

ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

The Seven Days Battles

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On the evening of June 24, 1862, the Union's Army of the Potomac was poised to begin its advance on the Confederate capital of Richmond, Virginia, with an attack the next morning on Southern forces less than 10 miles from the city. Seven evenings later, on the night of July 1, that same army retreated for the fourth time in that span of days from a field it had held after a major battle. It was headed for Harrison's Landing on the James River, more than 15 miles from Richmond as the crow flies, and a much greater psychological and strategic distance for the North. In fact, the Army of the Potomac would not reach this proximity to Richmond again for 23 months, by which time the Civil War would be recognizably different in fighting and objectives.

One month earlier, the Union looked poised to end the rebellion quickly and with little change to the status quo. President Abraham Lincoln had called for troops not to end slavery, one root cause of social and economic differences between the North and South, but to suppress the rebellion by 11 states that followed his election in 1860. Those troops had fought (west of the Appalachian Mountains) and maneuvered (east of the mountains) to strategically important gains. West of the Mississippi River, a victory at Pea Ridge had given the Union control of Missouri and northwest Arkansas. Northern forces had defeated Confederate armies in Tennessee, most recently at Shiloh, and gained most of the state; in fact, they had taken Corinth, Mississippi, an important rail junction. As a result of the campaigning the Mississippi was Northern-controlled to below the Tennessee-Mississippi border. The river also was controlled by the Union north of New Orleans thanks to combined army-navy efforts.

Only in the Shenandoah Valley did Southern fortunes seem favored. Major General Thomas Jonathan "Stonewall" Jackson and his men made lightning marches and defeated several Union forces in detail, threatening to cross the Potomac River. Lincoln was concerned about Jackson but also wanted to trap him if possible, and he diverted reinforcements to the Valley that originally were intended for the Army of the Potomac. That army, commanded by Major General George Brinton McClellan, had maneuvered its way to the outskirts of Richmond without fighting a major battle by transferring from the Washington, D.C. vicinity to the Peninsula between the York and James Rivers, at the western end of which lay Richmond. McClellan's advance may have been slower than some in the North would have liked, but it seemed inexorable. And on May 31 and June 1 at Seven Pines his army had defeated a Southern attack and severely wounded its

commander, General Joseph Eggleston Johnston. Confederate President Jefferson Davis replaced Johnston with General Robert Edward Lee, a soldier highly praised before the war but criticized in its first year for his actions in western Virginia and the southeast coast.

Lee thought he could not allow McClellan to force him into a set-piece battle or siege, so he decided to take the offensive. First preparing field entrenchments to allow his army, the Army of Northern Virginia, to hold a line with a minimum force, he then began to plan his attack. Understanding the need to concentrate all available forces on the decisive point, Lee took advantage of Jackson's escape from Lincoln's attempted trap and defeat of the Union forces to bring the Valley army to Richmond. To find the decisive point he sent Brigadier General James Ewell Brown "JEB" Stuart and his cavalry north of the Chickahominy River, which divided McClellan's army, on a scouting expedition. Stuart found the Northern right flank "in the air," not anchored by any natural obstacle and thus open to being flanked by a Southern force. Lee had found his decisive point; if he could force McClellan's right to retreat, the Federal supply line from White House Landing on the Pamunkey River would be exposed and vulnerable. McClellan would need to retreat to protect his supplies, and Lee would have the opportunity to attack the Army of the Potomac during its retreat.

