James Longstreet and The American Civil War

The Confederate General Who Fought the Next War

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Savas Beatie
California

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Dedication

This is dedicated to the Confederate and Union soldiers and officers who fought the War Between the States. Loyal to either their States or Union in accordance with the Constitution as they understood it and how they were raised. Great Americans all.

"Longstreet in Contemplation." *Ken Hendricksen*

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Preface

My first thoughts on the theme of General Longstreet as a "modern military thinker" during the War Between the States came to me at the Combat Maneuver Training Center in Hohenfels, Germany, 1988-1995. During these years, I was assigned to an infantry battalion as a forward observer and to two artillery battalions on a wide variety of locations. These units trained on dozens of offensive and defensive battle plans, a few of which approximated the troop dispositions arranged on similar terrain features at Fredericksburg and Chickamauga utilized by Lt. Gen. James Longstreet.

A few years later when I was assigned to the Headquarters Department of the Army Pentagon in Washington, D.C., I picked these thoughts up again. I visited the battlefields and started my research to intersect Civil War tactics with my own professional military education, experiences, and training. What I learned became the genesis for this book.

I used letters, reports, firsthand accounts, and so forth, to better understand Longstreet's actions and apply my own experiences to them. Therefore, this is not intended to be a biography of the general. My primary purpose and approach is to use the tools of the professional operational planner and experienced tactician as a prism or "overlay" to known historical facts, and thus better highlight Longstreet's evolving thinking. I believe an examination of his ideas through the lens of military analysis of this type provides strong evidence that he continued to improve his battlefield tactics, and that he also began to consider the planning facets of what is known today as operational art (the level of war above tactics). As a result, many aspects this study will not be found in other works.

The early war chapters discuss how the Confederate Army started as a collection of brigades, and how its various commanders had to learn how to put together larger formations and use them effectively. Readers will quickly discern that most officers had no idea of how important force structure concepts were (and are), and that Longstreet was one of the few who grasped this concept early on. Longstreet helped Gens. Joe Johnston and Robert E. Lee plan not only the battles, but helped form a quasi-modern army out of mid-19th century disorganization. At the same time, Longstreet evaluated what was working tactically through Second

Manassas, Sharpsburg, that culminated in a modern kill zone at Fredericksburg. The campaign into Pennsylvania chapters focus on planning oversights by General Lee that resulted in the early July battle at Gettysburg, while also introducing some of the operational concepts. These chapters also examine Lee's understanding of the combat arms in which he did not serve, and why Longstreet advised him not to attempt what he did at Gettysburg.

Later chapters examine the crucial afternoon events of September 20, 1863, at Chickamauga and the Chattanooga operations that followed through a continuation of my method of modern comparative analysis. I apply operational art to examine Longstreet's overlooked Bridgeport Plan, an idea he envisioned to seize Bridgeport, Alabama, and maintain the Confederate initiative. Although Gen. Braxton Bragg did not act upon Longstreet's suggestion and thus did not seize Bridgeport, an examination of the plan through the prism and contexts of modern mission analysis and operational art sheds new light on several aspects of the campaign. This study concludes with the campaign into Eastern Tennessee, where Longstreet encountered many difficulties (several of his own making) including a failed attack on Fort Sanders and logistical problems, his final outright battlefield success at the Wilderness, and the end of the war in April 1865.

It is my hope this look at General Longstreet's contributions by way of military analysis of various types sheds new light and demonstrates how his work in many areas became standard methods of war long after his life ended. I hope it helps to cast aside false conclusions about him that still linger, most of which stem from postwar Lost Cause politics. Lastly, it is my hope students of military history will find this work useful and easy to understand.

Acknowledgments

My twenty-five years of continuous active duty military education, experience, training, and use-of-planning methods in wartime and in peacekeeping operations is the foundation of my ability to analyze military history. My years with the 8th Infantry Division and 1st Armored Division were particularly helpful in this regard. I owe my foundation to those with whom I served, superiors, peers, and subordinates alike. These many mentors and practitioners of military decision-making have given me the experiences needed to understand the tactics, techniques, and procedures that make the United States Army the best it can be in war.

I owe a debt of thanks to my faculty at the Joint Forces Staff College, Naval Station Norfolk: Larry A. McElvain CDR, USN and Dave Diorio, and Dr. Keith

Dickson, section instructor. Their expert and professional instruction and training environment was a great experience for me to study operational art and operational design. Their method of applying the facets through a myriad of historical examples and in modern hypothetical scenarios, allowed me to achieve a level of understanding I was then able to apply to this book. Thankfully, the college's library contains a number of primary sources not found anywhere else.

