorsville was the most brilliant of all which General Lee had hitherto conducted and

stamped his fame as that of a commander of transcendent courage and ability. With 45,000 men he had met and defeated 125,000...He had inflicted on them a total loss nearly equal to this own army...and in precisely a week had hurled back the fragments of this multitudinous host to its starting point, baffled and broken.22

Dabney’s description of the outcome, while accurate in tone, increased the odds facing Lee from the actual two to one to nearly three to one, and more than doubled the actual Union casualties. This sort of exaggeration was not atypical of Lost Cause writers, who needed to show that it was only the overwhelming numbers of the Northern armies that led to the defeat of the morally and militarily superior South. However, even the fulsome Dabney was outdone by the crowning comment of the Lee cult, delivered by Col. Charles Marshall, a member of Lee’s staff. That officer described what happened as Lee rode up to the Chancellorsville clearing on May 3:

His presence was the signal for one of those outbursts of enthusiasm which none can appreciate who have not witnessed them...One long unbroken cheer...rose high above the roar of battle and hailed the presence of the victorious chief...as I looked upon him in the complete fruition of the success which his genius, courage and confidence in his army had won I thought that it must have been from such a scene that men in ancient times were raised to the dignity of gods’.23

Northerners of this period tended to focus on the ineptitude of their own commander at Chancellorsville rather than the genius of Lee, but from overseas Lord Wolseley added a comment on which both sides could agree:

Most of us think that one commander has seldom been more outgeneraled by another than Gen. Hooker at the Battle of Chancellorsville...it was the difference between the two commanders which sent the federal army in retreat back over the Rappahannock as the result of that battle.24

As the wartime generation left the scene, one might have hoped that the way would have been left open for a more balanced picture of the battle. In the North, at least, this was the case

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with the publication of John Bigelow Jr.’s detailed history of Chancellorsville in 1915. Bigelow
admitted that Lee was the better general, but this was not much of a compliment:

A general who should think of adapting the tactics that Lee…employed…should be sure…that he realizes the conditions under which these tactics succeeded…the total collapse of the enemy’s commanding general…To try them on a commander in his senses…would be to court defeat and invite disaster…Lee and Stuart won the battle because their bad tactics were opposed by worse tactics on the part of Hooker.25

Bigelow viewed Hooker rather than Lee as the decisive actor at Chancellorsville, because it was the mistakes of the Federal commander that determined the outcome of the battle. This balanced approach failed to convince most Civil War historians writing during the first half of the twentieth century, which was dominated instead by a fervent adherent of the Lost Cause, Douglas Southall Freeman.

Freeman wrote entertaining and well-researched histories of the Army of Northern Virginia and its commanders. His work was of a high standard, except when inconvenient facts contradicted the key axiom of his Civil War faith: that Robert E. Lee was always right. Lee was simply ‘that great man who is our Southern demigod’. Subsidiary points of doctrine included the ever-present Confederate disadvantage in both numbers and supplies, the primary credit for Lee of any success, and the full blame on Lee’s subordinates for any defeat. Freeman’s account of Chancellorsville illustrated all these beliefs. It was not enough that Lee was desperately outnumbered; Freeman claimed that Chancellorsville ‘saw the expenditure of thirty rounds of small arms ammunition per man in the Confederate army’ because ‘They didn’t have it’—an extreme shortage that somehow went without mention in any official report of the battle. Jackson was deprived of any role in the decision to flank the Union right; ‘Lee’s was the responsibility, Lee’s

The less than complete success of Jackson’s flank march necessitated desperate fighting on May 3 to re-unite the wings of the Confederate army, that resulted in the loss of eight thousand men in only four hours. Lest any doubt be cast on Lee’s generalship, Freeman sloughs over one of the worst bloodbaths in the history of the Army of Northern Virginia with the vague comment that ‘The price of the victory had not been unduly high.’

The high priest of the Lee cult, Jubal Early himself, could not have put things better. Despite such obvious biases, however, Freeman was accepted as the leading Civil War (and Revolutionary War) author of his day—and not just in the South. He was repeatedly invited to lecture at the Army War College, the Naval War College, and the Armed Forces Staff College, and was awarded the Pulitzer Prize twice. Freeman’s influence can be seen in the writings of some of the most popular historians of the post-Civil War Centennial period, where specific actions of Lee are occasionally criticized but the proper adulation is always expressed in the conclusion. The strongest adherents of Freeman’s viewpoint still stood ready to attack all detractors of Lee as heretics, rather than mere mortals subject to error.

A brief summary of the post-Freeman period will conclude this chapter. One class of historians still wrote with untrammeled admiration of the Confederate commander. Joseph Glatthaar called Lee ‘one whose blends intellect with audacity, a farsighted and brilliant military leader’.

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27 Freeman, Lee’s Lieutenants, II, 598-99.
commander who got into the mind of his opponent.’ Charles Roland noted that ‘For near a
century most students of the art of war have looked with unqualified admiration upon the
generalship of Lee’. Edward Stackpole added ‘The magnificent victory which Lee won a
Chancellorsville, and it was magnificent in all its aspects, raised Southern enthusiasm almost to
fever pitch’. 28

One more comment from this side of the argument will suffice. From Gary Gallagher we
have:

Chancellorsville confirmed Lee’s reputation as an unexcelled Confederate field
commander. Utterly dominating Hooker psychologically, he wrested victory from
circumstances—and against odds—that would have undone most generals. 29

However, there was now also a second group of writers, who combined praise of Lee at
Chancellorsville with facts that should have given them pause. Winston Churchill rated Lee’s
generalship at Chancellorsville at ‘an historic level’ because he extricated his army from a
‘hopeless’ situation caused by Lee’s own failure to understand the Union flanking maneuver.
Steven Woodworth said that ‘the battle of Chancellorsville...would go down as one of the most
amazing against the odds victories in the history of warfare’ even though he also believed that
Lee had initially been totally deceived. In a far from admiring tone, Woodworth added that
‘Hooker had executed a maneuver that had put Lee in a very tight spot. The Confederate general
had had to fight a desperate battle as the only alternative to a headlong retreat.’ The best modern
historian of Chancellorsville, Stephen Sears, asserted that ‘Beyond doubt it was the greatest
moment Robert E. Lee had experienced in his military life’ but seemingly contradicted himself

by noting that ‘The cost of victory was exceedingly high.’

All the authors cited above were outstanding historians, and none of them contradicted the existing portrait of Robert E. Lee as the best general and perhaps the greatest leader of the Civil War. At last, more than a century after Jubal Early’s defining speech, a few scholars emerged could no longer accept the Freeman viewpoint, that T. Harry Williams summarized as ‘whatever Lee did was right because he was Lee’. Thomas Connelly led the way, deriding the ‘Lee and Virginia cults…that distorted or obscured’ the real Lee. ‘Lee’s aggressive nature’, asserted Connelly, ‘bled the Confederacy of manpower…His offensive tactics were dreadfully expensive’.  

Alan Nolan made the same point; from the Seven Days in June 1862 through the battle of the Wilderness in May, 1864 Lee did not always act in the best interests of the Confederacy:

Lacking a real understanding of the practical circumstances of the antagonists, or lacking the ability to relate his grand strategy to those circumstances, Lee had pursued the counterproductive grand strategy of the offensive…Lee’s direction of his army had unilaterally accomplished the destruction of his [own] force.

McWhiney and Jamieson agreed, saying that ‘Lee used up thousands of irreplaceable troops in battles such as…Chancellorsville’ because he (along with many others) failed to comprehend the advantage that rifle muskets and field entrenchments gave to the tactical defensive. Finally, Edward Bonekemper specifically criticized Lee’s generalship at Chancellorsville, terming that engagement ‘The Victory That Wasn’t’ due to ‘Lee’s propensity for offensive


\[\text{31} \text{ T. Harry Williams, ‘Freeman: Historian of the Civil War: An Appraisal’, } \text{Journal of Southern History, XXI} \text{ (Feb. 1955), 96; Thomas L. Connelly, } \text{The Marble Man} \text{ (Louisiana State University Press: Baton Rouge, 1977), xiii, 208.}\]

\[\text{32} \text{ Alan T. Nolan, } \text{Lee Considered} \text{ (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 105.}\]
strategy and tactics’ that ‘again resulted in irreplaceable losses to his own army’.33

The response from Lost Cause historians was remarkable in both tone and content. Two examples will be given here. Robert Krick, the highly respected historian at the Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park, reviewed Nolan’s *Lee Considered* for a local newspaper. Krick termed Nolan’s book ‘tendentiously anti-Lee’, and its author ‘a bootless revisionist’. The admitted popularity of *Lee Considered* was won, said Krick, ‘by appealing to the sempiternal yearning to smash idols’ and by ‘also afford[ing] a limitless appeal to the political correctness wowsers’. This rhetorical heat might be appropriate for one whose belief in Robert E. Lee’s infallibility is a matter of historical faith, but it is not very enlightening for the rest of us. On the specifics of Nolan’s most important criticism, moreover, that of Lee’s overuse of the tactical offensive, Krick is surprisingly brief. In fact, Krick totally ignores Nolan’s strongest arguments, those relating to the Antietam and Gettysburg campaigns. Instead of direct refutation, Krick makes the point that ‘During a seventeen-month period [actually sixteen] that included Gettysburg…Lee fought precisely two substantial battles’. This is hardly convincing, granted that in ten of these months bad weather precluded Confederate offensives and that Lee offered battle on a third occasion (Bristoe Station campaign) only three months after his defeat at Gettysburg. Nolan’s main thesis thus remains unrefuted by Krick’s review.34

The second example of the emotional reaction of a Lost Cause historian to criticism of Lee to be described here is the review by Albert Castel of an article by Connelly that was a


precursor to his *Marble Man*. Castel, author of one of the best books on the Atlanta campaign, has solid credentials as a writer on the Civil War. He was not content to merely attack Connelly’s arguments, but must make it clear that Connelly was unworthy to discuss Lee at all. ‘It is at once apparent’, declared Castel, that ‘Connelly set out to do a job on Bobby Lee’. Not only are ‘most of Connelly’s criticisms of Lee…unfounded, excessive, or pointless’ but ‘his article in general [constitutes] an example of a type of pseudohistory’ that

> disparages previous writers on their subject as being biased, guilty of research and analysis, and as being members of some ill-defined scholarly establishment with a vested interest in perpetuating an historical myth…ignoring obvious and fundamental truths while marshaling a massive array of carefully selected and one-sided data…to ‘prove’ that the orthodox view is false and their own supposedly original interpretation is true…[Thus] Connelly ‘proves’ that Lee was a poor strategist who hurt more than helped the Confederate cause.  

Granted that Connelly had already established his own reputation with the publication of his classic history of the Confederate Army of Tennessee, this commentary is simply outrageous.

Castel goes on to raise specific criticisms of Connelly’s article on five separate points, and on the four involving the relative difficulty facing the Confederacy in the Western as opposed to the Eastern theatre Castel makes some valid points. On the first and most important point discussed, however, whether Lee was too offensively minded, Castel is forced into exaggeration and specious reasoning in his efforts to refute Connelly. Castel asserts that in his first two years of command, Lee

> fought ten major battles, in every one of which he was outnumbered, sometimes by as much as two to one…definitely lost only two—Malvern Hill and Gettysburg—both in large measure because of the failures of subordinates. In the process he suffered 103,000 casualties while inflicting 145,000 on a much stronger enemy.

