

The American Serbonis

The Seven Days: The Emergence of Lee, by Clifford Dowdey. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1964. 380 pp. \$7.50.

CLIFFORD DOWDEY'S *The Seven Days* is his sixth book on the great American war variously known as the Civil War, the War between the States, and by other sectional or customary names. Emphatically, he is not one of those writers whom the Centennial of the eighteen-sixties suddenly made publishable, but is one of the most seasoned, distinguished, and in numerous ways satisfying, of the historians of *that* period, *that* war. He is in the great tradition of historical writing. His books are narrative in the high sense, not mere documentation simulating narrative, and they illuminate our disturbed present as well as that seemingly so distant past of which our swaggering modernity may be but a mammoth variant repetition. If "the

Confederacy" were not too limited a term, it might be a temptation to call him the Thucydides of the Confederacy, for his six books do tell a unified story of fatality both as immediate and as far-reaching in its dislocations and destructions as was the Peloponnesian War. True, Mr. Dowdey, a Virginian, focuses mainly on the Virginia campaigns and their related factors. But his gaze is wide, deep, and searching. It would be better to think of him as the Thucydides of that United States of America that once valued the *pluribus* as well as the *unum* of its motto.

This new book, subtitled *The Emergence of Lee*, approaches the Seven Days battle by way of preliminary chapters that concentrate on McClellan, the true builder of the Army of the Potomac, the Union general who figured himself to be the "young Napoleon" of the war and who—but for the political-military didoes of Lincoln and the Radical Republicans—might well have achieved his ambition. This area of political-military relationships is a Serbonian bog where veritable battalions of historians have floundered. Bruce Catton, Mr. Dowdey's northern contemporary, discreetly pronounces the magic words "democracy at war" and thus, in his *Mr. Lincoln's Army*, seems to make the bog disappear. Mr. Dowdey charts it, forthrightly and firmly, till we know, as McClellan knew, that it was there, and was a bog.

Why did McClellan fail in the Seven Days, once he had landed his well-conceived amphibious expedition on the "peninsula" between the York and James rivers and surely had it in his power to roll over the inferior Confederate forces and take Richmond early in the summer of 1862? The usual answers are that McClellan foolishly relied on the Pinkertons' false reports of superior Confederate forces; that therefore he did not really need McDowell's 40,000 men that Washington, scared by Jackson's Valley campaign, kept from him; but above all that he was supercautious and sluggish in action, though admittedly "a good organizer," a hero to the North, and ever popular among his soldiers.

Deliberate, yes, says Mr. Dowdey, and vain-glorious. But this "complex, extraordinarily gifted man was wholly right in his idea for crushing the resistance in Virginia. His campaign . . . was the only imaginative campaign ever mounted against Richmond. Beyond that, it was the military execution of a clear political objective and held the possibility, as one of Lincoln's cabinet members said . . . 'of preserving the Union without destroying the nation.'" But McClellan was a Democrat, and moderate in his views of the North-South conflict.

By an invasion in overwhelming force he hoped, as Dowdey sums it up, to end the war quickly "with a minimal dislocation to Southern society and a minimal bitterness between the contestants." Then there could be a "settlement."

But that was what the rising faction of Radical Republicans did *not* want. They preferred a defeat before Richmond to the kind of victory that would make McClellan the savior of the Union and so spoil their plans to make slavery the main war issue and to gain control of the Republican party. Lincoln temporized and extemporized, not yet quite yielding to the Radicals, but not fully supporting McClellan. Worst of all, he made that strange man, Stanton, his Secretary of War, and Stanton was with the Radicals. Hence the "divided command" which did great injury to McClellan and his army. Hence, too, the bitter, deliberately overstated complaints that McClellan sent to Washington. With much justification, he was blaming in advance the government that might be responsible for his defeat, even for the loss of his army. Probably he discounted the Pinkertons' estimate of 200,000 Confederates; but to those scheming civilians at Washington he had better say that he faced "vastly superior numbers."

To destroy McClellan's army, indeed, was Lee's purpose, once he replaced defense-minded Joe Johnston, fortunately—or unfortunately—wounded by a Minié ball and shell fragment on the field of Seven Pines. Although at this time Lee was, as Mr. Dowdey makes clear, a novice "in the techniques of high command" and his army "a crude and makeshift machine" compared to McClellan's, he was bold and prompt in action. Within the three weeks that the tardiness of McClellan's advance allowed him, Lee organized "his heterogeneous collection of troops into an army" and planned a daring counteroffensive intended to force McClellan out of his fixed positions into a war of maneuver.

At this point, halfway through the book, "the emergence of Lee" becomes the dominant narrative theme. Lee's plan for an offensive, as he told Jefferson Davis, "would change the character of the war." Held back for long months at a desk job, as Davis' military adviser, Lee could influence strategy in only subtle, indirect ways. But he had gained the Confederate President's confidence and so was now able to seize the initiative and conduct broadly strategic operations that did not seem to violate Davis' official policy of a static, locally scattered defense. And so began, in Mr. Dowdey's phrase, "The Early Work of a Master." Lee's plans, carried out as he ordered, would indeed have destroyed McClellan's army, or inflicted a disastrous

"Dunkirk" kind of defeat. But much went wrong. Jackson, expected to outflank McClellan's right, suffered from "stress fatigue," was in a sort of walking coma, and brought his famous troops into action late or not at all. (Mr. Dowdey supplies a clinical note on "stress fatigue.") Communication between units supposed to act in concert was very poor—or non-existent. Staff work was non-existent. Lee was like "a future genius at a stage before his powers of execution were sufficiently developed to express his concepts." Furthermore, McClellan, his generals, and his troops, dislodged from strong defensive positions at heavy cost, were truly formidable opponents. The details of these savage battles have never, I believe, been so clearly or meaningfully presented, or with such careful justice to all engaged in the great conflict.

What is there to say in summation? Let Mr. Dowdey say it in his own way:

With his aggressive strategy reduced to the simple truism, "A good offense is the best

defense," Lee made the Seven Days Battle the single most significant engagement of the war. . . . By preventing a settlement in 1862, the Seven Days prepared the way for the war of subjugation according to the Radicals' purposes. . . . Without Lee's counteroffensive the Union could have been restored without slavery becoming an issue and establishing a course in which, under the resurrected banners of moral coercion, the Negro again became a political issue one century later."

Is Mr. Dowdey saying that, since the Confederacy was "doomed" to lose, he would prefer for it to have lost in 1862 to McClellan? No, Dowdey the Virginian, as an individual, is not saying anything. Dowdey the historian is speaking, with something perhaps of Gibbon in him, remarking on the strange irony of events and personages. It is a wise voice, of a probity and authority rare in our time, and Americans of all sections and sorts would do well to hearken to him.

Reviewed by DONALD DAVIDSON