I am indebted to members of the Longstreet Society for their constant encouragement in my work and in the continued study of the general. Richard Pilcher, President of the Longstreet Society, Joe Whitaker, Susan Rosenvold, and Maria Langonia. General Longstreet's great-grandsons, Dan Patterson and Clark Thornton, continue to be great friends who comprise this great organization, as do many others I have had the pleasure of meeting at the Piedmont Hotel in Gainesville, Georgia, for society events and projects.

I also thank my good friend Ken Henricksen of Maine, a renowned Civil War artist who created the unique cover art picture of General Longstreet.

Special thanks are due Dr. Bill Piston, a great friend, renowned Civil War historian, and Longstreet authority who assisted me in many ways over the years. Bill's guidance and azimuth check of my treatment of Longstreet is deeply appreciated. Thanks are also due Dr. John Marszalek, or the "cheerful assassin," as his students like to call him, who marked up one of my early drafts.

I owe a great debt of thanks to Theodore P. Savas of Savas Beatie for accepting my basic thesis on Longstreet and agreeing to publish my work. He provided the guidance of an experienced publisher and helped me make this a much better book. It was Ted who had the vision to expand my basic thesis and apply it to General Longstreet over the course of the entire war. Thanks are also due to his wonderful staff: Sarah Closson (media specialist), Sarah Keeney (marketing director), Lisa Murphy (accounts manager/marketing), Lois Olechny (administrative director), Veronica Kane (production logistics), and Lee Merideth (production manager). All of these fine people had a role in making this a better final product and demonstrated peerless professionalism throughout the process to completion.

I have gained many new professional acquaintances through Ted's efforts, such as Keith Poulter of *North & South Magazine*, the primary editor of my manuscript. Our nearly daily conversations about this history, often in minute detail, was thoroughly enjoyable. Keith is the ultimate editor: a pedantic about the English language who feels every angle is worth a discussion. Keith has a wealth of knowledge about the war and its participants. Jeff Prushankin also helped during the early editing of my manuscript and gave several important suggestions for

which I am thankful. Wayne Wolf served as copy editor, and Edward Alexander produced the outstanding maps.

Lastly, I would like to mention the late Ed Bearss who was my friend during the last three years of his life. Ed read much of this work in its early form and helped tremendously by checking historical accuracy. I enjoyed our talks about Longstreet and military history in general, and will never forget our road trip to Chicago. I wish he lived longer to see this work completed.

There are many other people I have met at the battlefields, in libraries, history centers, Civil War Round Tables, and in the towns and places mentioned in this book who taught me something of value. It is impossible to mention everyone, but they too were contributors to this book. I thank all of them.

If I left someone off this list, please know that I know you helped, and rest assured any oversight was unintentional.

Introduction

The Lost Cause

"Oh I'm a good old rebel, that's what I am . . .
I won't be reconstructed, and I don't give a damn."

— Innes Randolf, *A Good Old Rebel,* 1870

Edward A. Pollard, wartime editor of the *Richmond Examiner*, wrote a book in 1866 titled *Lost Cause*, thus coining the phrase that would forever be associated with the mindset of the secessionists. In a sense, Pollard's *Lost Cause* interpretations were the germ of a second religion for many in the South who were trying to make sense of the origins, conduct, and outcome of the war. This book did not attack Confederate Lieutenant General James Longstreet in any way; though as a matter of record it mentioned certain actions of his corps. Other historians followed with books and articles that fleshed out a growing complex doctrine of how the war was lost.

Attacks on Longstreet by Lost Cause proponents started when he established himself in New Orleans in 1867. During that year, Longstreet supported Congressional passage of the military reconstruction bills. The *New Orleans Times*, after soliciting Longstreet's opinion, confirmed that he did indeed endorse the legislation. Subsequently, Longstreet began to be criticized for failing to reject reconstruction.[1]

In 1872, Lost Cause rhetoric spread to Longstreet's war record, former Confederate general Jubal Early firing the opening salvo. Early sought to identify

1 William Garrett Piston, *Lee's Tarnished Lieutenant*, (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1987), 104. He also supported the 13th and 14th Amendments.

independence. Early's spin examined the errors at Gettysburg. He concocted the fallacious "sunrise order," concerning the second day, and saddled Longstreet with most of the blame for the repulse of the attack on the Union center on the third day of the battle.

