

THE CHARGER

April 2012

486th Meeting

Vol. 33 #8

Tonight's Program:

How Robert E. Lee Lost the Civil War

Was Robert E. Lee the Confederate States of America's great near savior or its own worst enemy? Were his aggressive strategies wrong for the understaffed, under-equipped army he led or a necessary risk to draw essential European intervention? Or did Robert E. Lee actually expect to defeat the Union powerhouse that confronted him?

In his provocatively titled book, *How Robert E. Lee Lost the Civil War*, military historian Edward Bonekemper III jumps into these questions with both feet. Mr. Bonekemper will discuss his book and views of Robert E. Lee's military performance. Expect a fascinating discussion and a rollicking argument.

Tonight's Speaker:

Edward Bonekemper III

Edward H. Bonekemper III is an adjunct lecturer of U. S. military history at Muhlenberg College, Allentown, Pennsylvania. For 34 years, he served as a federal government attorney, including 11 years with the U. S. Coast Guard and 17 with the U. S. Department of Transportation. Mr. Bonekemper holds a BA from Muhlenberg College, an MA from Old Dominion University and a J. D. from Yale Law School and is a retired commander in the U. S. Coast Guard Reserve. He is the author of several Civil War books, including *How Robert E. Lee Lost the Civil War*, *Grant: A Victor, Not a Butcher: The Military Genius of the Man Who Won the Civil War*, *McClelland and Failure: A Study of Civil War Fear, Incompetence and Worse*, and *Grant and Lee: Victorious American and Vanquished Virginian*.

Date: **Wednesday,
April 11, 2012**

Place: **Judson Manor
1890 E. 107th Street
Cleveland, Ohio**

Time: **Drinks 6 pm
Dinner 6:45 pm**

Reservations: **Please send an email to ccwrt1956@yahoo.com with your reservation, or call Dan Zeiser at (440) 449-9311 by 9 pm the Sunday before the meeting.**

Meal: **Entree, vegetable, salad, and dessert.**

**CLEVELAND
CIVIL WAR ROUNDTABLE
FOUNDED 1957**

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Editor - THE CHARGER - Dan Zeiser

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1962 Edward Downer
1961 Charles Clarke
1960 Howard Preston
1959 John Cullen Jr.
1958 George Farr Jr.
1957 Kenneth Grant

President's Message April 2012

In his 1972 pop hit, "You Don't Mess Around with Jim," singer-songwriter Jim Croce proclaimed:

You don't tug on Superman's cape,
You don't spit into the wind,
You don't pull the mask off that old Long Ranger,
And you don't mess around with Jim.

If you were to change "Jim" in that refrain to "Bob," or "Marse Robert," or "The gallant knight who lead the oppressed and undermanned people of the Confederacy in its noble fight against the Mongol invaders from the north," you would be singing about our April meeting (albeit, in somewhat fractured meter), as that is exactly what our April speaker, Edward Bonekemper, will be joining us to do - tug at Superman's cape.

Except for Abraham Lincoln, there is no more iconic figure in Civil War history than Robert E. Lee. Widely regarded as not only the greatest military leader of the Civil War, but perhaps the greatest military figure in American history, Lee is almost universally praised for his audacity in combat, his inspirational leadership, and his chivalrous gentility. Many believe that if Lee had accepted Lincoln's 1861 offer to lead the Union Army or, as head of the Army of Northern Virginia, had been given resources comparable to those available to the Army of the Potomac, the war would not have lasted six months. In anything close to a fair fight, the argument goes, Lee's far superior generalship would have carried the day against ANY opponent. It is a variant, of sorts, on the contemporary Southern belief that ten Union soldiers were not worth one Confederate soldier.

The problem with accurately evaluating Lee from 150 years distant is that he has been so wrapped in hero's robes and shrouded in Lost Cause mythology, that it is difficult to distill the iconic Lee from the historic Lee. It is not unlike trying to uncover the "real" Washington or Jefferson or Franklin (or Lincoln, for that matter); we have grown to love them too much to be honest or critical or permit them to have human failings.