Lee ultimately decided to concentrate 19 brigades of the Army of Northern Virginia, along with the 7 brigades of Jackson's force, against the Union right (only 9 brigades of Major General Fitz John Porter's V Corps) north of the Chickahominy. Meanwhile only 9 Confederate brigades south of the river faced 23 Federal brigades. It was a colossal gamble, even with the Southern forces entrenched. However, McClellan thought the Army of Northern Virginia outnumbered his force and had committed to a siege. His objective was to gain a position for his siege guns from which Lee could be shelled out of Richmond. By late June he was in position to meet that objective by taking a crossroads known as Old Tavern directly east of Richmond. First, though, he wanted to protect Old Tavern's left, so he ordered an assault for June 25 by elements of divisions of Brigadier Generals Joseph Hooker and Philip Kearny, Jr. The Northerners hit part of Major General Benjamin Huger's Confederate division, and a confused fight ensued around a grove of oak trees, an orchard, and King's Schoolhouse - all southwest of the Seven Pines battlefield. Many claims of success came from this fight, most commonly called Oak Grove, but in fact the Southerners had the best argument, because the Union lines ended the day about where they had begun it.

Oak Grove almost became a totally unanticipated success for McClellan, as the unexpected attack shook Lee for part of the day. He knew a determined assault south of the Chickahominy would not only spoil his plans but put Richmond in danger, although he thought he would be able to hit McClellan's rear with his strike force if the Federals advanced. By afternoon, however, Lee was satisfied the attack was not general, and he continued with his plans. The divisions of Major Generals James Longstreet, Ambrose Powell Hill, Jr., and Daniel Harvey Hill moved into place near bridges crossing the Chickahominy. Jackson, although later than he expected in his march from the Valley,

was approaching the area north of Richmond. McClellan found out Jackson was on his way, and the news caused him to cancel any further offensive moves. Instead he would defend his supply line and await developments on June 26.

Lee wanted to take the initiative on June 26, but he ran into problems. His plan was for Jackson to flank Porter's strong position behind Beaver Dam Creek east of Mechanicsville. He also sent a brigade, commanded by Brigadier General Lawrence O'Bryan Branch, to cross the Chickahominy well north of Beaver Dam Creek and clear crossings for the rest of his force. However, Jackson was several hours late getting into position, the understandable but unforeseen result of difficulties marching from the Valley to Richmond. For that reason Branch's brigade was late in clearing the crossings. As morning turned into afternoon the Southern generals became increasingly anxious. Every hour they waited was an hour for McClellan to discern the true situation and move forward south of the river. Finally, possibly without orders, A. P. Hill ordered his men to cross the Chickahominy. They found little resistance, as Porter had set up only reinforced pickets at the bridges, and eventually all the Southern forces got across the river with little loss.

However, Jackson's tardiness became costly once Lee had his men across the river. Porter's position was a defense in depth, held by Brigadier General George Archibald McCall's division, behind a swampy creek lined on either side by high ground. Confederates from A. P. Hill's and D. H. Hill's divisions attacking this position were exposed to fire as they descended to and then tried to cross the creek. Several Southern units tried to attack, but few succeeded in getting across the creek, let alone breaking McCall's line. The line was still there only because Jackson had failed to reach a flanking position in time to force Porter out of the line. Lee didn't realize that, because of the lack of communication between the two generals. He had not wanted to attack at Beaver Dam Creek, and he paid with 1,400 casualties for the failure - more than 300 from the 44th Georgia, which made the most headway. Union losses were about one-third that number.

McClellan, however, was looking at the big picture as he saw it. Jackson was later than planned, but he did finally reach a position that turned Porter's left - the only vulnerability of the Beaver Dam Creek position. So McClellan ordered Porter back to another position behind Boatswain's Swamp, another small watercourse with high ground on either side. This position protected some approaches to the Federal supply line, but it also protected several bridges across the Chickahominy. McClellan had decided in the face of the overwhelming force north of the Chickahominy that he needed to change his line of operations from the Pamunkey, which flowed into the York River, to the more secure James River. He needed one more day to get ready for this operation, and he counted on Porter to give him that day and then cross the river to rejoin the Army of the Potomac.