Jubal Early had entered the postwar fray as a colossal hypocrite, following a checkered career as a corps commander. He had some successes in the war, but also made decisions that led to the destruction of an entire Confederate Army. This dubious distinction was something that Longstreet never suffered. Coincidentally, Pollard placed blame on Early in his analytical volumes on the war, the second of which spoke of "remarkable misfortunes," such as "The breaking of our line [Early's line] at Fredericksburg." The disintegration of Early's line prompted Lee to cease his pursuit of Hooker at Chancellorsville, and, according to Pollard "robbed us of a complete success." Such passages undoubtedly infuriated Early, who lamented the fact that "newspaper accounts and Pollard's abominable book furnished the main source of information" about the Confederate armies. Early became a strident advocate for Lee and critic of Longstreet, providing an alternative commentary on the war that was welcomed by the more defiant unreconstructed Rebels. Thus, a politically motivated attack on Longstreet entered into the literature of American military history. Early's attacks on Longstreet provided support for another aspect of Lost Cause mythology; the anointing of Lee to some sort of deity.[2]

By the 1880s the populist worship of Lee had gained considerable momentum. Lee he passed away in 1870, and thus did not have an opportunity to intervene and perhaps temper the generation of the fiction advanced by many former Confederate generals and Southern historians. The degree to which Lee might have stood up for Longstreet remains speculative. Lee believed as a general principle that a good leader is humble and should not engage in squabbling over credit or openly attack a peer for a mistake or failure. Nevertheless, had Lee lived longer, he most likely would have provided commentary that would have substantially curtailed the mudslinging. He probably believed that for Confederate military leaders to squabble among one another was to blemish the fine legacy of the Army's efforts and sacrifices.

2 Edward A. Pollard, *Southern History of the War: The Second Year of the War* (1863; reprint, New York: Charles B. Richardson, 1865), 262-263; Jubal A. Early letter to Jedidiah Hotchkiss, Mar. 24, 1868, Hotchkiss Papers, MSS2/H7973/ b/2, VHS.

Longstreet initially ignored the criticisms. The Lost Cause snowball kept growing, however, jettisoning unwanted truths and creating new myths to fit the popular explanations that evolved on the relationship between Lee and Longstreet. The truth about their relationship was that Lee valued Longstreet's counsel and methods, even if he did not follow his advice at Gettysburg. During the war Longstreet freely offered his views to Lee, even if they stood in opposition. Many observers noted Lee did not have a problem with this and in fact appreciated Longstreet's opinions, even if he did not always use them. After the war, however, and without Lee to support him, Longstreet was left alone to suffer incessant attacks on his record, and increased marginalization in the history of the South.

Arguably, the next colossus in the Lost Cause category of historical scholarship came in the lengthy works of William A. Dunning. Dunning, an historian and political scientist, published in the 1880s when the Lost Cause expanded into more and different facets. He built upon earlier writers and speakers like Pollard and Early and shaped the Southern view into the foreseeable future. The "Dunning School" of Civil War and Reconstruction history had established itself; its primary message was to acknowledge that the abolition of slavery was positive, but that slavery would have died out on its own. Dunning theorized that despite the moral argument that slavery was wrong, the Negro was still an inferior being, and was not capable of self-government, thus segregation of the two races was necessary. Northern intervention in Southern life was an evil, and the war was one of unprovoked aggression. Essentially, except for slavery, the Old South was a paradise of traditional feudal virtue. Its destruction was a political, social, and economic crime, committed by an aggressive Northern government guided by vindictive radicals, who subjugated the South through their policies and programs of Reconstruction. Dunning's work set the tone for the way many in the South understood the war and set a historiographical course of interpretation that lasted for a century.

Douglass Southall Freeman emerged as the next influential historian to advance the adoration of Lee. At the same time, Freeman expanded the anti-Longstreet distortions at a mostly subliminal level. Freeman, born in 1886 was a second generation Lost Cause disciple. He spent much of his boyhood in Lynchburg, Virginia, while Jubal Early lived in the city. Freeman shaped the literature of the Confederacy regarding Lee and Longstreet in the 1930s and 1940s, much as Early had in the late nineteenth century. As Lee's greatest literary champion, Freeman wrote multi-volume sets that established his worship of both Lee the general and Lee the man. At the same time, Freeman, ever so subtly diminished, maligned, and ignored Longstreet's innovations and contributions. As