As illustrated in his CCWRT website article, "[Why Grant Won and Lee Lost](#)," Mr. Bonekemper does not spend much time speculating on alternative history. What if Lee had more of this or Grant had less of that? What if this chance encounter did not happen or another chance encounter did? Mr. Bonekemper ignores all the 'what-ifs' and instead focuses on Lee's response to the situation he confronted. Mr. Bonekemper's conclusions are fairly harsh and run against the grain of the worshipful praise more typically heaped on Lee. The essence of his argument is that Lee employed a military strategy that rashly, even stupidly, played to Northern strengths while brutally exposing Southern weaknesses. Robert E. Lee as the cause of Southern defeat? Them's fightin' words in most Civil War circles. It should make for an intriguing presentation and lively Q&A session.

We will be checking hardware at the door.

Respectfully submitted,
Paul Burkholder

CLEVELAND CIVIL WAR ROUNDTABLE
2011-2012 SCHEDULE

September 14, 2011

*Experiencing
the Civil War*

**Robert
Olmstead**



January 11, 2012
*The Barlows and
the Gordons*

John Fazio

February 8, 2012

*A. P. Hill
at Gettysburg*

Jon Thompson



October 12, 2011

*The Battle of
Monocacy*

**Marc
Leepson**



Destruction of the RR bridge
over the Monocacy River

March 14, 2012

*The Dick Crews Annual Debate:
Lincoln and Douglas Debate*

**Mel Maurer as Abraham Lincoln
Chris Fortunato as Stephen Douglas
Moderator: William F. B. Vodrey**

November 9, 2011

*The Battle of
Nashville*

**Dan
Zeiser**



April 11, 2012

*How Robert E. Lee
Lost the Civil War*

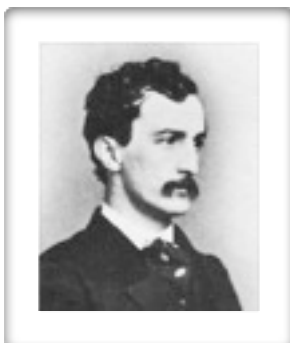
**Edward H.
Bonekemper III**



December 14, 2011

*How Sibling Rivalry
Helped Spawn an
Assassin*

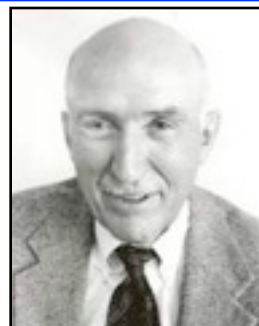
Nora Titone



May 16, 2012 (Note later date)

Vicksburg!

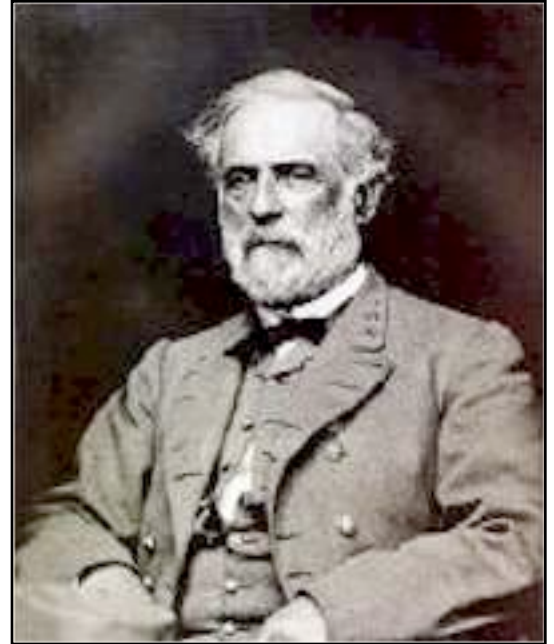
Ed Bearss



“How Robert E. Lee Lost The Civil War”

A book review by Stuart Kay

The number of books published concerning the Civil War or some aspect of that conflict is staggering. Books continue to appear on a regular basis which shows no sign of diminishing in the foreseeable future. Even here in England a quick tour of my local book shop revealed no fewer than 28 Civil War and related titles. For this reason, without extensive research of primary material, it is very hard for an author to come up with anything that has not been covered before. The potential author is therefore faced with conducting painstaking primary research, covering a less prominent aspect of the conflict, or placing a novel interpretation on existing well-covered fields of research, in an attempt to distinguish the book from all the others on the shelf. Edward Bonekemper’s book is clearly one of the latter.