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This statement is worthy of the Lee cult at its finest, a reversion to the ‘Lee was never really defeated’ school of the 1870s. If one reasonably adds Frayser’s Farm, South Mountain, and Antietam to the list of Confederate defeats, it appears that Lee’s army was beaten just as often as it was victorious. Also, Castel’s point that the strategy of the Army of Northern Virginia could not be considered as leading to excessive losses because its enemy suffered forty percent higher casualties is simply false—as long as the enemy army was more than forty percent larger. As Catton demonstrates, if ‘the two armies were losing about the same percentage of numbers engaged…these percentages meant certain doom for the smaller army’. Castel’s forty percent excess casualties for the Union armies facing Lee meant that the Confederates on average were generally losing a greater proportion of their soldiers in every engagement. In the long run, this was not sustainable. Castel is therefore misinterpreting his own numbers, which actually support Connelly’s contention that Lee’s overuse of offensive tactics caused losses that the Confederacy could not afford.37

The refusal of two important modern historians to give the slightest rational consideration to the hypothesis that Robert E. Lee placed too strong an emphasis on the attack is interesting. It seems to confirm that the longstanding prejudice against criticism of Lee still exists in some quarters. Thus, even at the present day there exists a strong incentive for historians to avoid analysis based on this view of Lee’s generalship. Applying this heretical theory to specific maneuvers of the Army of Northern Virginia might yield new and useful interpretations of oft-discussed battles and campaigns.

Chapter 3: A Chronology of the Chancellorsville Campaign

37 Castel, 211; Bruce Catton, A Stillness at Appomattox (Garden City: Doubleday & Co., 1953), 132.
An evaluation of the actions of Robert E. Lee during the ten-day Chancellorsville Campaign requires an accurate understanding of actual events. The phrase ‘Lee’s greatest victory’ so often applied to this campaign carries with it the picture of an enormous Union army, reduced to a mob of panic-stricken fugitives in the manner of First Bull Run. The Federals are fleeing desperately across the Rappahannock, its generals trying to save the remnant of the army from Lee’s all-victorious Army of Northern Virginia. This view of the campaign is as ubiquitous as it is false. The reality is quite different. Except for one corps for a few hours in the immediate aftermath of Jackson’s flank attack, no part of the Union army was subject to panic at any time during the campaign. With that one exception, Union troops engaged with the enemy inflicted almost as much damage as they received, leading to enormous casualties for the Rebels as well as themselves. Before the final Union withdrawal, the part of the Army of the Potomac still south of the river consisted of approximately 80,000 men, well-entrenched and fully capable of demolishing any Confederate attacking column that Lee could have cobbled together from his remaining 45,000 infantry. These facts and others supporting a more balanced history of this campaign than has been customary will be illustrated by the map-based discussion given below.

Map 2 illustrates the initial situation, and the Federal maneuvers on April 27-29 that began Hooker’s campaign. His Army of the Potomac consisted of about 130,000 men, with the infantry spread out on the north side of the Rappahannock in a rough triangle about seven miles on a side. The three vertices of Hooker’s main deployment area were at Falmouth just north of Fredericksburg, White Oak Church to the east-southeast, and Stafford Court House to the north; his 12,000 cavalrymen guarded the Union right flank from Hartwood Church to Rappahannock Station. Lee had the infantry of his Army of Northern Virginia spread out over a twenty-mile arc.

Map 2: Opening Union Movements at Chancellorsville, April 27-29
on the south side of the river, guarding fords and other likely crossing points from U.S. Ford on the west to Moss Neck on the east. The center of this position was where Lee had crushed the Union attacks in December. It was immensely strong, in terms of both terrain and fortifications, and was currently occupied by the divisions of McLaws and Early—17,000 soldiers. Jackson held the downstream crossings with 28,000 men, while Anderson’s division of 8,000 was spread out over the upper fords. The artillery reserve (2,000) was located about nine miles south of Fredericksburg, and Stuart’s cavalry division of 6,500 troopers was picketing the roads in the

Rapidan/Rappahannock triangle. Stuart’s main concentration was placed well west and north of the main army, south and southwest of Brandy Station. 38

Hooker knew that a renewed assault on the Rebel center was likely to result in a repeat of the December debacle. He needed to devise a plan that would avoid that pitfall, while still mounting an effective threat against the Confederate supply line—the Richmond, Fredericksburg and Potomac Railroad that ran directly south from the town of Fredericksburg. Hooker decided on a double maneuver around the Confederate left. The bulk of his cavalry, about 9,000 men, was sent on a deep raid starting from Kelly’s Ford more than twenty miles above Fredericksburg. This column was ordered to loop southwest, well away from Lee’s army, with the objective of cutting Lee’s rail connections with both the Shenandoah Valley to the west and Richmond to the south. If successful, not only would the Confederates be deprived of re-supply of both food and munitions, but Longstreet’s two detached divisions would be unable to return in time for the impending battle. After the departure of the cavalry, the Union right wing of three Union infantry corps (42,000 men), commanded by Hooker himself, also crossed at Kelly’s Ford. This force cut back southeast, crossed the Rapidan, and headed for Chancellorsville. This road junction was about ten miles from Lee’s main position at Fredericksburg, squarely behind the Rebel fortifications. Simultaneously, the Union left wing of two corps under Sedgewick (40,000), backed by the Union artillery emplaced on the dominant Stafford Heights east of the river, bridged the Rappahannock just below Fredericksburg and began to cross. Two divisions (12,000) were designated to cross at U.S.

Ford once that position was vacated by the Confederates, and a reserve of 24,000 men was located near Fredericksburg. 39

It was only at this point, on the morning of April 29, that Lee received news of the movement of the Union right wing. The Federal advance had penetrated the thinly patrolled gap of more than ten miles between the left of the Confederate infantry line and the main position of Stuart’s cavalry. As Col. Cameron remarked, ’General Stuart, usually so vigilant, seems on this occasion to have been surprised…[and so] allowed Hooker to concentrate at Chancellorsville’. This was a dangerous situation for Lee’s army, for it gave Hooker ‘the option of taking his [Lee’s] line in reverse or of moving upon his line of communications’. 40 Lee reacted slowly, concentrating Anderson’s division near Zoan Church and moving Jackson’s three easternmost divisions to straddle the railroad near Hamilton’s Crossing. The Confederate commander still retained one advantage; the Union army was moving into the region known as the Wilderness, a wretched tangle of second growth forest with few roads and few clearings that rendered cross-country maneuvers with large bodies of troops slow and difficult. According to Sears:

North to south it ran from the Rappahannock and Rapidan rivers to three or four miles south of Chancellorsville. East to west it extended from about Tabernacle Church [just east of Zoan Church] to beyond Wilderness Tavern…Men who fought in the Wilderness would remember it with fear and hatred—a dark, eerie, impenetrable maze. 41

Other things equal, this terrain hindered concentration of force, and so favored the smaller army if it acted on the defensive. The Wilderness did thin out a bit along the roads to the east of

Chancellorsville, so if Lee intended to receive Hooker’s attack he could maximize the advantages of the terrain by engaging the Federals as far to the west as possible.

So on the 29th Lee had to make a key decision—to fight to retain his position in the Fredericksburg area or to retreat. By the end of April 30th, Hooker would have (after the pre-arranged reinforcement of two divisions via U.S. Ford) 54,000 men concentrated at Chancellorsville, a force almost exactly equal to Lee’s entire army less Stuart’s cavalry. However, since Lee kept four of his six divisions in the Fredericksburg area watching the Union left, the detachment opposing a potential Union advance from Chancellorsville to the eastern edge of the Wilderness would be outnumbered three to one. Churchill succinctly summarizes the situation:

Lee was thus taken in pincers by two armies, each capable of fighting a major battle with him, while at the same time his rear was ravaged and his communications assailed. The advance of either federal army would render his position untenable, and their junction or simultaneous action in a single battle must destroy him. Nothing more hopeless on the map than his position on the night of the 30th can be imagined.  

Under these circumstances Lee’s decision to accept battle at Chancellorsville should not have been a foregone conclusion. The merits of the Army of Northern Virginia fighting at this time and place is one of the primary topics covered by this thesis, and will be examined in full detail in the next chapter.

Map 3 shows how the situation developed by noon on May 1. Sickles’ III Corps had been called in from the reserve, raising the total strength of the Union right to 73,000. Lee matched Hooker by dividing his army into two wings. The Confederate right, 10,000 men under Maj.Gen.Jubal Early, occupied the old Fredericksburg fortifications and confronted a Union

Map 3: Meeting in the Wilderness: Situation Noon, May 1

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42 Churchill, 225.
force that held a 4-1 advantage in manpower. Jackson was marching his three divisions to the support of the Confederate left. McLaws and Anderson had entrenched on the ridge that ran north from the Tabernacle Church at the very edge of the Wilderness, but were now marched west to hold the advance guard of the Union right inside the forest. Anderson checked Slocum’s XII Corps, while McLaws drove back Sykes until the latter was reinforced by Hancock’s division from Couch’s II Corps. By 1:30 Jackson’s leading division had come into line on
McLaws’ left.\textsuperscript{43} Approximately 25,000 Union troops now prepared to attack the equal number of Confederates in their immediate front, a situation that in the short-run promised nothing but stalemate. However, the Federals had three promising advantages: the Union right wing contained 30,000 more men than the Rebel left, Meade was taking 10,000 men completely unopposed into the Confederate rear, and the Rebel right was so weak that Sedgwick could take Fredericksburg at any time he chose to bestir himself. The Confederate army was still between the two Union wings, and did not have much prospect of repelling the advance of either.\textsuperscript{44}

At this stage, when the engagement was still little more than a skirmish, the Army of Northern Virginia was relieved from its worst embarrassments.\textsuperscript{45} The rescuer was neither Lee, nor any of his subordinate generals, nor the stout fighting men in the ranks. Rather, the angel of mercy was none other than the commanding officer of the Union army. Succumbing to unreasoning panic, Hooker withdrew his wing back to the vicinity of Chancellorsville (see Map 4). The Union officers reacted with dismay; the comment of Lt. Col. Francis Walker, adjutant-general of the II Corps, was typical:

\begin{quote}
The position they [the Union advance] reached was one in every way easy to hold. It afforded room and range for a powerful artillery, and could have readily been crowned before night by 90 guns...Yet this position General Hooker, in an evil hour, determined to abandon...for the low and wooded ground around Chancellorsville, relinquishing the very form and show of aggression...So manifest and so monstrous was the blunder, that the officers who were sent with the message could not bear to carry it.\textsuperscript{46}
\end{quote}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item\textsuperscript{43} Esposito, Map 85
\item\textsuperscript{44} Sears, 138, 201-2, 212.
\item\textsuperscript{45} The most heavily engaged Union division, that of General Sykes, lost only 285 men during this part of the battle (\textit{OR}, v. 25, Part I, 181).
\item\textsuperscript{46} Francis A. Walker, \textit{History of the 2\textsuperscript{nd} Army Corps} (2\textsuperscript{nd} ed., New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1891), 220-21.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}

Map 4: Hooker Withdraws: Situation 6:00 P.M., May 1
The operations of the last three days have determined that our enemy must either ingloriously fly, or come out from behind his defenses and give us battle on our own ground, where certain destruction awaits him.47

Hooker set his men to entrenching, which of course gave the Confederates the option to fortify at the same time. In spite of Hooker’s pronouncement, it was not clear how a totally passive Union army, sitting on a few worthless square miles of scrub forest and facing enemy entrenchments on every major road leading east, could compel Lee to do anything.

Now Lee, out of immediate danger, was facing his second major strategic decision—should he attack the Union right wing or dig in and wait until the Federals left of their own accord? This question will be discussed in detail in Chapter 5. At present, we will continue to describe Lee’s actions. In the event Lee did not seriously consider the defensive option; finding the Union works too strong to attack frontally he ordered Stonewall Jackson to undertake his famous march through the Wilderness to hit the exposed Union right flank. Jackson moved out at 7:30 A.M. on the morning of May 2, turned south on the Furnace Road, and took three Confederate divisions totally out of contact for more than eight hours. In order to give Jackson enough strength to make a meaningful attack, Lee had split his army into three non-supporting parts. For almost the entire day, Early’s 10,000 would have to confront Sedgwick’s 40,000 Federals near Fredericksburg, and Lee would be able to oppose no more than 15,000 men to Hooker’s 73,000 just southeast of Chancellorsville. The Army of Northern Virginia had escaped from an extremely dangerous situation on the previous day due to Hooker’s folly, but the circumstances facing the Confederates for most of May 2 were almost as perilous. Early’s desperate situation was unchanged, and the position of Lee’s wing was even worse.