Lee, not knowing of McClellan's decision, needed to keep the pressure on Porter as well as try to break the Union supply line. Unfortunately, the Confederates knew less about the topography near Richmond than did the Unionists. Lee thought Porter would stop at

Powwhite Creek near Gaines's Mill and between Beaver Dam Creek and Boatswain's Swamp. He likely didn't know Boatswain's Swamp existed. He thus devised a plan that sent Jackson, again the flanking force and joined by D. H. Hill, to the wrong place. When Stonewall arrived at his appointed spot, near a crossroads called Old Cold Harbor, he found Northerners in position. Meanwhile, A. P. Hill, not finding Porter at Powwhite Creek, pushed on to Boatswain's Swamp and launched a series of assaults on Porter's line. All were beaten back, and the fighting was among the most savage of the war. As Jackson's men came into line, they also attacked and were beaten back.

The attacks caused Porter to request reinforcements, and McClellan sent over three brigades that helped keep the Union line intact. Finally, however, late on the summer day, Lee's forces attacked more or less simultaneously all along a line that contained many exhausted Northerners. That line broke in several places. In some areas, as along the Union right, it was more of a fighting withdrawal. One of the epic regimental combats of the war came when the 20th North Carolina and 16th New York fought over a Union battery in this sector; the two regiments together suffered 466 killed and wounded. In others a complete break in the line came with the Confederate charges.

One such charge, immortalized during and after the war, occurred when Brigadier General John Bell Hood led his 4th Texas and part of the 18th Georgia across Boatswain's Swamp and through the three-line Union defense. An ill-advised charge by Federal cavalry contributed little, and only darkness stopped the Southerners. They had broken Porter's position, inflicted at least 4,000 casualties (another 2,800 Northerners were missing including two regiments captured almost entirely whole), and captured 19 pieces of artillery. However, they had lost nearly 9,000 men themselves. Gaines's Mill became one of the bloodiest battles of the war.

McClellan heard the result of Gaines's Mill at the Trent House, his erstwhile headquarters south of the Chickahominy. His men already had packed up. Once the news came, he sent orders to his army to head south and southeast toward the James River. His supply lines now completely open to Confederate attack, he believed he could not stay where he was. The primary cause of that belief was McClellan's understanding that he faced overwhelming odds on both sides of the river, and the logical consequence that he would be caught between two large Southern forces with no viable line of retreat. He thus had to get a new, secure base established and put his army in a position where it and its supply line to that base were safe.

Of course, McClellan had other options. The one most cited after the war was his opportunity, with what was in reality a substantial numerical advantage south of the Chickahominy, to strike toward Richmond. Objectively that attack against fortified positions might have succeeded at high cost, and if McClellan could have simultaneously attacked, defended the Chickahominy crossings against Lee's main force, and done without supplies for several days, he might have been able to take Richmond. Ulysses S. Grant, who would become the North's greatest general of the war, might have done it. But McClellan did not possess Grant's personality. He also might have stayed in place,

close to Richmond, and held the river crossings while he re-established his base on the James. Again given the reality of the situation, McClellan likely could have accomplished this, and it would have fit his personality. The problem was it did not fit the world McClellan operated in - a world where Lee outnumbered him approximately two to one. It forever will remain unclear precisely why McClellan believed this to be the case, but it really doesn't matter why except to people who want to either praise or bury him. McClellan operated rationally within his world. Unfortunately, the reality was different, and an opportunity was lost.

McClellan on the night of June 27 sent more than orders to his army. He also sent a message to Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, a friend-turned-enemy, which essentially blamed Stanton for the Union defeat. However, its last two sentences containing this accusation were deleted by a telegraph supervisor in Washington before Stanton saw it. While Stanton and Lincoln were pondering the turn of events, the Army of the Potomac headed toward the James River. They did so mostly unmolested by the Army of Northern Virginia. Lee wanted more concrete evidence of McClellan's intentions than the smoke from burning supplies gave him. He did try to gain that evidence a little through probes, and he sent Stuart to McClellan's former base (and Lee's son's house) at White House Landing - where, eventually, Stuart found McClellan's base and the house burning. But other than some combat near the south bank of the Chickahominy at Garnett's and Gouldin's farms (site of a skirmish the day before as well), little fighting took place on June 28.