The author is quite clear, in his introduction to “How Robert E. Lee Lost the Civil War,” that the aim of the book is to place a new interpretation on the contribution of Lee to the Confederate cause. In 248 pages, he goes at this aim with relish. Although the title of the book being what it is, the student of military history will be aware before opening the cover that, whatever the merits of the book, objectivity is not one of them.

The book is written in a fairly brisk manner that flows quite well and does not get bogged down in excessive detail, although the reason for this will quickly become apparent. A minor criticism is the use of belittling language throughout the book, such as “an obvious choice...,” “as usual for Lee he...,” and “instead of simply...,” although in the grand scheme of the book this is a minor problem.

Before going on to address the main body of the book it might be well to state that I write this review not as a rebuttal to the author’s claims but as an assessment of its value as a fair conclusion to arrive at when reviewing all the facts. In doing so, I do not intend to whitewash Lee; that he made mistakes, sometimes costly ones, is undeniable. The body of recent literature is clearly moving away from the earlier portrayals of Lee in the “Lost Cause” style. Furthermore, I must point out I am not a Southerner, not even an American, although I must admit to being an admirer of Lee and his campaigns. I have no national or State allegiance to push, although I should go on record as saying my best friend is a Virginian (albeit one married to an Ohio girl and now living in Dayton) and the source of my initial fascination with the Civil War. I do not intend to influence any potential reader as to the right or wrong of this book, I believe any serious student of the Civil War or military history is quite capable of making up his or her own mind.

The main question to be addressed is to what extent is the claim of the author based on sound, constructive evidence, objectively considered? The observant will note that I do not say the conclusion of the author, as it is quite apparent that the book’s conclusion came first and the body of the book written to support that conclusion. It is quite apparent that Edward Bonekemper is a lawyer, he builds a case for the prosecution ignoring or minimising all contrary evidence, leaving that to the defence.

All writers of military history are to some extent reliant on hindsight; it is the nature of the game so to speak. However, whilst hindsight may well help to show how things happened, it is rarely a useful guide as to why. A general in any war is required to make decisions on the spot, often at times of great stress and confusion. He will make these decisions on information and facts known to him at the time. Often it will turn out that the information he has is wrong. The general does not have the luxury of knowing what happened before he reaches his decision. As mentioned above, the author is prone to statements that things were either obvious or there being a simpler way of doing them. It is a weakness of the book that having said this he does not investigate why, if a simpler alternative was so obvious, Lee did not take it. Throughout the book, no consideration is given to what might appear obvious to the historian sitting in the comfort of his study with all the facts to hand, might not be so obvious to the general in the field in the heat of battle.

Many of the decisions made by Lee and others are presented in the book without any reference to external factors. Military action does not occur in a vacuum and the reason for doing something or the way that it is done can be down to other factors. There is no assessment of what was intended, what was hoped to be achieved, or the factors influencing them.

It is a maxim of historical study that an accusation should not just be made, it must be proven. Throughout the book, facts and accusations are made but not investigated or proven. For example the often made claim that Lee over-concentrated on the Virginia theatre at the expense of the whole is again made. The author is not the first or last to make this statement. However, there is no investigation or assessment of the strategic value of Virginia. No attempt is made to demonstrate Virginia's relevance or otherwise to the Confederate cause. Likewise, Lee's position as senior military advisor to President Davies is not assessed for the reality of the position, but is stated at face value. *On a similar vein, there is no discussion as to whether Lee, after the despatch west of the large forces the author states should have been sent there, would have retained sufficient numbers to defend Virginia. Furthermore, there is no consideration given to the logistics of supplying large additional forces in the West where the Confederacy struggled to support the forces it did have.*

The more serious reader, with more than a glancing knowledge of military affairs, will be quickly aware of the author's lack of understanding of military maxims or his decision to ignore them as unsupportive of his argument. There is no consideration given to the importance of initiative, that often attack is the best form of defence, concentration of resources, or that, perhaps most importantly, military actions are difficult! It is a well-known statement that no plan survives contact with the enemy. It is very rare indeed for an opposing force to sit still and comply exactly with how the plan requires them. The enemy is trying to win as much as you are. Too much of this book is concerned with plans not going entirely to plan and sometimes not at all; this can be the fault of the generals, but not entirely and rarely exclusively.