According to Brig. Gen. Fitzhugh Lee, commanding the only Confederate cavalry force on the battlefield,

The men of Anderson, which was one of the two divisions left in Hooker’s front after Jackson’s departure...were about six feet apart…How long would it have taken [Hooker] to have pierced Lee’s center?”

In other words, the center of the Rebel line, as well as the right, could not be held if the Federals attacked. The left, under Jackson, was strung out over ten miles of bad road for most of the day

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48 Esposito, Map 87.
and was likewise incapable of offering significant resistance to a determined assault by Hooker’s army. Fortunately for Lee, the Federals remained entirely quiescent except for a late and insignificant lunge by Sickles’ corps that captured a single Confederate regiment.

The payoff from all the risks taken to enable Jackson’s maneuver began shortly after 6:00 P.M., when his force crashed into the right flank of Howard’s XI Corps (see Map 5). In spite of the fact that Jackson’s march had been detected as early as 8:00 A.M., and that the deployment

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of a large enemy force had been reported to the commanders of both the division and corps on
the extreme Union right by 3:00 P.M., nothing was done to alter the vulnerable position of the
XI Corps. That body of troops was therefore routed and temporarily put out of action, suffering
about 2,400 casualties including almost 1,000 prisoners. This was a rather trivial return to the
Confederates for the effort expended. The Rebels lost only a few hundred men before darkness
put an end to the day’s fighting.

As the sun rose on the Chancellorsville battlefield on May 3, it immediately became
apparent that Jackson’s successful flank attack on the XI Corps had not solved the fundamental
problems facing the Confederates. Their army was still divided into three separate pieces, and
was still threatened with the imminent destruction of both their left wing (now under Stuart) west
of Chancellorsville and their right wing defending Fredericksburg. Map 6 below shows the
position of the main Union force and the Confederate forces directly opposed, as of 7:30 A.M.
There are a few features of this map that require some explanation. First, note that Reynolds’ I
Corps of 17,000 men had transferred from the Union left, so that the Union right wing was
stronger than it had been on the previous day even if one rated the combat power of the defeated
XI Corps at zero. Second, the only two decent sites for massed artillery in the Chancellorsville
area were on the heights at Hazel Grove and at Fairview. At dawn, both of these places were in
Union hands, giving the Federals total firepower dominance on the south and west sides of the
Chancellorsville salient. Third, the Confederate lines attacking this salient from the west were
exposed on their left to a flank attack from Meade’s V Corps, placed in reserve along the Ely’s

Map 6: Confederates Attack Chancellorsville: Situation 7:30 A.M., May 3


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Source: George Skoch, *op cit*

Ford Road. Meade’s corps, which had seen little action, could easily be supported by Reynolds’ unengaged troops to create a force larger than Stuart’s entire wing. Finally, the Union forces posted in front of Chancellorsville were entrenched and had almost exactly the same strength as their enemies—between 42,000 and 43,000 men. Lee’s army had to take Chancellorsville in order to reunite its left and center wings, and it faced formidable odds. Robert Krick spoke fairly when he claimed that
No greater danger confronted Lee during the campaign than this of being divided in the face of a much larger force after the excitement and momentum of Jackson’s attack had abated.\textsuperscript{53}

Or as Col. E. P. Alexander summarized the plight of the Confederate left wing, ‘Our situation was apparently a desperate one…Nothing but a combination of desperate fighting and good luck could save us’.\textsuperscript{54}

Once again the Union commander, Joseph Hooker, supplied the necessary luck. On an early morning visit to the Union front lines, he ordered that Hazel Grove be abandoned and handed over to the Confederates. It was Alexander himself who took advantage of this ‘fatal mistake’, emplacing dozens of Rebel cannon that previously had no place from which to fire effectively on the enemy. This was the turning point of the battle, according to Alexander: ‘The battle was still Hooker’s had he fought where he stood…There has rarely been a more gratuitous gift of a battlefield.’\textsuperscript{55}

Other officers agreed. Capt. Theodore Dodge noted that

The seizure of Hazel Grove... enabled the Confederates...to enfilade our lines in both directions...For this height absolutely commanded the angle made by the lines of Geary and Williams...Our severest losses during this day from artillery fire emanated from this source.\textsuperscript{56}

Brig. Gen. Alpheus Williams and his division initially had no problems holding its ground:

The Rebels opened with infantry alone…But in all that time they were never able to reach my front line. Three times they were driven back and their masses...thrown into great confusion...Soon, however...the Rebels captured [Hazel Grove]...It was a great misfortune to us, the loss of that position...They were able to enfilade our lines and place their infantry masses on our left flank.\textsuperscript{57}

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{55} E. P. Alexander, \textit{Military Memoirs of a Confederate} (New York: Scribner’s, 1907), 345.
\textsuperscript{56} Theodore A. Dodge, \textit{The Campaign of Chancellorsville} (Boston: Ticknor & Fields, 1881), 101.
\textsuperscript{57} Alpheus S. Williams, Letter of May 18, 1863 to his daughter, \textit{From the Cannon’s Mouth}, ed. Milo M. Quaife (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1959), 195-96.
\end{footnotes}
Even under these circumstances the Union guns at Fairview enabled the Federal infantry to hold off the Confederate attacks for some time. During this interval Meade, supported by Reynolds, rushed to army headquarters. The outcome was described by staff Maj. James Biddle:

I was present in Gen. Hooker’s tent with Gen. Meade when he {Gen. Meade} begged and intreated that his men be allowed to attack the left of the rebel army…I had I reported in person that all of Reynolds’ and most of Meade extended far to the west and rear of the troops of Lee…We could not obtain under any solicitations authority for Reynolds and Meade to move to attack Lee.\(^{58}\)

With the Union reserves thus paralyzed by Hooker, Alexander could continue his deadly work. His guns eventually triumphed by interdicting the Federal rear, ‘disrupting supply lines and leaving the advanced units and some of the artillery with no way to replenish ammunition’.\(^{59}\) The importance of the loss of access to fresh supplies of ammunition was acknowledged by both Union division commanders on the west side of the Chancellorsville position, and by both commanders of corps artillery firing in their support. Their common experience was that they successfully held off all Confederate attacks until the ammunition supply failed. The report of Brig. Gen. Williams, whose division held the southwest side of the Chancellorsville salient, was typical:

The enemy…was successfully resisted at all points of my lines…until about 8:30 a.m. My regiments had literally exhausted their ammunition…Finding it was impossible…to replenish my ammunition…I reported to the major general commanding the corps …that it would be impossible for me longer to resist the heavy attacks of the enemy.\(^{60}\)

Williams’ right was defended by the division of Maj. Gen. Hiram Berry, who was slain during the battle. Berry’s successor, Brig. Gen. Joseph Carr, stated that his ‘division held its position for

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\(^{59}\) Bruce Catton, Glory Road (New York: Doubleday, 1952), 196.

\(^{60}\) Alpheus S. Williams, OR, v. 25, Part I, 680.
over four hours…until its ammunition was entirely expended, when…it retired’. The commander of artillery for Slocum’s corps, merely noted that ‘We were nearly exhausted of ammunition’ by 9 a.m.\(^61\) The report of the commander of artillery for Sickles’ corps, Capt. George Randolph, was more emphatic:

> Twice the columns of the enemy on the Plank Road were repulsed by the concentration of fire from [his] batteries…I am of the opinion that, with a constant supply of ammunition…this line of batteries could have defied the enemy’s attack…As the batteries expended their ammunition they were withdrawn’.\(^62\)

Federal units, as described, fell back as they ran out of shells and bullets, enabling Lee’s army to enter the Chancellorsville clearing about 10:30 A.M., after four hours of fighting. Lee had no hesitation in assigning credit for this success:

> To the skillful and efficient management of the artillery the successful issue of the contest is in great measure due…It bore a prominent part in the final assault, …silencing his batteries and by a destructive enfilade fire upon his works, opened the way for the advance of our troops. \(^63\)

Lee equally well could have given credit to his Union opponent, who by yielding Hazel Grove granted to the Confederate gunners a role that would not otherwise have been possible.

> The Army of Northern Virginia had overcome terrain, entrenchments, massed artillery, and 40,000 hard-fighting Union infantry to win the day. The cost to both sides had been appalling. On the morning of May 3, the Confederate left and center had suffered slightly over 8,700 casualties, and their adversaries on the Union right about 200 fewer. Viewed in isolation, this level of loss combined with this ratio of loss cannot be considered an outcome favorable to

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Lee’s army. Nor was the day’s toll over; fighting near Fredericksburg (briefly described below) would lengthen the casualty lists still further. By the end of the day Confederate losses would amount to approximately 10,200, with Union losses being about 1,000 greater. These numbers would place May 3, 1863 as second only to the Battle of Antietam as the bloodiest day during the entire war. Once Jackson’s flank attack failed to drive the entire Federal army from its position on the evening of May 3, these devastating casualties became inevitable.  

Ironically, even as the Federal rearguard retreated north from Chancellorsville, the Union left wing was able to report that it had taken Marye’s Heights above Fredericksburg, and driven Early’s Confederates south of the town. Sedgwick immediately marched his own VI corps west along the Orange Plank Road on a route heading straight for Lee’s rear. Correctly believing that Hooker’s wing had been temporarily stunned into immobility, Lee sent McLaws’ division to check Sedgwick’s advance. McLaws was able to hold up the Federals at Salem Church six miles east of Chancellorsville until darkness fell. The next day Lee tried to arrange the destruction of the Union VI Corps, reinforcing McLaws with Anderson’s division and ordering Early to retrace his steps back to Fredericksburg and join the attack. The numbers fighting on each side amounted to approximately 20,000 men; with only a slight advantage in numbers the Confederates were unable to gain an advantage. Slow Confederate deployment limited the engagement to little more than a sharp late-afternoon skirmish, Sedgwick losing perhaps 1,100 men and the attacking Confederates nearly 1,400. Meanwhile (see Map 7), Stuart had been left with the remains of Jackson’s original flanking column, barely 20,000 exhausted troops, to hold

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64 Losses by day based largely on John Bigelow, Jr., The Campaign of Chancellorsville (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1910),473, 505; adjustments computed from material in OR, v. 25, Part I, 172-85, 188-91, 806-09.
off Hooker’s wing of 81,000.\textsuperscript{65} This was yet another opportunity—the last one on this battlefield—for Hooker to strike under conditions of such advantage that victory was virtually certain. Hooker declined the chance, leading two modern historians to liken his wing of the army as ‘akin to a Rottweiler held in a corner by a Chihuahua’. \textsuperscript{66} Without support from the main

Map 7: Confederates Attack Union Left: Situation 5:30 P.M., May 4

Source: George Skoch, \textit{op cit}

\textsuperscript{65} Esposito (Map 90) estimates that Sedgwick could oppose 19,000 men to the Confederates’ 21,600 on his front; for losses see Bigelow, 473, 505 and \textit{OR}, v. 25, Part I, 191; strength of Union right wing and opposing forces under Stuart computed from original strength less estimated losses; see previous notes.

