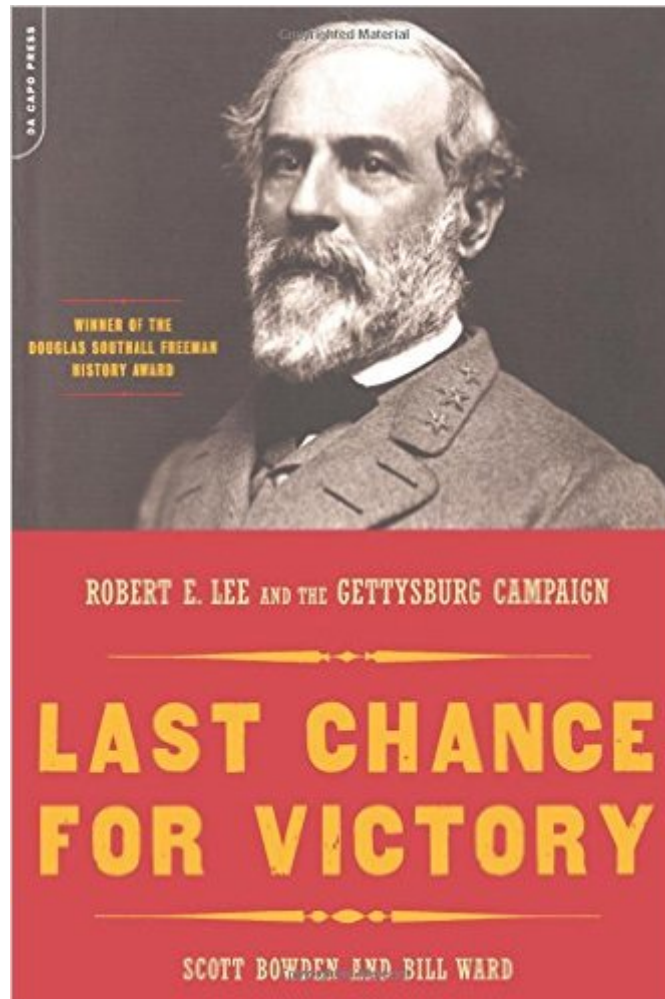


The book was found

Last Chance For Victory: Robert E. Lee And The Gettysburg Campaign



Synopsis

Long after nearly fifty thousand soldiers shed their blood there, serious misunderstandings persist about Robert E. Lee's generalship at Gettysburg. What were Lee's choices before, during, and after the battle? What did he know that caused him to act as he did? Last Chance for Victory addresses these issues by studying Lee's decisions and the military intelligence he possessed when each was made. Packed with new information and original research, Last Chance for Victory draws alarming conclusions to complex issues with precision and clarity. Readers will never look at Robert E. Lee and Gettysburg the same way again.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Bowden and Ward's book is a very fresh look at Gettysburg. It provides a generally good synopsis of the events of the campaign and the battle but, more importantly, it offers original analysis and a sharp analytical focus on the "big questions," that is, the decisions and actions from Presidential down to brigade level which determined the outcome...and (somewhat courageously on their part) a specific analysis of the turning-points which could have made a difference in that outcome.

Moreover--and refreshingly--they analyze those key decisions in terms of what the (Southern) players knew at the time--not in terms of an a-historical post mortem analysis based on twenty-twenty hindsight. The strength of this book thus is in its originality; its focus on analysis, not micro-history; its deft sense of strategy/tactics; and its plumbing of sources. I agree with other reviewers on this site that one will never look at Gettysburg quite the same way again after reading this book. It clearly makes a valuable contribution. HOWEVER, the book also has its weaknesses:1)

It views the battle essentially from the Southern side, which creates an inbuilt bias towards explaining Gettysburg not as a battle the North won but as one the South lost. In this regard, I endorse the recommendation of other reviewers that a good companion volume to the book would be Coddington's classic work on the Gettysburg campaign, which gives more equal time to both sides (with, if anything, more attention to the Union).² Much more seriously, the book at times has an almost polemical (non-objective?) tone...the exoneration of Lee from virtually all responsibility for the outcome--blame being placed primarily on his corps commanders.

Other reviewers of this book are correct in assessing this book as one-sided (Confederate) and pro-Lee. Nevertheless, it is well worth the reading. In particular, it has three major benefits. It explicitly and exhaustively explains Napoleonic and contemporary (1860) strategic and tactical thought and technique, and arrives at a favorable comparison of Lee's practice to contemporary practice. It explicitly quotes relevant documents when examining controversial actions. For example, six relevant messages surrounding the orders given to Stuart are repeated verbatim and analyzed as to their meaning. The usual treatment for this kind of material is to footnote it and summarize for conclusions only, leaving (and leading) the lay reader to agree. This book invites the reader to analyze the material, and disagree. It often presents both sides of an argument, but sometimes does not make an opposing argument as strongly as it might be made. The footnotes are extensive, and easy to manage as they are at the end of each chapter. It is particularly well organized, presenting the battle in chronological fashion. One of the advantages of concentrating on the Confederate side of the battle is that Confederate actions and inactions are presented in a coherent fashion due to this organization. In short, you may disagree with the authors, but you will know why they drew the conclusions they did, and will find that they have strong evidence to support those conclusions. I would recommend that the interested reader read another major work on this battle BEFORE reading this work. The authors clearly assume that the reader is familiar with the battle and the controversies surrounding it. If you can take it, try Coddington. He is definitive, but hard to read.

No matter which school of thought one follows concerning Robert E. Lee, this book is bound to make you give a lot of thought to Lee's leadership at Gettysburg. If the writers are able to make the reader stop and think about his or her preconceived notions then they have accomplished much. At times, I found myself laying the book aside and picturing in my mind various areas of the battlefield along with the movement of the troops that the authors were then describing. The use of excellent

maps to illustrate the point that was being made was also a great plus for this book. After the numerous books that have come out in the last few years criticizing Lee mercilessly, this book is a welcome counterpoint. Unfortunately, these authors, like those who heap criticisms on Lee, tend to go to the extreme. The truth probably lies somewhere in between. This work makes a very credible argument that Lee's orders to J.E.B. Stuart were fairly explicit as the army began to move north and that Stuart simply went off on his own. There is also clear evidence that A.P. Hill was responsible for the failure of the attack on July 2nd and that Richard Ewell, new to corps command and possibly unnerved by his own initial success on July 1st let a clear opportunity to carry Cemetery Hill pass. The words, "if practicable," in his orders is a poor excuse for his lack of action because taking that hill was very practicable. The authors also give a very clear and convincing argument as to why Longstreet's flanking maneuver would not have worked and present the most clear and well written picture I have read of what Lee was up to with his echelon attack on July 2nd. On the other hand this book fails to explain away some of Lee's failures during the campaign.

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