Alarm bells will quickly sound in the head of the objective reader when he or she starts to encounter the author's description of the battles themselves and the planning for them. The serious reader will quickly spot that a fair amount of misrepresentation in their description is involved and the narrative includes a fair amount of what we would today call "spin." This occurs from the start, for example, the Mechanicsville battle is written in a way to suggest that Lee devised an over-complicated plan to launch a series of frontal attacks. The serious student is aware that the hoped for result of the complicated approach march was to obtain the objective by manoeuvre. Worryingly, at least three of the resources listed in the book's bibliography make this abundantly clear.

Putting to one side the glaringly obvious weaknesses in the author's portrayal of events and lack of contextual presentation for a moment, the serious historian confronts the book's main contention, that Lee should have known that the South's best chance of victory lay in Lincoln's electoral defeat in 1864. I have two observations.

Firstly, hindsight is the basis of this position. Although, as the author quite rightly points out, Lincoln's potential electoral defeat was well known in the South as a chance of victory, it is hindsight that leads the author to claim it as the best chance. The author's claim that Lee ignored this and went for the win instead is quite puzzling; after all, logically a general who is not trying to win is surely trying to lose? Furthermore, no explanation is given as to why Confederate strategy, as the inferior power, should have obviously adopted a strategy of endurance.

Secondly, and quite probably the most obvious weakness of this book, the objective reader will note the author fails to even justify his own recommendations. Adoption of a passive defence in Virginia with a transfer of forces to the West would have required the South to gradually retreat south, abandoning the economically vital Upper South. The well-informed reader will immediately ask why, with her armies deep in the Southern heartland earlier, with tangible results to show for the cost in lives and success more easily discernible, would the Northern population be more demoralised and inclined to elect a peace at any cost President in 1864?

The author's opinions as to Lee resigning once "defeat became obvious" shows a clear lack of understanding of the main subject of the book, Robert E. Lee himself, and of Western military convention. It has long been standard in Western armies that whilst a general may offer his resignation, if it is not accepted he will continue. This is because in a Western army, whilst a general has the right to resign his men do not, and as a result generals have traditionally considered resignation in wartime desertion. To suggest Lee should have done what he would undoubtedly have considered tantamount to desertion and abandoning his post shows a worrying lack of knowledge about General Lee.

On the plus side, the book does contain some useful statistics regarding casualties. In many ways, casualty statistics is what the book boils down to. The casualty figures reveal the terrible cost of the Civil War in particular and warfare in general. Warfare is risky, if you do not want to suffer casualties then do not fight wars. As is the case with the rest of the book, the author does of course view them as an abstract and not in conjunction with any other factors. It should always be borne in mind that no matter how thorough or clever the plan or manoeuvre, there will always ultimately come a point when the infantry must advance and engage the enemy. The historian is well aware of basing any argument purely on statistics, especially when they are viewed out of context of all other considerations and influences on events.

In summary, the author has produced a book based on misrepresentation, selective quotations, statistics, and misunderstanding to support an argument not fully thought through or presented. Whilst the casual reader may find it useful, the more serious or objective student of the civil war or military historian will quite quickly observe it is not based upon a realistic assessment of the situation or factors at the time. Whatever the rights or wrongs of his argument, the author has failed to present a credible argument in this book.

Stuart Kay is a new member of the Roundtable. Raised in Hong Kong, he is a solicitor for Samurai Promotions in Feltham (greater London), England. He is a devoted fan of Marse Robert and will attend the April meeting in his defense.

William Henry Fitzhugh “Rooney” Lee



Born at Arlington in 1837, William Henry Fitzhugh Lee was the second son of Robert E. Lee and Mary Anna Randolph Custis. His pedigree included “Light-Horse” Harry Lee and Martha Washington. Though hardly the most famous member of his family, “Rooney”—as he was known—nevertheless played an important part in the nation’s most trying ordeal.

After spending most of his childhood moving from post to post with his father, Lee was granted admission to Harvard in 1854, where his record was less than exemplary. It was hardly surprising that in 1857 Lee left the school to accept a commission in the army as a second lieutenant. Assigned to the 6th Infantry under Albert Sidney Johnston, the young officer was sent to Utah Territory to quell the Mormon Rebellion. Following additional assignments in Texas and the Pacific Northwest, Lee resigned his commission in 1859 to take up farming at the White House estate on the Pamunkey River in Virginia.