The Federal pincers were now broken, and Lee’s army apparently out of danger. Lee could now concentrate his entire army against the Federal right wing, entrench, and make any further Union progress impossible. Instead, Lee proposed to attack Hooker on May 6. Col. Alexander had helped Lee take Chancellorsville, but he viewed this new task with trepidation:

What was known of the enemy’s position gave assurance that the task would be the heaviest which we had ever undertaken. Hooker...must have had fully 90,000 men to defend about five miles of breastworks. These he had had 48 hours to prepare...Lee would scarcely be able to bring into action 35,000...both [Union] flanks rested securely upon the river...and our artillery would be unable to render any efficient help. 

Alexander thought ‘a disastrous repulse’ inevitable, and that no one in the Army of Northern Virginia other than Lee himself thought the attack would be successful. Fortunately for the Confederates, Hooker overruled his own council of war and withdrew his army during the night of May 5. The campaign was over, and the armies returned to their camps—less the 17,300 men lost on the Union side, and the 13,460 lost by the Confederates.

Chapter 4: Lee’s Decision to Offer Battle: Why Fight Near Fredericksburg?

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68 Losses taken from Sears, 492, 501.
On April 29, 1863 Robert E. Lee had to make his first major decision about how to oppose the developing Federal spring offensive. He chose to defend his existing position near Fredericksburg, an objective his Army of Northern Virginia accomplished during a desperately fought nine-day campaign. In spite of this success, it is a major thesis of this paper that Lee was unwise to fight a major battle under the conditions existing in the Fredericksburg/Wilderness area at the end of April. This thesis rests on four major points: (1) that the physical position of the Confederate army after the successful Union crossing of the Rappahannock was extremely unfavorable; (2) that the numerical disadvantage of the Rebels was enormous, but was guaranteed to improve in the immediate future; (3) that Fredericksburg and its environs held no special military or political value for the South; and (4) that a superior defensive position was available a short distance to the south of Fredericksburg. Since the primary defense of Lee’s generalship during the Chancellorsville campaign rests on his ultimate victory, a fifth point must also be added—that Lee’s success in halting the first lunge of the Federal offensive by dusk on May 1 was possible only because of events that were entirely beyond Lee’s control, and that could not have been expected.

Map 8 shows the position of the two armies late on April 29. The three advantages for the defenders were the strong fortifications around Fredericksburg, the Rappahannock-Rapidan river line with few good crossing points, and the large area of dense scrub forest (the Wilderness) between the Wilderness tavern and the Tabernacle Church that would hinder the movement of large bodies of troops. These features were not sufficient to make the Fredericksburg/Chancellorsville area a good place to fight for the woefully outnumbered Confederates. There were three problems with the Fredericksburg entrenchments. The first was...
that they covered only about one-third of the total front initially occupied by the Rebel army. The second was that their strength had been fully tested in the battle of Fredericksburg the previous December. The 12,000 casualties inflicted on the Union forces at that time, at relatively small cost, ensured that the main Federal effort would be made elsewhere. Finally, the low ground in front of the Confederate positions could be totally dominated by artillery placed on Stafford Heights across the river. Even Stonewall Jackson had recognized during the previous engagement that the higher ground on the east side of the Rappahannock made a successful attack against Union forces in the plain on the west side an impossibility:
The first gun had hardly moved forward from the wood 100 yards when the enemy’s artillery reopened, and so completely swept our front, as to satisfy me that the proposed movement should be abandoned.  

This decision received the hearty concurrence of the equally hard-bitten commander of the frustrated attack, Jubal Early:

Nothing could have lived while passing over that plain…there was not a man in the force ordered to advance…who did not breathe easier when he heard the ordered countermanding the movement.  

A Union column that crossed the river near Fredericksburg was going to stay there until it moved back under its own volition. Thus, it was possible for Hooker to pin considerable Confederate forces near the town at almost no risk to himself.

The second alleged advantage of Lee’s position, the ability to use the two rivers as a major obstacle to a potential attacker, was not of much value. Part of the issue is illustrated by Map 8 above, which shows the Confederate infantry line ending at U.S. Ford even though other crossing points existed further upstream. The problem was that Lee had felt it necessary to cover the river all the way down to Port Royal, off the map perhaps seven miles to the east. With this deployment, the fact that the Confederates could leave much of the river lightly guarded and concentrate on the known fords was not enough. The Army of Northern Virginia had simply run out of men before reaching the Rapidan. Clausewitz pointed out the problems inherent in defending a river position in his classic *On War*:

If one considers the river as a defensive line, it must have points of support at each end such as the ocean or neutral territory, or other factors that will prevent the enemy from crossing above or below the defended sector…where an envelopment is possible, the direct defense of a river…is a very risky affair.  

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69 Thomas J. Jackson, *OR*, v. 21, 634.  

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If Clausewitz is correct in asserting that movement around the flanks of the defense is the major impediment to a successful defense of a river, then the ability of the Confederates to react to such a maneuver was an important consideration. Hooker’s re-organization of the Union cavalry meant that early detection of a movement upstream by Rebel horsemen was no longer guaranteed; during the actual campaign the Army of the Potomac got a three-day head start to the fords on the Rapidan before Lee knew what was happening. In this regard, the existence of the Wilderness was a very mixed blessing. On the one hand, this terrain was a considerable hindrance to a successful Union flanking column trying to reach the Confederate line of communications (the Telegraph Road and the rail line running into Fredericksburg from the south). On the other, the Wilderness equally impeded any large Rebel force trying to move west from the town. Any Union flanking force proceeding southeast from the Rapidan fords that was large enough to deal with Anderson’s single division would likely make it as far as Chancellorsville or even further east before meeting significant opposition. Combined with the problem of the Union artillery on Stafford heights, this feature of Lee’s position gave Hooker the capability of forcing Lee to battle in an awkward position. If Lee held his ground and did not retreat, he would have to fight with two isolated wings standing back to back less than ten miles apart, with only one good road serving as the potential line of retreat for both. Under these circumstances, defeat on either wing could spell disaster for the entire Army of Northern Virginia. The Fredericksburg/Wilderness position offered Lee poor prospects for either attack or defense.

The second factor that should have influenced Lee in his decision to fight at Chancellorsville was the relative numbers of the two armies. While details differ, there is absolutely no doubt that any battle fought on or near Lee’s position during the first few days of
May would be fought at odds of greater than two to one. As Table 1 showed, this ratio was worse than that faced by Lee during any of his previous battles; only in the closing days of the siege of Petersburg in 1865 would Lee face such odds again.\textsuperscript{72} Lee had ‘no expectations that any reinforcements…will join me in time to aid in the contest at this point’ so a fight on his first line could only be obtained under strong numerical disadvantage.\textsuperscript{73} The practical question facing Lee at this time was whether he could significantly mitigate this problem by retreating from Fredericksburg. The hypothetical situation would be a battle some distance south of that town, at a date one or two weeks in the future.

There were two possibilities for Lee obtaining reinforcements, and one for Hooker’s numbers being decreased. The most important event that could have strengthened Lee was the return of the forces under Longstreet that had been sent to forage in the Suffolk area of southeast Virginia. The veteran divisions of Pickett and Hood, with an aggregate present for duty totaling 14,000, would have increased Lee’s infantry strength by more than a quarter.\textsuperscript{74} Longstreet was ordered to rejoin Lee on April 29, but had trouble extracting his force in the face of a Federal attack and did not get the last of his men to the railroad until May 5. Due to the disorder caused by Stoneman’s raiding parties, and a certain lack of urgency about rejoining Lee due to the end of the fighting at Chancellorsville, Longstreet did not actually make it back to Fredericksburg until May 9. He probably could have reached that place, or the North Anna Bridge, a full two days earlier.\textsuperscript{75}

\textsuperscript{72} Esposito, maps 95, 120, 136a, 142.
\textsuperscript{73} Robert E. Lee to Jefferson Davis, May 2, 1863, \textit{OR}, v. 25, Part II, 765.
\textsuperscript{74} \textit{OR}, v. 25, Part II, 814.
Other sources of reinforcements were available to Lee had he retreated instead of fighting near Fredericksburg. While one can imagine a vast concentration of Confederate forces being assembled under Lee’s command north of Richmond, it should be recognized that this never happened during the war. We will consider, therefore, only historical reality—brigades that actually were sent to Lee in May or June, 1863. Two infantry commands were transferred to the Army of Northern Virginia in the former month—the brigades of J. Johnston Pettigrew (2,600) and Junius Daniel (2,050). The former, like Longstreet, was summoned to the front as soon as word of Hooker’s movement was received in Richmond. Its advance elements started to arrive at the North Anna position about May 6. Daniel was ordered to the front only on May 20, probably too late to help oppose any variant of Hooker’s spring offensive. This is also almost certainly true of the four brigades of cavalry, under William ‘Grumble’ Jones, Beverly Robertson, Albert Jenkins, and John Imboden, that were sent to Lee’s army at various times during the spring. The opening of the campaign caught them with men and horses scattered from western Virginia to South Carolina, impossible to assemble with any speed.

Finally, there is also the matter of the decline in Union strength over time. Hooker had very good reason to force a battle as soon as possible, due to the impending expiration of enlistments for no fewer than thirty-four of his regiments between May 20 and June 24. As Hooker reported to the War Department, ‘between May 20 and the last of June we shall lose by expiration of service alone nearly 16,000 men’—the equivalent of an entire army corps. Admittedly, the majority of those departing were nine months’ men, whose value was somewhat

76 Noah A. Trudeau, Gettysburg (New York: HarperCollins, 2002), 587-95; Trudeau also reported the strength of the four newly arrived cavalry brigades as 6,100.
77 For Pettigrew, see Sec. of War James A. Seddon to Gen. Lee, May 6, 1863, OR, v. 25, Part II, 780; for Daniel see Walter H. Taylor, May 20, 1863, ibid., 813.
limited. However, more than 6,900 of those to be lost were two-year veterans, as good as any soldiers in the army.⁷⁹ While Lee would have had to delay battle for three weeks to allow the actual physical departure of Union expirees, he would have started to benefit sooner than that. Even as early as May 1, one regiment (34th New York) disputed the official expiration date and refused to obey orders. Army headquarters informed the division commander, Brig. Gen. John Gibbon that:

Generals Meade and Sickles, in similar cases, had the refractory men surrounded by a guard, and informed that if they persisted in their insubordination they would do so at the peril of their lives.⁸⁰ Gibbon managed to get his men back into line, but it is quite possible that their feelings were similar to those of another group of expirees:

The men were just a trifle lukewarm about things…The division was fully aware that it had only twenty-seven more days to serve…Understandably, this tempered enthusiasm; who wanted to get shot, so near to the end of his time as a soldier?⁸¹

Lee was well aware of the pattern of expiring Union enlistments, but believed it justified making his fight as early as possible:

I think it all-important that we should assume the aggressive by the first of May, when we may expect Gen. Hooker’s army to be weakened by the expiration of the term of service of many of his regiments, and before new recruits can be received.⁸²

There was no connection between the loss of old regiments and the arrival of new soldiers for the Army of the Potomac, so Lee’s selection of May 1 as the time of lowest effective strength for his opponents was not correct. As shown above, by May 9 Lee would have been reinforced by Longstreet and Pettigrew to a strength of 78,000, lowering the ratio of Union to

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⁷⁹ Joseph Hooker to War Department, May 28, 1863, *ibid.*, 532.
⁸⁰ Seth Williams to John Gibbon, April 30, 1863, *ibid.*, 302.
Confederate numbers from the unprecedented 2.11 to a somewhat more manageable 1.67. Some additional cavalry might also have been received, and the expiree morale factor would have worked ever more strongly in Lee’s favor. From the viewpoint of effective numbers, the retreat and delay option was far more favorable to the Confederates than standing fast just south of the Rappahannock.

