

Never Call Retreat - Lee and Grant: the Final Victory

By Newt Gingrich and William R. Forstchen

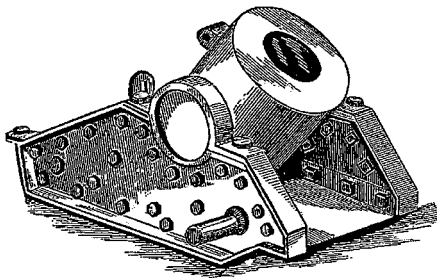
Reviewed by Rich Barbuto

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Those of you who have read the first two alternative history novels by this gifted pair have, no doubt, already read the final book of this masterful trilogy. In *Gettysburg*, the former Speaker of the House and the creator of the Lost Regiment science fiction series joined forces to paint a magnificent “what if” scenario. What if Lee broke contact after the first day of the Battle of Gettysburg and instead placed the Army of Northern Virginia between Meade’s Army of the Potomac and the national capital at Washington? Professional historians often shy away from attempting to answer the “what ifs?” Discovering and understanding what really happened is difficult enough without trying to project lines of action into the future. But for the amateur historian, the buff, “what ifs” are powerful attractions. Gingrich and Forstchen, both historians, bring their considerable talents and skills to bear in an attempt to consider all lines of activity, all factors, to build an alternative historical process. And to entertain us in the endeavor.

Lee withdraws from contact at Gettysburg and marches wide of Union forces. He selects a perfect killing ground at Union Mills. Meade follows slowly. Goaded on by the Stanton, the secretary of war, Meade launches suicidal attacks which result in catastrophe. The Army of the Potomac shatters itself against the immovable object of Southern manhood. In the absence of resistance, Lee marches eastward, occupying Baltimore and bringing Maryland into the Confederacy.

The situation for the union is critical. War democrats shout for an armistice. Lincoln orders Grant, fresh from his victory at Vicksburg, to take command of all union forces. *Grant Comes East* is the continuation of the 1863 campaign set up in the first book. Grant launches Sherman from Chattanooga move on Atlanta. He shifts much of the western army eastward, slowly gathering in south central Pennsylvania. His newly organized Army of the Susquehanna is not yet ready for operations as more trainloads of ammunition, weapons, and supplies pour out of northern factories and link up with the western regiments flush with victory and anxious to redeem northern honor. Meanwhile, General Sickles, new commander of the Army of the Potomac, gathers in fresh troops to reconstitute the Army of the Potomac, now also along the Susquehanna but a hundred miles eastward of Grant’s force.



U.S. Army 8 inch mortar.

To say Sickles reviles this upstart general from the west is an understatement. The audacious but politically-minded Sickles disobeys Grant’s specific directions not to move until so ordered. His ambitions are unbounded and his judgment poor. Sickles moves on Baltimore prematurely. Lee, the master of battle, sets an ambush and despite the faltering of some of his subordinates, annihilates Sickles’ army along the Gunpowder River.

In a matter of weeks, Lee has delivered two crushing blows to union forces. The people of the North are in an uproar. Casualties are in the tens of thousands and a powerful Confederate army appears to be moving at will well north of Washington. The cause for union is at a crisis. Lincoln’s presidency is wavering on the decision of battle. Can Grant redeem the situation or will he fall short as have McDowell, Pope, McClellan, Burnside, Hooker and Meade before him?

Never Call Retreat opens with Grant's decision to cross the Susquehanna in order to meet Lee in battle and destroy him once and for all. Pushing him back into Virginia will do no good for that would mean that the war would slip into 1864 without resolution. Undoubtedly Lincoln would be turned out of office. No, Grant must force Lee to come to battle and not be allowed to withdraw victorious back to Virginia. Fortunately, as commander of all union forces, Grant has at his disposal scattered but numerous forces. Can he coordinate a campaign over vast distances in order to achieve this goal at once fraught with both grave risks and invaluable prizes?



The authors have the history down pat. The actual personalities of union and confederate players come to bear on the dynamics of this desperate campaign. The fictional characters are drawn to reveal the hopes and aspirations, the fears and dread of the common soldiers. Gingrich and Forstchen masterfully explain the subtleties of rail operations, field fortifications, telegraph, and advanced weaponry. The message is clear: industrialization has made this a new kind of war. He who can adapt will succeed. The man who can keep the trains functioning (or not) contributes more to the cause than perhaps his rank or position in life suggests. Likewise, the commander who can best orchestrate a multitude of distributed forces in a campaign can often succeed even in the face of experienced and victorious battle leaders.

The story is gripping and told in a fast-paced and lively manner. You won't put this down. Having said all that, what has *Never Call Retreat* have to offer the solo gamer? One word. Scenarios! The trilogy is replete with skirmishes, engagements, and battles described in detail and supported by maps. Battles take place along rail lines, in towns, against field fortifications, over mountain passes and across canals as well as on open fields. My favorite is the series of desperate fights over the city of Frederick, Maryland and the various crossings on nearby Monocacy Creek. The race to the Potomac of scattered forces, barges, trains, heavy guns and pontoon bridging is a real cliffhanger! Who gets there the first with the most?

The interplay of infantry, cavalry, and artillery is exciting. Each branch has strengths and weaknesses which are vividly exposed. The functions of leadership and generalship are demonstrated again and again. Solid leaders can often (but not always) coax maximum effectiveness from their units. Generals who fail to plan for setbacks as well as for success put their corps and armies in grave jeopardy.

Never Call Retreat, indeed the entire trilogy, will motivate you to put down those ancients, medievals, and moderns and to dig out your old civil war figures. Soon red battle flags and blue regimental flags will cover your wargaming table as reb and yank clash once again. And you, the solo general, will be armed with fresh scenarios and excited, once again, about this thrilling era of history.

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July 2011. Note: all three books of the trilogy are available on Amazon.com at reasonable prices.