By the end of the day Lee had enough evidence on the Northerners' destination that he could plan accordingly. He put his whole army, plus some additional forces, on the move June 29. Jackson and D. H. Hill were to move down the north bank of the Chickahominy to observe the Yankees and prevent them from re-crossing the river, crossing themselves when they could and moving along the river to flank the Union force. Longstreet and A. P. Hill were to loop around the entire army to try to cut the Federal retreat line. Major General John Bankhead Magruder and Huger were to pursue the Army of the Potomac from their positions south of the Chickahominy to try to fix it in place as long as possible. If all went well Longstreet and A. P. Hill to get between the Unionists and the James, setting up the possibility of a decisive battle near the Glendale crossroads (where many roads converged on the way to the James) on June 30. Lee also got Major General Theophilus Hunter Holmes and some of his Department of North Carolina troops to cross the James River from Petersburg to advance down the River Road on the north bank.

As typically happened to Lee's plans during the Seven Days, not all went right on June 29. Jackson and D. H. Hill got into position near Grapevine Bridge, an important crossing of the Chickahominy, but Stonewall showed no initiative. Some have speculated that since June 29 was a Sunday Jackson (a religious man) did not want to fight. Since Jackson fought on other Sundays that explanation can be dismissed; his relative inaction probably was caused by confusing orders and the need to rebuild a bridge to get his artillery across the river. Longstreet and A. P. Hill marched in sweltering heat to within seven miles of the important Glendale crossroads, ready to move again in the morning.

Holmes was on the north bank of the James by afternoon, ready to move down the River Road.

The main show of June 29 for the Confederates was supposed to be Magruder and Huger working together on parallel roads (Magruder the Williamsburg Road, Huger the Charles City Road) to snipe at the Union rear guard, slowing it down enough to allow Lee's other forces to do their work. But Huger spent most of the day either moving between the two roads or waiting, as he responded to multiple conflicting orders given by multiple people. Finally he moved down the Charles City Road, but he engaged no Federals. Magruder was by turns cautious and energetic, ready to beat the enemy and fearing the enemy would beat him. There was some reason for the latter sentiment, as McClellan had left a large force as a rear guard. In fact, more than two of McClellan's five army corps were in and around Savage's Station, the former Union forward supply depot and field hospital. The supplies at the station were being destroyed - one locomotive full of ammunition spectacularly crashed into the Chickahominy river bottom in a creative method of destruction - and the wounded were abandoned, those who could move trying to keep up with the retreating army. To buy the rest of the army time, the corps of Brigadier General Edwin Vose Sumner and Samuel Peter Heintzelman, along with Brigadier General William Farrar "Baldy" Smith's division of Brigadier General William Buel Franklin's corps, were ordered to hold their positions west, southwest, and north of Savage's Station until dark. This force against the four divisions (three of them small) commanded by Magruder and Huger was a substantial mismatch, but Heintzelman evened the odds a bit by withdrawing his entire corps during the afternoon.

Magruder moved forward slowly, and he stopped relatively quickly when his advance found three regiments of the Union rear guard near Allen's Farm. Then he waited, first for Huger and then for Jackson, to whom he had sent a request for assistance. Jackson wrote back that he could provide no assistance, as he had "other important duty to perform." That message has caused almost as much consternation as McClellan's telegram to Stanton, but all Stonewall meant was he needed to ensure the Federals were not retreating by crossing the Chickahominy and following their old supply line. Neither he nor Lee could be absolutely sure McClellan had not determined on that course, and Lee did not want to miss a chance to strike a blow. Once Magruder received Jackson's message he threw caution to the wind, or perhaps he remembered Lee's instruction to fix the Union rear guard as much as possible, and he attacked with two brigades. One, commanded by Brigadier General Joseph Brevard Kershaw, made some headway north of the Williamsburg Road until some of the still-plentiful Northern reinforcements stopped the advance. South of the road, in the woods, three of Brigadier General Paul Jones Semmes' regiments engaged in a short-range combat with Vermonters from Brigadier General William Thomas Harbaugh Brooks' brigade. Little was accomplished; the Yankees stayed about as long as they would have anyway, and then they began to pull back.