The next point to be considered is whether there was some political or economic rationale for attempting to retain the region around Fredericksburg. As a general rule, the Confederacy hated to relinquish any of its territory, fighting Yankee incursions wherever they occurred. There was no reason to believe, however, that the Confederate authorities placed any special political or prestige value on the territory that would have had to be yielded if Lee had withdrawn to the next good defensive position on the way to Richmond. Lee himself declared that he wished to stay, so that ‘Fredericksburg will be saved and our communications retained’, but the town had been wrecked by Union forces the preceding December and did not really provide good access to anyplace useful.83 The twenty-mile long swath of territory along the Richmond, Potomac, and Fredericksburg Railroad between the southern edge of the Fredericksburg defenses and the North Anna River (see Map 1) contained neither towns of any size, nor any roads branching off to the relatively untouched regions to the east. The corridor itself and the areas near the railroad had been thoroughly exploited by Confederate commissary officers during the winter. According to historian Edward Stackpole, ‘The surrounding country had already been thoroughly drained of its provisions; little of value remained’.84 The corridor did allow access to the lower Rappahannock, but without good roads or railroads this region could be used as a source of supply only by units actually located in that area. Accordingly, the cavalry brigade of W.H.F.

83 Robert E. Lee to Jefferson Davis, OR v. 25, Part II, 765.
84 Stackpole, 65.
Lee had been stationed there until the end of March, when the approach of the campaign season compelled the Confederates to move it elsewhere.\textsuperscript{85} From that time forward, the contribution of the entire area near Fredericksburg to Confederate supplies was very limited. The nearest point with major economic value was the connection to the Virginia Central Railroad at Hanover Junction. This location, so valuable for receiving supply from the Shenandoah Valley, was on the south side of the North Anna and so could easily be retained in the event of a short retreat by the Army of Northern Virginia.

The North Anna has been mentioned a number of times because it was the obvious alternative to fighting close to Fredericksburg. Jackson and Longstreet both thought the North Anna provided the superior position, and Lee himself had selected it as his chosen battleground prior to the start of Burnside’s campaign in December. The ultimate endorsement was delivered in 1864 by the new Union general-in-chief. During his Overland Campaign Grant attacked Lee’s army wherever encountered, fighting major battles at the Wilderness, Spotsylvania Court House, and Cold Harbor in spite of any disadvantages imposed by fortifications or terrain. Only at the North Anna was Grant so confounded by a Confederate position that he simply gave up, and moved around Lee’s flank instead of attacking.

Let us first consider the reasons for the preference of key Confederates for the North Anna position over Fredericksburg before returning to Grant’s dilemma. Stonewall Jackson had expressed his opinion of the latter defensive line before the December battle:

\textsuperscript{85} Robert E. Lee to James A. Seddon, April 4, 1863, \textit{OR}, v. 25, Part II, 703.
‘I am opposed to fighting here. We will whip the enemy but gain no fruits of victory. I have advised the line of the North Anna but have been overruled.’

Later historians gave various reasons for Jackson’s opinion. Walter Geer wrote that Jackson objected to the Fredericksburg position because ‘it gave no facilities for a counter stroke, or any opening for a pursuit in case of victory’. Any triumph at Fredericksburg would be a strictly defensive one, and according to John McKenzie, Jackson believed winning a defensive battle and then going back to the positions both armies had held before would serve no good strategic purpose for the Confederacy.

He had therefore proposed an alternative strategy to Gen. Lee, based on the fact that at the North Anna:

the attackers would have little flank protection; thus when their attack was spent, flanking counter attacks by a reserve of fresh confederate troops might surround and destroy all or part of Burnside’s army…if routed at the North Anna position, the beaten army would have 37 miles to travel to Aquia creek, and it would have to cross the deep Po and Rappahannock rivers while under attack by pursuing Confederates.

Lee rejected Jackson’s approach even though, according to both D. S. Freeman and Brig. Gen. E. P. Alexander he agreed with Jackson on the advantages of the North Anna line. Lee himself put things this way:

I think it more advantageous to retire to the Annas and give battle there than on the banks of the Rappahannock. My design was to have done so in the first instance [December]. My purpose was changed not from any advantage in this position [at Fredericksburg] but from an unwillingness to open more of our country to depredation…and also with a view of collecting such forage and

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88 McKenzie, 108.
provisions as could be obtained in the Rappahannock Valley…It will therefore be more advantageous to us to draw him further away from his base of operations. 89

By late April the supplies were long gone. Maj. Gen. Sir Frederick Maurice mentions another factor that he thought affected Lee’s actions: ‘a break in the weather that made the roads bad and that rapid maneuver necessary for a coup by Jackson impossible’. The utter futility of Burnside’s infamous ‘Mud March’ only a few weeks after the battle of Fredericksburg showed the unwisdom of relying on the likelihood of decent weather during the Virginia winter. By the beginning of May, however, any objection based on the local climate no longer applied. 90

The ability of the North Anna position to open the way for a Confederate counterattack was amply proved by Lee’s brilliant defense around Ox Ford in May, 1864. At the start of Grant’s Overland Campaign, Lee had chosen to abandon Fredericksburg and the line of the Rappahannock, and fight further south. A bloody battle in the Wilderness just west and south of the Wilderness Tavern (see Map 8) was followed by a second engagement about a dozen miles to the southeast, at a heavily fortified Rebel position centered around Spottsylvania Court House. Grant was acting on a single principle: Attack the Confederates wherever he found them, regardless of any obstacles. After losing perhaps 34,000 men during the first two weeks of his offensive, 91 Grant slipped around Lee’s right and marched another twenty miles south towards the crossings of the North Anna River. Just as Jackson had predicted the previous year, the Federals became strung out in the course of their movement north of the river. Grant admitted later that ‘Lee now had a superb opportunity to take the initiative’ against either

Map 9: Lee Stops Grant at the North Anna: Situation May 25, 1864

90 Sir Frederick Maurice, Robert E. Lee the Soldier (Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1925), 169.
91 Esposito, maps 125 and 133.
isolated half of the Union army. 92 Lee missed this chance, so the Union movement continued. On the 23rd the Federals made it to the south bank of the river, winning skirmishes at both Jericho Mills and Chesterfield Bridge and inflicting more than 1,100 casualties on the Confederates. 93 The Union advance was aided by the fact that the south bank of the North Anna was lower than the north, except for the short stretch southeast of and including Ox Ford.

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Here the advance of the Army of the Potomac came to a grinding halt. As Grant himself reported to Maj. Gen. Henry Halleck, Lee’s position at the North Anna was unassailable. Grant had split his army into two wings, thinly connected by Willcox’s single division which was too weak to reinforce either. To move troops from the strong right wing to support Hancock would require two river crossings and a six-mile march on the winding country roads. Historian Gordon Rhea described the situation:

Lee...would hold a tremendous advantage...for the first time in the campaign the army of Northern Virginia would be positioned to take the offensive. Lee could leave a skeleton force in the western leg to fend off Warren and Wright, concentrate the mass of his army along the eastern leg, and attack Hancock with overwhelming strength... Lee’s moment had come. His plan to split the Union army had worked... He had isolated Grant’s best corps and was positioned to assault with superior numbers.  

On the afternoon of the 24th Lee could concentrate about two-thirds of his army against one-third of the Union force. His potential target was not yet entrenched, had an open left flank, and was backed up against an unfordable river with only two bridges. The opportunity south of the North Anna was even better than the one Lee had foregone a few miles to the north. Rhea believed that Lee ‘would most certainly have wrecked much of Hancock’s corps’ if he had attacked. Fortunately for the Federals, Lee himself was incapacitated by illness at this time, allowing Hancock to escape. This good fortune does not alter the conclusion that the North Anna position provided the potential for an attack with concentration of force, no need to divide the army or take other undue risks, good terrain for maneuver, and constricted lines of retreat for the enemy. This may be contrasted with the position actually chosen for the 1863 battle, where most of the fighting was undertaken on May 3 without numerical advantage or any Confederate ability to maneuver for advantage.

94 Rhea, 322, 344.
Finally, having considered the possibilities of the North Anna position based on actual Civil War events, we should do the same for the Fredericksburg/Wilderness position. It is undeniably true that within three days of deciding to fight near Chancellorsville the Confederates had repulsed the advance of the Union army at very little cost. This success should not be given full weight in the arguments as to whether Lee should have fought at that place, because it was due to actions by the Union commander that should not have occurred and could not have been predicted. Lee was justified on the basis of past experience in believing that the Union leadership in Virginia was not very good. He would not have been similarly justified in assuming that the Union army would not only halt its advance at the first sign of opposition, but actually turn tail and run. The events that took place on the afternoon of May 1 represented a level of Union command incompetence not previously displayed in the Eastern Theater, and could not have been forecast by Lee or anyone else. Therefore, the arguments presented in this chapter about the undesirability of Lee choosing to fight rather than retreat to a better position still hold in full force. In particular, the fact that Lee chose to wage battle without one of his best generals and more than 16,000 fresh men seems to make little sense. We are forced to agree with Robert Krick:

Good ground on the North Anna River would allow the Confederates a chance to regroup and start over. Even after a century and a quarter it is difficult to come to grips with Lee’s daring choice.95

With all due respect to Krick, ‘inexplicable’ might be a better word choice than ‘daring’.

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Chapter 5: Lee’s Decision to Escalate the Battle: Why Make the Flank March?

By the evening of May 1, 1863, Robert E. Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia had followed the retreat of the Union right wing back to the Chancellorsville area. The threat of a potentially ruinous pincers movement against the Confederate line of communications had been neutralized at little cost. For the first time in the campaign, Lee had the option of entrenching his main force in terrain highly favorable to the defense. Instead, Lee divided his own left wing into two parts and sent Jackson with half the army to make an all-out attack on the Union flank. Jackson routed the Union XI Corps late on the afternoon of May 2, losing fewer than 1,000 of his own men. In spite of this success, it is a major thesis of this paper that Lee was unwise to order Jackson’s famous flank march. This thesis rests on four major points: (1) that Lee had already secured the stated objectives of his defense, and was unlikely to face another major Federal threat; (2) that the damage actually done to the Army of the Potomac by Jackson’s column was not serious, and could not conceivably have inflicted a major blow on the enemy; (3) that the inevitable result of Jackson’s march was the battle for Chancellorsville on the morning of May 3, in which the Confederates won the field at the price of the second bloodiest day in the history of the Army of Northern Virginia; and (4) the level of risk to which the Confederates were exposed during and after Jackson’s march was excessive, with the Southern tactical success being entirely dependent on no fewer than four displays of command incompetence by the Union army. The final evaluation of Lee’s generalship during this campaign must also include a fifth point, which is generally overlooked—that the actual result of Chancellorsville was not all that favorable to the Confederacy, and did not compare well with the outcomes of the other major battles fought in the same vicinity.
Map 10 shows the position occupied by the left wing of the Confederate army at the time Lee was considering a plan to attack the unsecured Union right flank. The vital question about this line was whether it gave Lee a high probability of achieving the goals.

Map 10: Lee Considers a Flank Attack: Situation Midnight, May 1/2

Source: Clipson, *op cit.*
of his campaign. He believed that the loss of the Fredericksburg/Rappahannock line ‘throws open a broad margin of our frontier, and renders our railroad connections more hazardous and more difficult to secure’.  

Once the initial Federal maneuver had been thwarted on May 1, the Army of the Potomac could oust the Confederates from the neighborhood of Fredericksburg only by (1) a direct assault on the fortified heights just west of the town; or (2) by a similar head-on attack on the position shown above southeast of Chancellorsville; or (3) by a new movement to turn the now fortified and alert Confederate left. The outcome of the December battle shows that the first option was unlikely to succeed. If Colston’s reserve division of 6,100 men had been sent to bolster Early’s 10,000 at Fredericksburg, it is unlikely that the Union left wing could have breached the immensely strong entrenchments at that point. Even without this reinforcement, Early withstood a number of attacks on May 3, and inflicted more than 3,000 casualties on the Union forces before being compelled to retreat.

