

The Great Partnership: Robert E. Lee, Stonewall Jackson, and the Fate of the Confederacy

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Review

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Keller, Christian B., *The Great Partnership: Robert E. Lee, Stonewall Jackson, and the Fate of the Confederacy*. Pegasus Books, 2019. HARDCOVER. \$18.89. ISBN: 978-1643131344 pp. 328.

The cover of Christian Keller's latest book, *The Great Partnership*, features a Mort Künstler painting titled *Tactics and Strategy*. A fatherly Robert E. Lee, seated on a crackerbox, rests a bare hand on the gloved forearm of Stonewall Jackson, crouching beside him and looking attentively at his commander. The 2002 painting captures a key moment in their partnership: the campfire-lit evening of May 1, 1863, at Chancellorsville. The painting's title suggests their relationship: Jackson the tactician and Lee the strategist.

Ironically, Keller's book argues a different relationship between the two men. "Lee's mind, like [Jackson's], was not limited to the tactical or even the operational objectives in his immediate line of sight," Keller writes. "The army commander thought more broadly, strategically, in ways that signified a clear understanding of what had to be done to win the war...." (10) In this, Keller argues, Lee and Jackson were in near-perfect synchronicity.

Keller lays out one of his primary challenges early. "The often discussed, over-romanticized, and well-explored relationship between Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson may initially appear to be a subject of little interest today," he admits, "especially in a world in which things Confederate have fallen out of vogue and social and cultural interpretations of the American Civil War attract the attention of most scholars." (xi) He responds successfully with a study that offers fresh insight into both men and the dynamic between them—a dynamic that drives Confederate fortunes in the eastern theater through most of 1862.

"The 'blue light' Presbyterian commoner, born in the Appalachian hill country, and the blue-blood Episcopalian aristocrat, born in the Tidewater, shared a devotion to God and the Old Dominion that trumped loyalty to country..." Keller says, but he spends more time illuminating their similarities than differences. (2) For example, "the similarities in their faith far outweighed

their differences and brought them closer together as men and as leaders in a command team increasingly indispensable for the hopes of Confederate independence.” (68)

Keller begins his examination with Jackson’s arrival outside Richmond in May 1862—the first time Lee and Jackson met in person during the war. However, the two men worked closely, albeit via correspondence, throughout Jackson’s spring campaign in the Shenandoah Valley while Lee served as Confederate President Jefferson Davis’s chief military adviser. Lee and Jackson first began to understand and trust each other during that important correspondence, and while Keller acknowledges that fact, his decision not to explore that formative phase of their relationship seems like a missed opportunity.

Jackson, of course, underperformed during the Seven Days battles. “For the Confederate public...” Keller writes, “Jackson’s bumbles were never illuminated and his previous aura now combined with Lee’s as a result of the overall success in driving back the enemy from the capital.” (34) From there, Keller takes readers battle by battle through 1862 to show the establishment and perfection of the Lee/Jackson relationship. “[Jackson] would suggest, advise, and offer his opinion henceforth, but he would obey without flinching,” Keller says. “That deferential quality in Jackson’s personality was a key component of his professional relationship with Lee.” (61)

If Keller’s main premise about Jackson is that he possessed “a mind that was unequivocally engaged with the truly *strategic* character of the Civil War,” his main premise about Lee highlights “the general’s political sagacity and emotional intelligence.” (61, 53) This was particularly true—and important—in Lee’s dealings with Richmond. “Lee’s high emotional intelligence...enabled him to handle the often-prickly Davis and his cabinet with aplomb,” Keller contends. (7) Other army commanders never successfully figured out how to handle their commander in chief, so, Keller adds, “That reality by itself made Lee a precious commodity for the Confederacy.” (53) Lee’s emotional intelligence played a key role in his dealings with his command team, too, “ensuring their viewpoints were heard and their input valued.” (46)

A weakness of the book is that it lacks a thorough exploration of Lee’s relationship with James Longstreet. Although Keller chose to focus on Lee and Jackson, Longstreet held an influential place in their dynamic friendship. Instead, Longstreet flits about the edges of Keller’s story rather than illuminating it. Keller seems to buy into worn criticisms of Lee’s Old Warhorse and dismisses him as someone who “believed himself to be”—but, by inference, actually

wasn't—a trusted subordinate and friend of Lee's. When he correctly contends “the command team had evolved into a symbiotically supportive system of opposites that could lay most differences aside and work successfully together,” it's hard to fully appreciate without a more fleshed-out look at Longstreet's role in that team. (92)

Cavalryman Jeb Stuart, also a supporting character, gets a bit more attention because of his personal friendship with Jackson; however, Keller downplays Stuart's unique relationship with Lee as though to honor it would somehow detract from Lee's relationship with Jackson. Keller goes to great lengths to illustrate a deep, genuine friendship that develops between Lee and Jackson, transcending their professional relationship but making it more effective. Keller's forceful argument of that interpretation makes a worthwhile addition to the long historical conversation about the two men.

Of curious interest is a full chapter devoted to public and private reactions to Jackson's death. This gets off track from the central theme of the book—the partnership between Lee and Jackson—but Jackson admirers will find it a welcome and thorough addition. The following chapter gets back on point, though, offering excellent analysis of the impact of Jackson's death on Lee and the command structure of the Army of Virginia. As Keller forecasts early in the book, the “death of Jackson was a professionally mortal blow from which the Confederate chieftain, and the Confederacy, would never recover.” (xi) Included in the chapter is a thoughtful discussion of the impact of Jackson's absence on the battle of the Gettysburg, a topic usually rife with ill-considered wishful thinking. Keller extrapolates from that discussion one of the best-articulated arguments in print in favor of Gettysburg as a turning point of the war, “not because...it led inexorably to final Federal victory. Instead, it represented a unique moment in the time-stream of the conflict in which a decisive rebel success would have opened strategic branches and sequels that could have only benefitted the Confederacy to the detriment of the union.” (215) Though many historians (including myself) remain skeptical of the “Gettysburg-as-turning-point” thesis, Keller offered a convincing perspective of the battle's influence on the course of the war.

The book's footnotes provide a wealth of additional information and analysis and are, of themselves, worth considerable examination. In the notes and text, Keller is careful to call attention to the pro-Jackson bias of many of the sources closest to Jackson, such as surgeon

Hunter McGuire and staff officers like Henry Kyd Douglas and James Power Smith. Their influence is nonetheless apparent in Keller's story, but he ensures everyone reads with eyes wide open.

A final touch worth mentioning is Keller's excellent use of specific moments to help illuminate the relationship between the two commanders: an open-air meeting in a grassy field, a parlor prayer service, an 1862 Christmas dinner, and others. Each little episode brings readers in for a closer view of Lee and Jackson. Like Künstler's cover image, Keller tries to invite us into an intimate moment, even if we may never fully be privy to the inner workings between them.

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