The rest of the Army of the Potomac on the night of June 29 was stretched out from the James River to the area around White Oak Swamp, a small watercourse that crossed

multiple roads leading from the Richmond area to Glendale, Malvern Hill to the south, and the river. However, seven of the army's 11 divisions, plus another brigade, were arrayed in a sort of semicircle around the Glendale crossroads, which had become vital to hold so the army's trains could make it to the James. Lee's entire army was headed to the same spot. Jackson and D. H. Hill crossed the Chickahominy moving toward White Oak Swamp Bridge northeast of Glendale. Longstreet and A. P. Hill continued their line of march from June 29, approaching Glendale from the southwest. Huger did the same from the northwest. Magruder looped around Huger to march on the same line as Longstreet and A. P. Hill. These moves opened the possibility of a decisive battle larger than any in the war thus far. Holmes' small force, not of Lee's army, was the only one not headed to Glendale; instead he approached Malvern Hill, where part of Porter's corps was guarding the road to the James River.

For the fourth time in six days the Army of Northern Virginia brought on a battle, and for the fourth time in six days Lee's plans failed. Jackson inexplicably did almost nothing at White Oak Swamp Bridge, and Huger followed suit on the Charles City Road northwest of Glendale. These failures allowed the Union forces at those locations to reinforce their brethren at Glendale itself. That was decisive, because although Longstreet and A. P. Hill attacked with great force and broke Brigadier General George McCall's division of Pennsylvania Reserves. McCall's men, who had fought Mechanicsville by themselves and were in the thick of it at Gaines's Mill, should not have been in the front line at Glendale but were because of Union confusion. McClellan, as in all the worst of the fighting in the Seven Days, was not on the field. Instead he was scouting for the best place for his army's new base. He did not leave anyone in formal command in the Glendale area; elements of several army corps were in the vicinity, creating the possibility of command havoc. Yet he gave orders to individual units before leaving the field. The most important consequence of all this was McCall's exhausted men being placed in the front line southwest of Glendale - exactly where Longstreet and A. P. Hill would attack.

Yet the Pennsylvanians put up stout resistance before yielding. Longstreet, attacking first, broke McCall's line in three places but could not sustain his advantage in the face of counterattacks, artillery fire, and Union reinforcements, some coming from in front of Jackson and Huger. A. P. Hill then followed Longstreet to the attack, took Union batteries that had been fought over all day, and captured McCall. But it wasn't enough to break the Union line.

Some of the combats between individual units were as intense as any in the war, with much of it hand-to-hand or at close range. Batteries changed hands multiple times, and with no preparation the battle lines for the most part were open. Out of about 43,000 men engaged, casualties came to more than 6,000. But Lee did not have enough of an advantage to make the day as decisive as it could have been. Magruder, his last card, was wasted in marching to support Holmes, who was shelled out of his advanced position by Union artillery on Malvern Hill.

On the night of June 30 the Army of the Potomac gathered most of its force on or near Malvern Hill. This rise of ground overlooked the James River and the River Road. The Willis Church Road from Glendale passed directly over Malvern Hill on its way to a junction with the River Road. The western side of the hill was really a bluff, almost impossible to assault. The eastern side was somewhat protected by Western Run, a small, swampy stream. The north side was a gentle slope, not ordinarily what would be considered a strong defensive position. However, the terrain was open fields, perfect for artillery to decimate attacking formations before they could reach the Union line. Porter, who McClellan left in command on the main part of the field, had more than 100 cannon on the hill itself, which artillery reserve commander Colonel Henry Jackson Hunt placed in almost perfect formation - particularly on the north side, where more than 30 guns were spaced widely to be able to aim in concert or separately at almost any point on the field. Infantry was in support of the guns to allow the widest possible field of fire.