A Federal success was no more likely if they had attempted the second approach. The Wilderness not only concealed the Confederate lines and protected them from the Union artillery; it also greatly hindered the massing of Union troops at any particular point. The line of low hills between Catherine Furnace and the Orange Plank road provided further advantages. The Confederates, with a force of almost 37,000 infantry on this flank, had ample strength to extend their lines further west to block any direct approach from the Furnace Road. Fitz Lee’s cavalry stationed at the Burton house just south of the Federal XI Corps would have provided additional security. Lt. Gen. James Longstreet had no qualms about the strength of the Rebel line. He thought that the proper policy was for Lee

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to stand behind the entrenched lines to await the return of my troops from Suffolk. Under that plan Gen. Lee would have had time to strengthen and improve his trenches, while Hooker was entrenching at Chancellorsville. He could have held his army solid behind his lines...my impression was and is that Gen. Lee standing under his trenches would have been stronger against Hooker that he was in December against Burnside and that he would have grown stronger every hour of delay.98

If Longstreet was correct, that leaves only the third option described above as a possible reason for Lee to abandon his advantageous defensive position. One year after Chancellorsville, the Federals under Grant tried to outflank Lee’s army by marching down the Brock Road off the map to the south. The maneuver almost succeeded, for Grant had three advantages that Hooker lacked in 1863: a secure supply line through Fredericksburg (already in his possession), the presence of his own cavalry corps in full strength, and a good road heading directly around the Confederate right. Hooker, under his less favorable circumstances, could only have moved blindly past the Confederate left, exposing his supply route leading back to the Rappahannock fords and constantly getting further away from the other wing of his own army. It therefore appears highly unlikely that Hooker could have undertaken a second successful outflanking march in close proximity to a fully alert Confederate army.

The position of Lee’s army as the sun rose on May 2 had been much improved during the previous twenty-four hours. In addition to the tangible factors of strength and position cited above, Lee had gained another source of strength that buttressed his lines, and gave him every assurance of victory. The loss of nerve demonstrated by the Union commander on the previous day had both demoralized his own senior generals, and given Lee valuable information about the likelihood of further offensive action by Hooker’s wing of the Federal army. The leaders of the three advancing Federal corps reacted to Hooker’s withdrawal order with a mixture of anger and

disgust. Maj. Gen. Darius Couch, commanding the Union II Corps, later recounted his conversation with Hooker after being ordered to withdraw on May 1:

   To hear from his own lips that the advantages gained by the successful marches...were to culminate in fighting a defensive battle in that nest of thickets was too much, and I retired from his presence in the belief that my commanding general was a whipped man.99

   According to a II Corps staffer, the officer delivering the order, Brig. Gen. G. K. Warren, ‘stated with great pain...that he had entreated Gen. Hooker not to take this most mischievous step’. Maj. Gen. Henry Slocum, commanding the XII Corps, called the staff officer sent to him with the withdrawal notice ‘a damned liar’ because ‘No one but a crazy man would give such an order’. Slocum also informed the unfortunate Major Roebling that ‘If I find you have spoken falsely, you shall be shot’. Maj. Gen. George Meade of the V Corps acidly remarked that ‘If we can’t hold the top of a hill, we certainly can’t hold the bottom of it.’ By the evening of May 1, none of these officers was in the proper state of mind needed to fight a successful battle.100

   At this same time, Lee was forming his own opinion of Gen. Hooker as an army commander. One of the reasons for Lee’s remarkable record since assuming command of the Army of Northern Virginia was his ability to draw inferences about future behavior from the reported actions of his opponents. Historian Edward Stackpole termed Lee ‘a past master in the art of appreciating the capabilities of his opponent.’ Col. Alexander felt that Lee regarded Hooker with contempt:

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The degree to which Lee counted on [Hooker’s] shortcomings is beyond knowledge, but he certainly behaved in a fashion he would not have attempted against sterner opposition.101

In fact, the plan that Lee adopted for the second day of the battle made little sense unless Lee assumed that Hooker would remain quiescent under almost any provocation. The horrendous dual risk that Lee took, of occupying a paper-thin line while outnumbered more than four to one while simultaneously directing a large force on a day-long flank march directly across the enemy’s front, could not conceivably be justified under any other circumstances. However, if the Federal host was not going to move, then Lee’s defensive objectives would have been secured without taking such risks. The conclusion is inescapable: Jackson’s flank march was a discretionary movement, undertaken for offensive purposes, and it must be judged on that basis.

We can determine the true objective of the Confederate offensive on May 2 by considering Lee’s philosophy of battle. Lee knew that his army, and the Confederate forces in general, were seriously outmatched in numbers and resources by those of the Union. From this circumstance Lee drew the conclusion that:

The lives of our soldiers are too precious to be sacrificed in the attainment of successes that inflict no loss upon the enemy beyond the actual loss in battle. Every victory should bring us nearer to the great end which it is the object of this war to reach.102

In practical terms, the enemy had to be truly beaten, deprived of all offensive capability, with large formations crippled and disorganized for a significant period of time, while the Confederates avoided such damage.

When viewed by this high standard, Jackson’s flank march and surprise attack at Chancellorsville was not a success. Jackson’s men managed to inflict a total loss of 3,096, or less than three percent of the Union forces present on the battlefield, while suffering 1,113 casualties themselves. The spoils of war, in terms of prisoners and captured artillery, amounted to almost 800 men and nine guns. Col. Alexander correctly deemed this ‘a very trifling loss’,\textsuperscript{103} granted the size of the total Union forces present. The primary victim of the Confederate attack, the Union XI Corps, was indeed routed and put out of action for a few hours. However, by the next morning it had been reorganized and put back into position on the left of the Union defensive line. Table 2 below places the limited impact of the Confederate attack of May 2 in its proper context. These are not the sort of numbers associated with a war-altering strategic success, or even with a significant tactical victory able to determine the outcome of a major battle.

The fact that the actual historical result of Jackson’s attack was only a modest success does not provide a complete proof that the movement should not have been made. Its execution might have been faulty, or there might have been some unforeseeable circumstance that thwarted Lee’s expectation of a decisive victory. As Churchill

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|l|c|c|c|}
\hline
Union Organization & Initial Strength & Total Loss, May 2 & Percentage Loss \\
\hline
Army of the Potomac, Total Infantry Corps Strength & 118,440 & 3,096 & 2.6 \\
\hline
Right Wing & 94,773 & 3,096 & 3.3 \\
\hline
XI Corps & 12,977 & 2,411 & 18.6 \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\caption{Union Casualties from Jackson’s Attack, May 2, 1863}
\end{table}

Source: Bigelow, 473, 505

\textsuperscript{103} Losses from Bigelow, 505; E. Porter Alexander, \textit{Military Memoirs of a Confederate} (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1907), 336.
remarked, ‘In war one cannot guarantee success, one can only deserve it.’ A closer look at the progress of the flank march, and the physical environment in which it took place, is necessary to determine whether Lee’s intentions were properly executed.

The terrain of the Wilderness has generally been considered an unalloyed advantage for the Confederates, in large part because it made off-road maneuvers so difficult. This evaluation was correct as long as the larger Union army was the attacker. On the morning of May 2, when Jackson was trying to organize a Confederate offensive, the Wilderness hindered rather than assisted the Rebels. Although Jackson issued his orders for a dawn (4:00 a.m.) start, his troops were not actually formed and on the march until nearly 8:00. Granted that the troops were not originally deployed in order of march, so that Colston’s division had to be brought up and inserted between Rodes and A.P. Hill, and that the march column was ten miles long, the preparation time does not seem excessive. At the standard marching rate of Jackson’s corps, two miles an hour, the advance elements would have finished their planned nine-mile march to the Federal flank by around 12:30 instead of the actual 4:00, and been deployed off the road and ready to move forward by 2:00 instead of the actual 5:15. To expect important results from an attack with more than five hours of daylight remaining for the attack was perhaps not unreasonable; to expect such results from an attack made with only two hours left before sunset was excessively optimistic. As Col. Alexander noted, ‘only in daylight can the fruits of victory be gathered’.

Why did the march take so long? There were two reasons, both of which could have been anticipated. The first was simply that the Confederate high command, even though it had

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occupied the area of the battlefield for more than five months, knew little about the road net in
the Wilderness. Jackson’s initial route had his men moving north up the Brock Road, which
would have put the head of his column squarely in the middle of the XI Corps line, rather than on
its flank (see Map. 10 above). Warned by Fitz Lee, Jackson was able to correct this mistake at
the cost of adding three miles to his march—one and a half hours at normal speed. Stackpole
termed this extension ‘a serious if not fatal deterrent to the full exploitation of Jackson’s
move’. 106 The second, related reason for delay was that no account had been taken of the fact
that an entirely road-bound column, marching along a single narrow path, was not going to be
able to have all its components start the march at the same time. If Jackson wanted to attack with
two of his divisions rather than one, he had to wait until Rodes’ three-mile long column had
cleared the road and given Colston’s men room to deploy. That imposed a delay of another
ninety minutes or so, accounting quite well for the remainder of the historical delay. Jackson’s
last division, that of A.P. Hill, found its road entirely clogged and was not able to move out until
11:00. Hill was not able to get into attack position before sunset, and Jackson did not wait for
him, depriving his attack column of one-third of its strength. These problems were not due not
to faulty execution; Col. Alexander was adamant on this point, asserting that ‘I have never seen
any criticism upon or discussion of the time consumed by this march’. Rather, one must place
the blame on inaccurate and unrealistic planning. Robert E. Lee had no reason to expect an attack
that was better delivered than the one Jackson gave him. 107

In fact, Lee had one piece of undeserved good fortune that prevented Jackson’s modest
success from being turned into a complete disaster. The Union commander, at 1:55 a.m. on the
3rd, had ordered his I Corps under Reynolds to move under cover of darkness from Sedgwick’s

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107 For Hill’s timing see Sears, 243; E. Porter Alexander, *Fighting for the Confederacy*, 201.
wing in front of Fredericksburg to his own, for the specific purpose of protecting his right flank. However, according to Union Chief of Staff Maj. Gen. Daniel Butterfield, the necessary dispatch from army headquarters did not arrive until 4:55, because ‘the orderly lost his way who brought it to United States Ford’. Reynolds had his men were crossing at U.S. Ford about the same time that Jackson was starting his attack; the I Corps was about equal in strength to the two divisions Jackson had at his disposal. The presence of Reynolds’ men ensured that Jackson would never win his decisive victory by reaching the Union bridges over the Rappahannock and cutting off the Federal right wing. This would have been true even if Jackson had not been shot down and had somehow organized a coherent attack, under the circumstances described by Brig. Gen. R.E. Colston:

Brigades, regiments, and companies had become so mixed that they could not be handled; besides which the darkness of evening was so intensified by the shade of the dense woods that nothing could be seen a few yards off. The halt at that time was not a mistake, but a necessity.

It should also be realized that if Hooker’s order had been received at the time of issue, Reynolds would have been directly behind the XI Corps at the time Jackson attacked. If this had been the case, matters would quickly have become very uncomfortable for Jackson’s men; a serious Confederate reverse could hardly have been avoided. This whole business illustrates both Lee’s good luck and poor planning; throwing a large force into an area about which no information was available about roads or enemy forces present was surely a dubious decision.

In the event, the worst consequence of Jackson’s flank attack was the compromised position in which it left the Confederate forces on the morning of May 3. As discussed above, there was no real chance for Jackson to disable a large part of the Federal army on May 2.