a speaker at the Army War College, Freeman had some influence on an entire generation of twentieth century military thinkers. By advancing his perspectives, he denied these future leaders the lessons of Longstreet's innovations and their bearing on the development of warfare. Not only did Freeman deny credit to Longstreet for the great battles he won, he also tossed aside the general's modern methods. They remained lost for decades, until military necessity forced new generations to put them into use. One wonders what differences in the First World War and even Second World War might have occurred if the innovations and theories had evolved into a doctrinal form at the various United States Army schools for senior officers before these wars. Unfortunately, Longstreet's knowledge and lessons were lost, largely because he did not share the beliefs of Lost Cause ideology. Longstreet was a proud Southerner, a professional army officer and a gentleman who fought for his homeland for many of the same reasons Lee fought for Virginia. Yet, Longstreet had completely moved on from the notion of clinging to what they had lost. To him, the surrender at Appomattox decided things, and the South should move on.[3]

General Lee had officially surrendered the Army of Northern Virginia, accepting General Ulysses S. Grant's magnanimous terms, and that was the end. Longstreet had fought the war from Manassas all the way to Appomattox. He was there to the bitter end, fighting on as a corps commander in the Army of Northern Virginia even when it was whittled down to a small remnant of its former self. Both Longstreet and Lee were certain the cause was lost by the spring of 1865, and they knew better than any armchair critic that the Confederacy as a country had succumbed long before the defenses at Petersburg unraveled. President Jefferson Davis, relatively powerless even in 1864, presided over an inept body of representatives who rarely made decisions that helped the war effort. Richmond as a government at this late date was a façade, and the Southern economy was in shambles. All the remaining hopes for the cause lay with the Army of Northern Virginia and Lee. By 1865, Lee knew he had passed the point where further resistance against such disproportionate numbers and resources was no longer war, but senseless murder.

Longstreet too accepted the verdict of the battlefield. He owed no apology for defeat and thought all citizens must support the United States as a single entity. He decided to become a member of the Republican Party and supported equal rights

3 Gary E. Gallagher, *Lee and His Army in Confederate History*, (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 263.

for the Negro. He was not concerned that the Republican Party was a metaphor for Union, and that "Solid South Democrats" would soon replace the Northern occupation power. Conversely, the Democratic Party became a metaphor for the division of the country and Lost Cause ideology. Thus, to someone who believed in Pollard or Dunning, Longstreet possessed the principles of a traitor.

Longstreet tried to fight back in the newspapers and magazines as best he could, but often not as ably and modestly, as he perhaps should have. As the years went by, he became bitter and frustrated with the pure fantasies created about the war. For example, the mythology about Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson, to wit that he was second in command to Lee, his "right arm," and star lieutenant. In fact, Longstreet's date of rank made him second in line to command the Army of Northern Virginia. At times Longstreet's wounded ego caused him to write and say things that only fueled his antagonists and their arguments.

Longstreet made statements that many of his critics perceived as faulting Lee. During a period of harsh criticism, Longstreet defended himself against the charge that he disobeyed Lee at Gettysburg, and that he was slow to get his assault underway on July 2, 1863, once his corps arrived. Many of Longstreet's critics asserted that he had not prepared his corps for the third day attack on the Union center either. They accused him of dragging his feet throughout the day in an effort to convince Lee of the plan's futility. This allegedly prevented an earlier attack, resulting in the repulse of Pickett's charge.

In more recent historiography of the second day, Longstreet is widely considered correct in his explanations. There is little evidence that perceived delays in Longstreet's assaults were due to hesitancy on his part. The time it took for Lee to decide a course of action, and then to correctly position the two available divisions was accomplished as fast as could be. In fact, Longstreet had already made his understanding known immediately after the war that he understood that Lee wanted to fight a defensive campaign in Pennsylvania, and then only if attacked.

Another great debate has focused on the third day. Critics such as Early believed Longstreet received instructions on the evening of the second day to make an attack in the morning of the third day. Lee actually did not tell Longstreet to attack until that very morning, and his lieutenant tried to prove this through letters he had saved that Lee purportedly wrote several months after the battle. In one, Lee confessed that he should have listened to Longstreet and that the situation might have been much better had he not attacked on the third day. However, Longstreet only mentioned this letter decades after the war, and never showed it to anyone. A fire in Longstreet's Georgia home on April 9th, 1889, probably

destroyed this letter along with most of the general's papers. Ironically, the fire took place on the twenty-fourth anniversary of Lee's surrender at Appomattox. In any case, the content of the letter may have been taken out of context by an aging and angry Longstreet, who was certainly looking for evidence to refute the incessant attacks on his war record.