Lee likely understood the nature of this position; he had spent time not far from Malvern Hill at Shirley Plantation on the James. Despite some irritation at seeing his plans not fulfilled as he desired, he was clear-headed if tired on July 1. Before deciding whether to attack McClellan, he wanted to see if there was a weak spot. Asking Longstreet to investigate the Confederate right where Magruder and Huger were to be posted, Lee went left to where Jackson and D. H. Hill were to line up. Longstreet and A. P. Hill, having suffered horrendous casualties in the previous battles, were in reserve.

Longstreet saw the possibility of massing artillery to counteract the Union guns, and Lee approved the suggestion. The Rebels worked to get batteries in place; unfortunately for them, the Federals shelled them out of position almost as soon as they set up. In the meantime Lee had decided to be ready to follow up any Northern weakness caused by Southern artillery fire. He issued an order noting that Brigadier General Lewis Addison Armistead, in command of the brigade closest to the Yankee line, would “charge with a yell” if a withdrawal was seen, and in that event other Confederate units were to charge as well. Of all the problems with this order, the most important was that units could charge with a yell for many reasons, and a yell could occur without a charge - but no one might know the difference.

Longstreet earlier had found Magruder marching the wrong way through a duplication of road names in the area around Malvern Hill; finally Magruder got into the desired position. When he did so, he and others saw Union movement, which they interpreted as a withdrawal. In fact it was a shuffling of batteries in the front as some had fired all their ammunition. But Magruder told Lee of his view, and Lee responded to follow up the “success.” Magruder did so, ordering his men forward. They were decimated and never really threatened to break the Yankee line. But more than that, their charge and yell was seen by D. H. Hill, who ordered his men to join in the assault. Hill’s men suffered nearly 20 percent casualties and didn’t come within 200 yards of the Union line. Finally Huger’s units attacked. A few men made it to the reinforced Northern line but were turned back. The day ended with more than 5,000 Confederates killed or wounded and no change in the Union position. It was one of the most futile attacks of the war.

That evening Porter and others tried to get McClellan to keep his lines at Malvern Hill and even attack toward Richmond. But McClellan was not ready for that, and in truth the army could not have stayed at Malvern Hill. Even during the day Confederates were eyeing the roads east of Malvern Hill, seeking to turn the position. Attacking toward Richmond from Malvern Hill was possible, but if McClellan had wanted that done he most likely would have attacked on June 27 or 28 from much closer to the Southern capital. Instead the Army of the Potomac retreated toward Harrison's Landing, its new base on the James. Most marched July 2 through a driving rainstorm. Lee followed, spurred on by a report from Stuart that Evelington Heights, which commanded Harrison's Landing, was unoccupied. But Stuart ruined the idea himself by firing one cannon. He was quickly dislodged, McClellan occupied the heights in force, and Lee declined to attack, ending the campaign.

Tactically the Yankees were successful in four of the five major battles in the Seven Days. Only at Gaines's Mill did they leave the field before they were ready. They inflicted 20,000 casualties on the Army of Northern Virginia, more than 20 percent of the Southern pre-campaign strength, while officially losing almost 10,000 killed and wounded themselves. Another 6,000 Federals were missing, most captured, some killed or wounded. But strategically the Confederates won the day. McClellan was forced from within sight of Richmond to a spot more than 20 miles away. It would be almost exactly 23 months before a Union army got that close to Richmond again. McClellan's ensuing lack of aggression allowed Lee to eventually take his entire force north to defeat Major General John Pope's Army of Virginia at Manassas, then invade Maryland, where McClellan was able to fight a bloody draw at Antietam and force the Rebels back across the Potomac River.

That draw at Antietam was the final link in a chain that made the Seven Days one of the decisive campaigns in the Civil War. If McClellan had successfully taken Richmond in June or July of 1862, the war might have ended shortly after. It would have ended without an Emancipation Proclamation, the preliminary version of which was released by Lincoln after Antietam. Without that proclamation, it is possible that slavery would have ended much differently than it did. It is certain that a McClellan victory would have prevented what became a hard, increasingly bloody conflict that eventually brought far-reaching changes to American society.