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Withdrawal of Jackson’s wing would have been virtually impossible, granted the same factors of darkness, disorganization, and bad terrain that had helped the Federals stop the Confederate attack. That meant that the Confederates were going to be in close contact with superior Federal forces at dawn on May 3, as shown in Map 11. Stuart now commanded Jackson’s former troops due to the latter’s wounding, and his force was faced by equal numbers in front and a separate and superior force on his left that he had no means to oppose. His Union opponents were entrenched, and the high ground at Fairview and Hazel Grove gave their guns complete dominance of the west and south sides of the Chancellorsville salient. Lee himself, in direct command of the Confederate center, had 17,000 men confronting three Union divisions of slightly superior aggregate strength. In addition, the Union salient blocked the two roads that could have linked the Confederate left and center, giving Hooker interior lines so that he could concentrate an overwhelming force against either Lee or Stuart whenever he wished. According to McKenzie

at any time after Jackson’s attack halted, Hooker had the material resources to win the battle. On the 3rd, before the two Confederate corps were rejoined around Chancellorsville, he could have driven between them and eventually defeated each portion.

The Confederate right wing at Fredericksburg (a few miles to the east) was also confronted by a stronger Union force, and was subject to collapse at any moment. Lee had to be able to send reinforcements to Gen. Early at Fredericksburg, and the only way he could do that was by re-

Figure 11: Lee Tries to Re-Unite His Army: Situation 6:00 A.M., May 3

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110 Size of forces computed from Bigelow, 473, 475.
uniting his center and left and establishing a good defensive position. This in turn could only be done by smashing the Federal salient around Chancellorsville by a direct frontal assault. The prospects for a successful attack were dismal, but Lee was compelled to order his men forward anyway. Much has been written about the risks that Lee took in exposing the divided portions of his army to Federal attack on May 2, but the real payback for Lee’s recklessness occurred on the following day. As historian Edward Bonekemper put it, the

Source: George Skoch, from Sears, 315.
problem resulting from Jackson’s flanking march was that Lee’s forces were separated and vulnerable to a counter-attack...Stuart and Lee were left with no choice but to launch desperate offensives the next morning...so that they could rejoin their forces.\textsuperscript{112}

With no advantage in numbers or position, the odds were stacked against the Confederate attack.

The results of the fighting around Chancellorsville on May 3 were described in Chapter 3 above, and will be briefly summarized here. Lee did succeed in reducing the Federal position, after about four hours of some of the most intense combat of the entire war. Losses incurred during this action were about equal, 8,500 for the Union forces 8,700 for the Confederates.\textsuperscript{113} These awful Rebel casualties were sustained not for the sake of any great strategic object, but merely to restore the two combatants to more or less the same relative positions that they occupied before Jackson marched. The historical results for this part of the battle do not justify Lee’s decision to escalate the conflict by sending Jackson against the Union flank.

The next issues to be considered in our evaluation of this decision are those of the risks to which it exposed the Army of Northern Virginia, and the extent to which Lee’s ability to avoid the worst potential consequences of these risks was affected by Union command issues. The risks include the following: (1) The exposure of the divisions of McLaws and Anderson to destruction by overwhelming enemy forces from the time Jackson started his march until that general attacked; (2) The exposure of Jackson’s three divisions to annihilation by a flank march across the enemy front, with zero ability to either maneuver or retreat; (3) The complete defeat of Jackson’s flank attack on May 2 by an alerted and reinforced XI Corps; (4) The probable annihilation of Stuart’s wing by a catastrophic flank attack by two entire federal corps on May 3; (5) The exposure of the Confederate center and left to heavy losses and a high probability of

\textsuperscript{113} Daily losses taken from Bigelow, 505.
defeat during the battle around Chancellorsville on May 3; (6) The vulnerability of the Confederate right to a severe defeat at odds of four to one during the entirety of May 2; and (7) The exposure of the Jackson/Stuart wing to attack at heavy odds from the Union right after Lee organized a column of three divisions to re-take Fredericksburg on the afternoon of May 3. Every one of these individual possibilities was enough to daunt almost any general except Lee, ‘the supreme master of the calculated risk’;\textsuperscript{114} taken together they form an overwhelming objection to Lee’s strategy at Chancellorsville.

Many of the listed risks—all except the third and the fifth—were perhaps not as bad as they seemed, if one could accept what must have been one of Lee’s guiding assumptions—that Hooker was incapable of ordering an attack. Stackpole’s comment that ‘Either Hooker was operating in a mental vacuum or he was as ineffectual as his predecessors when the chips were down’ is entirely fair.\textsuperscript{115} Even if Hooker was paralyzed into indecision, however, the theoretical possibility of independent operations by his corps commanders did exist. Sickles exceeded his orders and attacked the tail of Jackson’s marching column on May 2, but he was so delayed by Hooker that his action destroyed only a single regiment. Meade and Reynolds, on the extreme Union right, knew they had a great opportunity on May 3, but refused to exercise any initiative even when Hooker was obviously incapacitated. As Col. Alexander notes, this was quite peculiar:

\textsuperscript{114} Stackpole, \textit{Chancellorsville}, 204.
His second [blunder], permitting us to defeat a part of his army while the next stood idly by, we will attribute solely to the brick in the solar plexus. But why did none of his staff take the responsibility? Or none of the other corps commanders? I can only attribute the general fear to take responsibility to the moral effect of Lee’s prestige.\textsuperscript{116}

Under these circumstances one could interpret the refusal of the Army of the Potomac to attack and overthrow Lee’s plans as due to what might be termed its standard level of incompetence. It was not therefore not entirely unreasonable for Lee to believe that he was safe from Federal attack at Chancellorsville, and that he had indeed ‘calculated’ the level of risk. On the two remaining points, his ability to surprise the XI Corps and to storm the Federal salient on May 3, Lee’s reasoning about his prospects of success cannot be supported. The level of incompetence required to give his army the moderate success it actually enjoyed on these two occasions cannot be traced to the normal functioning of the Union high command. Rather, only the most extraordinary blunders—what might be deemed extreme incompetence—rescued the Confederates from the logical consequences of their own actions. From past history, Lee had no right to assume that these Federal mistakes would take place.

Consider the surprise of the XI Corps first. There is no other case during the entire Civil War where a local commander, having received repeated warnings of a flank attack and having the permission of army headquarters to adjust his positions, failed to do anything to protect his men. Detection was more likely than not, as Col. Alexander noted:

Only a very sanguine man could even hope that 15 brigades, with over 100 guns, could make a march of 14 miles around Hooker’s enormous army without being discovered.\textsuperscript{117}

\textsuperscript{116} Alexander, \textit{Fighting for the Confederacy}, 216. In the same vein, Catton claimed that the Army of the Potomac was ‘ready enough to admit that the greatest general of all was…General Lee’. See Bruce Catton, \textit{This Hallowed Ground} (Garden City: Doubleday, 1956), 316.

\textsuperscript{117} Alexander, \textit{Military Memoirs}, 329.
In fact, Jackson was seen within an hour of his starting the march, and according to Sears
‘Beginning at 3 o’clock or so there was a series of actual sightings…that by any measure ought
to have jolted Devens and Howard…into action.’ The major commanding the Union pickets
posted beyond the right flank reported ‘A large body of the enemy massing in my front’ and
shots were exchanged between the Union pickets and the advance of Jackson’s column. A Union
artillery captain rode right into a solid mass of Rebel troops a mile from the Union flank,
narrowly escaped, reported to both army and corps headquarters, and was totally disbelieved.118
Howard had been told by Hooker at 9:30 that morning that

If he [the enemy] should throw himself upon your flank, he wishes you to
examine the ground…in order that you may be prepared for him in whatever
direction he advances…The right of your line does not appear to be strong
enough…there appears to be a scarcity of troops at that point…We have good
reason to suppose that the enemy is moving to our right.119

In spite of the reports, and in spite of his orders, Howard moved not a man. Historian A.C.
Hamlin justifiably concluded that ‘a more ridiculous and stupid surprise did not occur in the
history of the Civil War’. Yet Lee’s entire strategy for Jackson’s flank march depended on such a
surprise.120

The other risk Lee should not have assumed rested on his ability to drive back the
Federals holding Chancellorsville. Under the conditions existing at dawn on May 3, briefly
described above, it simply could not be done. Historian Allan Nevins believed that

had they [Sickles’ corps] been maintained on their high ground here at Hazel
Grove a junction of the separated southern forces would in fact have been
impossible. But Hooker threw this last golden chance away by ordering the
troops to fall back at dawn.121

118 Sears, 266; Maj. Owen Rice, ‘Afield with the Eleventh Corps at Chancellorsville’, MOLLUS, Sketches
of War History, I (Cincinnati, 1885), 23; Catton, Glory Road (Garden City: Doubleday & Co., 1952), 183.
This action should be considered as equivalent to Meade abandoning Cemetery Hill at Gettysburg, or Lee voluntarily yielding Marye’s Heights at Fredericksburg, or Jackson marching away from Henry House Hill during the Battle of First Bull Run. These generals all held the key terrain on their battlefields, and won victories as a result. In fact, there is no known analog to Hooker’s abandoning the most vital position that existed at Chancellorsville. No Civil War commander anywhere else ever did such a thing. Lee could certainly not count on Hooker’s action, and so could not reasonably have expected anything except defeat on the morning of May 3. Once again, Lee triumphed not because of good planning but because of extraordinary incompetence by his foes.

When the Battle of Chancellorsville finally ended, it became possible to consider what Lee had actually won by fighting in a position of disadvantage before his entire force was assembled. In terms of territory, Lee’s decision to fight in the Fredericksburg/Wilderness area preserved the nearby districts from Federal plundering. We have already shown, however, that this region had already been picked over and little of economic value remained. The relative position of the two armies, glaring at each other across the Rappahannock, was exactly the same after the battle as before. However, it is the losses sustained by the Confederates that show that Chancellorsville was anything but Lee’s greatest victory. Table 3 compares the casualties associated with all three battles waged near Fredericksburg—the battle of Fredericksburg proper in December, 1862, Chancellorsville, and the Wilderness. Lee commanded the Southern forces in all three engagements, and the disparity in numbers between the Union and Confederate forces were fairly similar. By the key measure of relative losses, Chancellorsville was by far the least successful for the Confederacy. If Fredericksburg had the same relative loss as Chancellorsville, the Union would have been saved more than 5,000 casualties; in the Wilderness, the Union
would have been saved more than 3,000. If Robert E. Lee had achieved only the same level of
victory in his other Virginia battles that he secured at Chancellorsville, the story of the war
would have been different—and probably considerably shorter.

Table 3: Losses from Three Battles Fought Near Fredericksburg

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Battle</th>
<th>Union Loss</th>
<th>Confederate Loss</th>
<th>Ratio of Union to Confederate Losses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fredericksburg</td>
<td>12,353</td>
<td>5,377</td>
<td>2.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chancellorsville</td>
<td>17,304</td>
<td>13,460</td>
<td>1.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Wilderness</td>
<td>17,666</td>
<td>11,033</td>
<td>1.60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: Fredericksburg: OR, Series I, v.21, 97; Chancellorsville: Sears, 492,501; Wilderness
Noah A. Trudeau, Bloody Roads South (Boston: Little, Brown, & Co., 1989), 341; Alfred C.
Young, Lee’s Army During the Overland Campaign (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University
Chapter 6: Conclusion: Lee’s Misguided Generalship at Chancellorsville

This work has focused on the generalship of Gen. Robert E. Lee during the Civil War campaign of Chancellorsville, and found it to be lacking at a number of key junctures before and during the four-day battle. In particular, we found two decisions to be unjustifiable by any information that Lee might have had in his possession at the time. First, the rush into battle on May 1 while fully one-fourth of his army was still absent ensured that Lee’s army would have to fight while at a massive numerical disadvantage, and ignored the obvious alternative of retreat and concentration. Second, the famous flanking march of Stonewall Jackson was unnecessary to halt the Federal advance, extremely risky, and unlikely to result in any significant advantage to the Confederacy. These opinions are not in the mainstream of historical commentary on this battle, in which uncritical admiration of Lee has taken the largest part.