Most importantly, regardless of Longstreet's story on the timing of Lee's decision at Gettysburg, Longstreet was correct that 15,000 men could not cross that open field and break the defensive line the Union had established behind a stonewall. This was the lesson of Malvern Hill: modern weapons had swung the advantage from attacker to defender, making frontal assaults costly and often futile. Lee acknowledged the reality of this truth after Gettysburg and accepted the blame immediately. As the commanding general, Lee never blamed his subordinates for Gettysburg. He chose the spot, and he ordered the attack. But, to a proponent of the Lost Cause, Lee was always right. Therefore, Longstreet was deemed wrong for not having enthusiastically supported Lee's decision to launch a frontal assault against Cemetery Ridge. Much Lost Cause misperception abounds, including criticism of Longstreet's attempt to convince Lee to disengage from the Union positions at Gettysburg. Longstreet suggested the army continue to maneuver until they found a stronger position, with terrain suited to a defensive posture such as the army held at Fredericksburg in December 1862.

Regardless, Longstreet was not insubordinate at Gettysburg, nor was he a lesser general fumbling through the preparation for an operation that he was unsuited to turn into a success, as some historians have suggested. Longstreet knew the attack would fail before it commenced. He saw the Union advantage as plain as day—the Army of the Potomac (AOP) held a strong defensive position behind a stone wall, and this was the same advantage the Confederates used against the attacking Union Army at Fredericksburg. Moreover, Federal soldiers had been preparing the position and making improvements since the second of July. Longstreet's unique respect and understanding of the power and range of the weapons of the time enabled him to see this. Even the support of massed artillery and the attempt to get the infantry close to the Union line by executing a sequence of obliques (instead of walking straight in as Burnside had done at Fredericksburg) would still have left the Confederate attackers in the open, exposing them to murderous fire for more than enough time to decimate them. He sensed Lee was becoming anxious in the last days of June. Nothing had been heard from the larger portion of this cavalry corps. The lack of routine timely intelligence on the whereabouts of the Union Army left him blind for several crucial days, and Lee did not utilize the cavalry he had retained. Lee's anxiety was intensified by the fact that

he was operating on unfamiliar ground, and perhaps this caused him to accept the long odds of a battle to destroy the Army of the Potomac.

Once contact was made with the AOP, he abandoned his plan to avoid it, and was sucked into a battle over a place of no use to him. By the third day, he gambled with extreme odds in a reckless frontal assault, after two days of inconclusive fighting. As Longstreet stated in his memoir *From Manassas to Appomattox*, "(Lee) knew that I did not believe that success was possible, that care and time should be taken to give the troops the benefit of positions and grounds."[4]

Lee was truly a gifted and able commander, he had many strengths that made him a great commanding general, but he did not think about this modern aspect of a defensive advantage in the way Longstreet did. Longstreet's clarity on this new aspect of war was the lesson of Fredericksburg, where he had inflicted a costly defeat on the AOP. He perceived that a similar disaster loomed for his own troops at Gettysburg if they tried to attack a similar position to the Confederate strongpoint on Marye's Heights at Fredericksburg. He knew how to set such conditions and saw what would happen on a larger scale at Petersburg and on a continental scale fifty years into the future in the trenches of World War I in France. Longstreet clearly envisioned some of the methods of early twentieth century land warfare.

It is important to understand that what happened to Longstreet's legacy was the result of postwar politics and subsequent historiography that sullied his reputation as an advanced military thinker. This was the result of several dynamics within the theory of the Lost Cause intersecting. The postwar canonization of Lee to a Christ-like figure required a meticulous manipulation away from the basic conclusion that the loss at Gettysburg was Lee's responsibility. The notions that Lee was a flawless deity but was also responsible for the failure at Gettysburg were mutually exclusive. Consciously and unconsciously, directly and indirectly, the events at Gettysburg would have to be reinterpreted and retold so that they absolved Lee of any error of judgement and provided a better fit with Lost Cause theory. Lost Cause ideologues had to shift the blame and found it convenient to shift it to the one senior leader present at Gettysburg who questioned Lee, who did not embrace the Lost Cause, and was now in league with the Grant administration and the Republican Party. Longstreet became the perfect scapegoat.

4 James Longstreet, *From Manassas to Appomattox*, (Philadelphia, PA: J.B. Lippincott Co., 1896), 388.

The erroneous blame for Gettysburg created an inaccurate assessment of Longstreet's abilities and insights. Once the fog of the Lost Cause and the prejudices of Early, Dunning, and Freeman are lifted, and one examines Longstreet strictly according to how he applied the art and science of war, a rich military history emerges. Examination of Longstreet from a vantage point of modern method that set him apart from his contemporaries is largely unexplored, and long overdue.