Lee’s simple agrarian life, however, was short-lived. When his home state seceded in April 1861, the Virginian once again took up the sword—this time as a captain in the 9th Virginia Cavalry, attached to what would ultimately become his father’s command, the Army of Northern Virginia. In his year of service with the regiment, Lee took an active part in the Seven Days’ Battles, and the Second Manassas and Maryland Campaigns, ascending to the colonelcy of the regiment along the way. When the Army of Northern Virginia reorganized its mounted arm in November 1862, “Rooney” Lee was given charge of a brigade and promoted to brigadier general.

Limited cavalry operations at the end of 1862 and in the spring of 1863 gave Lee little chance to test his mettle as a brigadier. However, on the morning of June 9, 1863, Lee, then camped near Brandy Station, Virginia, heard firing in the direction of the Rappahannock River at Beverly’s Ford. Riding to the sound of the guns, the general organized a defensive position, taking advantage of the terrain and a low stone wall. For five hours Lee’s cavaliers fought off repeated assaults by Union cavalry under General John Buford, effectively stalling the Federal advance and exacting a fearsome toll in casualties. Lee, however, did not escape unscathed. As the battle of Brandy Station drew to a close, the brigadier was badly wounded in the leg.

The general’s wound required several months of convalescence, during which he was captured. The next nine months of Lee’s career were spent as a prisoner at Forts Monroe and Lafayette. In December of 1863, Lee learned of the death of his wife. He was exchanged in March of 1864.

When Lee returned to the army that spring, he was given command of a division and promoted to major general, making him the youngest Confederate officer to hold that rank. He rendered reliable service during the war’s final year, most notably at the April 1865 battle of Five Forks. While his fellow generals George Pickett, Thomas Rosser and (his cousin) Fitzhugh Lee, enjoyed their lunch, Rooney defended against a combined assault by infantry and cavalry and, despite his best efforts, was ultimately overwhelmed. Little more than a week later, Lee surrendered his cavalry along with the entire remnant of his army at Appomattox Court House.

After the war, Rooney Lee resumed his life as a farmer and was the president of the Virginia State Agricultural society for several years. He was eventually drawn back into public life, serving a term as a state senator from 1875 to 1879 and later as a member of the U.S. House of Representatives from 1887 to 1891. W. H. F. Lee passed away shortly after the expiration of his term and was buried in Alexandria. In 1922 his remains were reinterred at the Lee Mausoleum in Lexington, Virginia.

Mary Anna Randolph Custis, 1808-1873

Mary was the daughter of George Washington Parke Custis and Mary Lee Fitzhugh and was the only child that lived to adulthood. G.W.P. Custis was the grandson of Martha Washington and the adopted son of George Washington. Mary's father didn't want her to marry Robert Lee, but eventually gave in to his daughter's wishes. Mrs. Lee had severe arthritis forcing her into crutches or wheel chair in the later years of her life. During the Civil War, Mrs. Lee lost her beloved home Arlington (now known as Arlington House within Arlington Cemetery). While her husband was fighting the war, she traveled from relative to relative until early 1864 when she and her daughters moved in with her son Custis and his friends at 707 Franklin Street in Richmond. She and her daughters knitted socks for the soldiers during their free time. After the War, while her husband was president of Washington College, Mrs. Lee spent her time mothering the students at Washington College and the near by Virginia Military Institute (VMI) doing all she could to help them while away from their families. Mrs. Lee was devastated when Annie died in 1862 and even more so when her husband died in 1870. She was further traumatized when a second daughter (Agnes) died in 1873, herself passing away shortly thereafter.



Narrative taken from www.robert-e-lee.freeservers.com/Lee_Family.htm, photos from the National Park Service website.



**NEXT MONTH
VICKSBURG!**

ED BEARSS

**PLEASE NOTE THE MEETING WILL BE MAY 16,
THE THIRD WEDNESDAY IN MAY**

The Children of Robert E. Lee and Mary Anna Randolph Custis Lee



George Washington Custis Lee
1832-1913



Mary Custis Lee
1835-1918



William Henry Fitzhugh Lee
1837-1891



Anne Carter Lee
1839-1862



Eleanor Agnes Lee
1841-1873



Robert E. Lee Jr.
1843-1914



Mildred Childe Lee
1846-1905