Why do most writers on the battle of Chancellorsville refer to it in such terms as ‘confirm[ing] Lee’s reputation as an unexcelled Confederate field commander’ or that ‘Lee’s moves were made with the quick authority of a general used to dominating the battlefield’ or that [History] ‘will show nowhere else such an example of the steady handling of a smaller force against a greater one’. The two major reasons, as discussed in Chapter 2, appear to be the general postwar reputation of Lee as the near-perfect exemplar of the Lost Cause, and the stunning contrast between the apparent disaster facing his own army on May 1 and the humiliating retreat of the opposing Army of the Potomac four days later. Granted the initial conditions many writers on the battle seem to be so amazed that Lee won any kind of victory that

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they tend to gloss over some of the unpleasant details. Yet the history of the battle given in Chapter 3 clearly shows that except for the two-hour period during and after the rout of the Union XI Corps, the Confederates always attacked under the disadvantage of numbers, fortifications, and/or terrain. Lee himself confirmed this aspect of the battle:

“The conduct of the troops cannot be too highly praised. Attacking largely superior numbers in strongly entrenched positions, their heroic courage overcame every obstacle of nature and art.”

This is a major point in our assessment of Lee’s decisions at Chancellorsville, for requiring extraordinary exertions of one’s troops and exposing them to unnecessary risk of loss is the very opposite of good generalship.

Lee’s decision to fight an immediate battle in the Chancellorsville Wilderness area has been generally praised. Yet, as the discussion in Chapter 4 illustrates, there were four very strong reasons for Lee to retreat the twenty-five miles back to the North Anna river. First, the Confederates were surprised by Hooker’s maneuver across the rivers and around their left flank, losing much of the defensive strength of their position. Hooker placed the Army of Northern Virginia squarely between the two Union wings, front and rear, each equal in numbers to the entire Confederate force. No one disputes that the Rebel position on the night before the battle was potentially disastrous; undermanned, unfortified on the west side, and so cramped that a victorious advance by either Federal wing had the potential to sever Lee’s lines of supply and retreat.

Second, Lee was outnumbered to an even greater extent than usual. He needed perhaps a week to recall the divisions of Hood and Pickett back from the Suffolk area to the main army. These 14,000 veterans would have increased Lee’s infantry strength by about one-fourth. Surely

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the logical course of action would have been to do almost anything necessary to ensure that these men would be present at the imminent battle. In addition, the Union Army of the Potomac was starting to lose large numbers of troops due to expired enlistments, a process that would remove 16,000 soldiers from its ranks by the end of June. Lee thus had every reason to attempt to delay a battle for as long as possible. Moving immediately to the front on May 1, Lee forfeited the chance to alter the manpower balance against him by 30,000 men.

Third, once Lee had been outflanked, the Fredericksburg area lost its special value as a military position. Burnside had marched the Union army to a crushing defeat by a piecemeal frontal attack on the Confederate fortifications, but Hooker plainly had no intention of repeating his predecessor’s mistakes. Any supplies from the immediate area of the town or the lower Rappahannock had long since been consumed, so that Lee’s army at Fredericksburg, dangling at the end of an inadequate rail connection, was perpetually short of rations and forage. There was no reason for Lee to hold Fredericksburg, other than the general desire to protect the citizens of the area from plundering Federals. The town and region were of so little value, in fact, that Lee made no effort to retain the area at the start of the 1864 campaign.

Fourth, there was considerable agreement within the Confederate high command that the position at Ox Ford on the North Anna, or on the clear ground just to the north of that place, possessed more advantages than did Fredericksburg. The latter position could be useful for passive defense, but the real fruits of victory were only available by means of a Confederate counter-attack that crushed an isolated part of the Union army. The North Anna position was particularly favorable for this type of maneuver. Also, as a general rule, the further the Federals marched from their supply base, and the less they were covered by terrain that hindered the offensive, the more likely was a Confederate triumph likely to yield substantial results.
Fredericksburg, only twelve miles from the Union base at Aquia Creek and with its Stafford Heights and the tangled forest of the Wilderness protecting the Union left and right wings respectively, was not favorable in these regards.

Taken together, these four reasons appear to weigh decisively against the decision that Lee took on the night of April 30. There is only one counter-argument—that the Federal advance on May 1 was checked, with the Federals retreating back into the Wilderness. A key argument presented in Chapter 4 is that Lee had almost nothing to do with the Union reverse. Hooker had all the advantages of numbers and position, and simply chose to throw away all his possibilities of success. The Union forces were not driven back; they were recalled by their own commander before any serious fighting developed. No one has ever explained why Hooker had what amounted to a nervous breakdown on the afternoon on May 1, but it was enough to rescue Lee’s army from the consequences of his first poor decision. By the evening of the first day of the battle, Lee had the option of fortifying a large force opposite Chancellorsville, effectively pinning Hooker’s wing to the Rappahannock. Hooker had already been stopped with only minimal losses of both sides.

This was an excellent and undeserved outcome for the Confederates. Somehow, however, Lee convinced himself that he could do better. He made his second key decision of the battle, sending Jackson with nearly half the army on a long march to strike the exposed Union right flank. Stackpole’s comment exemplifies the judgment of most historians on this move:

Lee’s decision was a courageous one, in the Lee tradition…Who but Robert E. Lee would have had the strategic insight and moral courage to assume the heavy risk of further dividing his forces?... Never had Lee’s exquisite skill and sense of timing been better demonstrated than on this occasion.\(^{124}\)

\(^{124}\) Stackpole, *Chancellorsville*, 155-56.
This was a mere re-phrasing of the opinion written sixty years earlier by Stonewall Jackson’s mapmaker, Captain Jed Hotchkiss, who claimed that

The audacity of Jackson’s flank movement, by which Lee entirely detached from himself the larger part of his army, was only equaled by the audacity of Lee himself in his willingness to confront and attempt to hold in place the great mass of Hooker’s army with…two divisions.125

There are excellent reasons for disputing Lee’s decision on this occasion, and Chapter 5 presents four of them. The first is the simplest; Lee had already achieved his stated objective of saving Fredericksburg, and due to Hooker’s obvious panic was unlikely to face any further significant Federal threats. Fighting a battle before one’s own forces are assembled is an act of desperation, and on the morning of May 2 Lee had little to fear. Second, in the event, Jackson inflicted only modest damage on the Union forces—3,100 casualties and the temporary disruption of a single corps. Correct military calculation about the difficulty of marching a large force on a single narrow road through the Wilderness would have shown that Jackson had no chance of doing any better. Even the hard-marching Jackson was only able to deliver his attack two hours before sunset, and with one of his three divisions not yet available. With an entire reinforcing Federal corps marching over the very bridges at U.S. Ford that constituted Jackson’s strategic objective as darkness fell, the probability that even an unwounded Jackson could have organized a successful night attack was almost nil.

The third reason that Jackson’s flank march was an error grew naturally out of the limited success enjoyed by that officer. The Union forces that had stopped Jackson’s men were still there, in unavoidable proximity to the Rebels. The Union salient around Chancellorsville separated the two divisions commanded directly by Lee from the Confederate flanking column.

The Federals held every advantage: they were entrenched, occupied the only two decent artillery positions in the area, had equal numbers directly confronting the Confederates near their position, and in addition had more than 30,000 fresh troops on the left flank of the three divisions formerly led by Jackson (now under J.E.B. Stuart). The idea that Lee and Stuart could successfully attack the Federals and re-unite their army in time to send aid to the outnumbered Confederates holding the Fredericksburg lines was preposterous. Thanks to another brainstorm of Hooker’s, the Confederates did manage to take the Chancellorsville position. However, they lost 8,700 men in the four hours it took to storm the crossroads, and inflicted merely equal casualties on their opponents. After all this bloodshed, at noon on May 3 Lee’s army was in almost exactly the same position it could have occupied bloodlessly early on the previous day. The only difference was that the Rebels now held an extra square mile or two of completely worthless forest. Thus, the only real result of Jackson’s famous flank march was the loss of slightly under 10,000 irreplaceable veterans in exchange for the loss of about 11,600 Federals.

The fourth reason for doubting the efficacy of Jackson’s march was that it repeatedly exposed Lee’s army to disaster, from which it was saved not by the skill of the Confederate high command but by the staggering ineptitude of the Union counterpart. The bluecoats made four separate blunders. The act of sending Jackson on a long march out of contact with the rest of the army exposed the remaining forces near Chancellorsville to attack by forces outnumbering them by more than four to one for most of a day. The Union army somehow never became aware of this situation. Next, the success of Jackson’s attack was entirely dependent on his march and deployment being undetected by his selected victim, the Union XI Corps. In fact, his troops were seen and their presence repeatedly reported to corps headquarters. Even though the corps commander, Maj. Gen. Oliver Howard, had already been told by Hooker to look out for his right
and secure the flank against attack, he ignored all the warnings and did nothing. In addition, as noted above, the Federals could have marched two corps into the flank and rear of Stuart’s wing virtually unopposed. Had the order been given, nothing could have saved this half of the Confederate army from a severe mauling. In this case, the local Union commanders did understand the situation and begged Hooker for permission to advance—which was refused. Finally, while the Federal lines around Chancellorsville were virtually invulnerable as originally occupied, Hooker gratuitously forfeited this advantage. He ordered the abandonment of the most valuable position in the area, the heights of Hazel Grove. This action allowed the Confederate artillery to place flanking fire on the west and south faces of the Union salient, and eventually to establish dominance over the entire battlefield. In turn, the support of the Confederate guns was the only thing that allowed the infantry to take Chancellorsville.

The four Federal blunders discussed here (and there were others) can be divided into pairs. The first and third, failing to attack vulnerable Confederate detachments, might be termed ordinary incompetence, of the sort that the Union army often committed and which Lee could reasonably have included in his calculations. The other two blunders, however, were truly extraordinary and Lee could not have anticipated them. For a corps commander to fail to respond to the type of information received by Howard about an imminent flank attack was unprecedented. And for an army commander to simply hand over the dominant terrain on a battlefield was also a unique act, that never occurred on any other occasion during the Civil War. The true measure of Lee’s decision to undertake a major flanking maneuver is the fact that his army would have been disastrously defeated without the assistance of some of the worst military leadership ever seen on the Eastern theater.
One last point must be made. Much of the favorable historical commentary is based on the idea that Chancellorsville was a great Confederate victory. It is true that the Rebels held the field at the end of the battle, which means that they did win a victory of sorts. The strategic consequences of that victory, however, were very limited. Both sides held the same ground after the battle as before it. In addition, as shown in Table 3 above, the ratio of Union to Confederate losses was much lower for Chancellorsville than for both of the other battles fought in the same general area. At the battle of Fredericksburg in December, 1862 the Union lost twenty-three men for every ten Confederates. At the battle of the Wilderness in May, 1864 the loss ratio was eight to five. At the battle of Chancellorsville, however, the Union lost only thirteen men for every ten Rebels lost. To put this another way, if Lee had been as successful at Chancellorsville as he had been at Fredericksburg, the Union would have lost an additional 13,000 soldiers for a total of more than 30,000 casualties.

In this regard, as in others, Chancellorsville did not turn out well for the Confederates. Lee’s recklessness did his army much harm, and confirms Longstreet’s opinion that ‘In defensive warfare he was perfect. When the hunt was up his combativeness was overruling.’\textsuperscript{126} Thanks to the many Union errors described above, Lee was able to avoid the worst consequences of his own actions at Chancellorsville. At Gettysburg, he would not be so fortunate.

\textsuperscript{126} James Longstreet, \textit{From Manassas to Appomattox} (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Co., 1895), 330.
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