To classify Longstreet's way of war as "modern," as early twentieth century methods introduced in the middle of the nineteenth century, one must establish an understanding of how he broke with the Napoleonic era practices current at the time. Military professionals know the smallest variations in tactics can make the biggest difference. Moments and seconds matter when it comes to synchronizing an attack or volley of fire. Longstreet made such adjustments to the known tactics, techniques, and procedures of his day and proved that his adjustments were decisive modernizations in nineteenth century warfare. His innovations became even more significant with the widespread introduction of repeating rifles and eventually the machine gun (by the time of the First World War). Perhaps today, the notion of earthworks as an advantage is obvious, but it was not obvious to many officers who were students of Napoleonic tactics and had not fully grasped that the lethality of weapons had increased. Napoleon relied primarily on maneuver; he rarely dug in, because he demonstrated that the tactical offense was generally dominant. Many had not grasped in the 1860s that modernity had also brought changes in operational maneuver. Thus, while the tactical defense was generally dominant in the American Civil War against a direct approach attack over open ground, *maneuver* was the key against a strong dug-in defensive advantage. Longstreet understood this.

Chapter 1

The American Understanding of War From Early Republic to Secession

"I recollect well my thinking; there is a man that cannot be stampeded."

— Fitzhugh Lee on Longstreet at Blackburn Ford

In the years leading up to the Civil War, the United States Army was small and, apart from those who had participated in the Mexican War or in actions against the Indians, most had no combat experience. By 1861 the last major conflict (the war with Mexico) was fifteen years in the past. There was only one remaining general who had commanded as many as 20,000 or more troops—the aging Winfield Scott. Although he had extensive experience as a commander in the field and had received a brevet promotion to lieutenant general in 1855, Scott was too old and infirm to assume a field command in 1861. The US Army was simply devoid of leaders, or anyone for that matter, with formal training in the operational arts. No one had the previous experience necessary to command the larger formations that would take to the field during the Civil War.[1]

Immediately after the Revolution, the Continental Army had an officer corps that understood strategy at the army level. Much of this expertise was subsequently lost, however, as the experienced generals of the period left the service or passed away. Congress did not maintain a large standing army where generals could practice command of large numbers of troops. Moreover, there was no school for

1 Only 125 of the 425 Confederate officers who would rise to general were professional soldiers before the war. Thomas L. Connelly and Barbara L. Bellows, *God and General Longstreet: The Lost Cause and the Southern Mind* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1982), 89.

officers of the rank of major or above to study the art and theory of war in the classroom.

The only educational bright spot occurred during President Thomas Jefferson's administration. The president saw the need for university-level education for Army officers and established the United States Military Academy at West Point. The primary focus at West Point was tactical-level training for junior officers. This approach fit Jefferson's vision of western exploration and security requirements in new territories. The training did not address components of large-scale land warfare.

The educational system for officers during the antebellum decades gave a new second lieutenant a decent foundation to lead a detachment of cavalry, several sections of artillery, or several dozen infantry soldiers. It also provided technical training in artillery and engineering. Once commissioned, a young lieutenant served under a veteran captain, who had experience leading the company or battery and would mentor a lieutenant on the expectations of advancement to the next level. However, both the lieutenant and captain were company-grade officers who had tactical unit level duties. Their day-to-day world seldom required an understanding of the higher level planning conducted by colonels and generals. The purpose of officer training during the first half of the 1800s was to develop company and battery commanders, not masters of the operational art of war.[2]

The Operational art of war interrelates tactics and strategy as an area of study for established career officers who command larger units. As a stand-alone concept, it was non-existent in the antebellum United States military. Senior captains, majors, and colonels had to build intuitively upon what they saw and experienced as junior officers.

Jominian Theory

What cadets at West Point did study was the interpretation of Napoleonic warfare from the mind of Swiss military theorist Henri Jomini. Although he offered his ideas on various theories of war, the preponderance of Jomini's work consisted of procedures for how to array troop units—the common variations of line and column formations Napoleon had employed, which Jomini put into still finer geometric shapes. American military theorists translated the Jominian playbooks in

2 Piston, *Lee's Tarnished Lieutenant*, 5.

the early nineteenth century and laid out these formations from the squad up to battalion level, including the movement of multiple battalions.

American theorist Dennis Mahan, who was the Dean of Military History at West Point in the 1830s, believed in Jominian organization and the methods of Napoleon. During his tenure at West Point, Mahan took these ideas, distilled them to his own liking, and drilled this combination into all of the cadets. James Longstreet and the members of his Class of 1842 were familiar with the campaigns of Napoleon, well versed in the basic drill of the battalion, and knew how commanders moved battalions.

This particular area of study for cadets changed little as antebellum officers moved up in years and rank. Variations on the Jominian formation, as interpreted by Mahan, were a facet in the overall understanding needed to conduct battles and campaigns. But the big picture at the operational and strategic level remained untouched. For example, a major at the start of the Civil War was nearly twenty years removed from his education as a cadet. His understanding of how to maneuver a large formation was dated, and most officers did not compensate for the extended ranges of the new weapons available in 1861. Faded recollections of classroom teachings on Napoleonic battles and the Jominian crafting of lines and columns did not prepare the average Civil War officer for battle planning or strategy. Those who were to become effective battlefield leaders to adjust quickly in order to master the modern battlefield.

Longstreet was no exception. He learned quickly in combat, however. His first tactical experiences were with the offensive. He participated in the battles of Resaca de la Palma, Churubusco, and Monterey in Mexico and witnessed firsthand that attacks were successful when carried out resolutely. Leadership and planning mattered and would defeat a prepared defense that lacked strength of leadership. At the battle in El Molino del Rey, however, Longstreet's unit was part of an attack against a heavily fortified structure called Casa Mata. The defensive preparations were thorough and Mexican leadership confident. The Americans were thrown back with heavy loss. The retreat was such a rout that Mexican forces felt confident enough to launch a counterattack.[3]

Longstreet did not forget this bitter lesson, which dashed any notion he may have held that frontal assault was supreme in all situations. He realized that in war,

3 Emma Jerome Blackwood, ed., *To Mexico With Scott: Letters of Captain E. Kirby Smith to His Wife* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1917), 202-203; Justin H. Smith, *War with Mexico* (New York: The MacMillan Co., 1919), 145-146.

the mechanics boiled down to bringing decisive firepower to bear against your enemy more effectively than he can against you. Firepower in the nineteenth century referred to the aggregate lethal effects a unit of infantry, battery of cannon, or a combination of both could employ against a person, unit, or object. Firepower—the simplest common denominator of warfare—could be enhanced by numerical superiority, maneuver, or the use of cover and concealment. The right combination of firepower, maneuver, and use of terrain or man-made cover at the right place and time ensured the application of decisive firepower.

As a result of the improvement of weapons over those of the Napoleonic period, combat in the Civil War almost always demonstrated that a line formation behind earthworks had a great advantage over a line formation in the open. A defender covering an open area where range to target is optimal, and taking advantage of high ground, walls, buildings, or earthworks, made the defender's position extremely difficult to overcome.

In 1861, however, many military thinkers remained steeped in Napoleonic theory and were caught "fighting the last war." Their understanding of warfare remained Napoleonic both in a tactical sense as it pertained to maneuver, and in the technological sense as it pertained to the application of firepower. Both Jomini and Mahan believed in the direct approach tactical offensive, i.e., that vigorous charges will overcome defenses. The rifles of the Napoleonic era were accurate to only about eighty yards. Thus, after the defender fired an initial volley, the attacking force could initiate a bayonet charge while the defender reloaded. At that close range there existed a high likelihood that the attackers would close on the defenders, which increased the odds of offensive success. Élan and leadership within the attacking force often prevailed over an entrenched defender. Commanders emphasized this sort of thinking to a great degree, while aspects of how and when to utilize defenses received scant attention. While there were a few lopsided massacres, such as the Battle of New Orleans in the War of 1812 and costly assaults like those launched at the Battle of Bunker Hill in the Revolution, the direct approach remained dominant during this era.

During the Civil War, however, many officers failed to recognize that the range and accuracy of modern weapons were much greater than during the time of Napoleon. In the 1850s, the transition from smoothbore to rifled weapons, which could strike a man as far away as 600 yards, significantly increased the tactical defense and made it superior to the direct approach tactical offense. Some who appreciated the improvement in the range and accuracy of firepower still did not understand that an increase in range required a change in thinking about how to successfully engage the enemy. The eighteenth-century way of employing line

formations remained prevalent, and much blood was be shed before the increasingly outmoded methods were discarded.

War Comes to America

The decades preceding the Civil War saw a continuance of the widening gulf both culturally and economically between North and South. Industrialization proceeded more rapidly in the North, while Deep South states were characterized by large cotton plantations worked by slave labor. Politicians and newspapers of each section demonized the other, and many Southerners resented the moral condemnation of slavery. The population of the North was also growing much faster, undermining the South's early political dominance, as representation in the federal government gradually became majority Northern.

The emergence of the Republican Party in 1854 exacerbated the sectional tension, and when Abraham Lincoln—seen as a sectional leader of the Northern Republican states only and committed to the exclusion of slavery from the territories—was elected president in November 1860, five Deep South states seceded, followed shortly after by those of the Upper South when Lincoln called for troops from them.

At the beginning of the secession crisis Longstreet was still a major in the US Army stationed in New Mexico. Asked by a fellow officer how long he thought the impending crisis would last, he replied "At least three years, and if it holds for five years you may begin to look for a dictator." Whereupon a lieutenant rejoined, "If we are to have a dictator, I hope that you may be the man."[4]

As the crisis unfolded, Longstreet hastened east, met with Confederate president Jefferson Davis at the Executive Mansion in Richmond, and was offered a commission in the Confederate Army with the rank of brigadier general. On July 1 he received orders to report to Major General Pierre Beauregard at Manassas Junction, Virginia.[5]

In Washington, Major General Irwin McDowell, was ordered to take his recently recruited army south and capture Richmond. Rebel troops blocked their path at Bull Run Creek. McDowell's initial intention was to move around the Confederates' left flank, and he ordered Union divisional commander Brigadier

4 James McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1988), 251-252; Longstreet, *Manassas to Appomattox*, 30.

5 Longstreet, *Manassas to Appomattox*, 32-33.

General Daniel Tyler to reconnoiter the area. Tyler exceeded his orders and pushed one of his brigades toward Manassas Junction in an effort to determine Confederate strength barely visible behind the creek. This brought on a fierce engagement with the Confederate brigade guarding Blackburn's Ford, commanded by Longstreet. Although he was a Brig Gen., Longstreet was cloaked in civilian clothing because he had not yet secured a Confederate uniform. A soldier in the 17th Virginia later remarked "General Longstreet seemed to be everywhere, regardless of danger, and unconscious of what a conspicuous mark he presented to the enemy."[6]

Blackburn's Ford dipped about fifteen feet below the banks on either side of the winding and heavily wooded Bull Run Creek. Confederates challenged the approaching Union troops, and when a Union officer responded by identifying his unit as Massachusetts men, the Confederates opened fire. The engagement lasted about an hour and stopped Tyler's advance cold. After losing eighty-three men Tyler disengaged and withdrew toward Centreville. Longstreet's naturally strong position allowed his soldiers the opportunity to pour fire down into the ranks of the advancing Union force attempting to cross the stream. There was flat front on Longstreet's side of the stream and he had concealed his men from the view of the approaching Federals by positioning them behind a thin line of trees. The result was a more reckless advance than might otherwise have been attempted by men aware of Confederates massed to their front. The position also gave Longstreet the opportunity to take advantage of interior lines by adjusting his troops smoothly and with a degree of stealth. By using a thin observation line of scouts far out in front and positioning reserves to take advantage of the interior lines the location afforded him, Longstreet shifted reinforcements forward to strengthen any part of his line with equal speed and facility. This excellent defensive position provided a quick small-scale lesson in the advantageous use of terrain.[7]

Longstreet had remained mounted during the fight directly behind the 17th Virginia Infantry, where he heard one private ask another, "I wonder what they

6 "The Battle of Bull Run," *Richmond Dispatch*, August 3, 1861. The paper identified the writer as "an eye-witness."

7 Lieutenant Colonel D. B. Sanger, "Was Longstreet a Scapegoat?" *Infantry Journal*, 43: 1, (1936), 48-57.

Union troops crossing Blackburn's Ford unopposed, March 1862. General McClellan and staff in foreground. (Alfred R. Waud. *Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division*)

expect us to do here?" Longstreet told the soldiers that he expected them to keep the enemy from crossing the creek.[8]

This first engagement of the first major battle of the Civil War did not require Longstreet to make any major troop movements. It did, however, provide Longstreet an opportunity to determine how best to array his troops in a defense of this sort. What he came up with was a true mobile defense on a small-scale, and a method that became doctrinal in the twentieth century when the mobility of motorized and tracked vehicles required defenses to become more flexible.

8 Edgar Warfield, *A Confederate Soldier's Memoirs* (Richmond: Masonic Home Press, 1936), 48-58.