

Civil War and Reconstruction
History 3750
Writing Assignment # 2

For your next assignment, please read the information on this handout as well as both of the following documents (available on the course website):

George B. McClellan's initial report on the Seven Days' Battles

Walter H. Taylor's account of the Seven Days' Battles

BACKGROUND TO THE SEVEN DAYS: In the spring of 1862, the Union's Army of the Potomac, Major General George B. McClellan, commanding, launched the Peninsula Campaign, a march from Yorktown up the Virginia Peninsula towards Richmond. After several weeks of slow progress, Union forces closed to within about five miles of Richmond. On 31 May occurred the Battle of Seven Pines, in which the Confederate commander, General Joseph E. Johnston, was severely wounded. With this turn of events, President Davis replaced Johnston with General Robert E. Lee, as yet untried in major command.

Lee, outnumbered, realized that McClellan's army was bisected by the Chickahominy River. On the south bank Lee had his men dig entrenchments his becoming known as "the king of spades" and "Granny Lee" by men who believed that he was reluctant to fight. But in reality, Lee was entrenching his southern wing so that he could transfer nearly all of his men to the northern wing and crush all of the Union forces that were to the north of the river. On 25 June Lee attacked.

During the next seven days (hence the name), six major battles occurred, during which Lee forced McClellan back fifteen miles and temporarily broke the morale of the Union troops. Still new to command of so large an army, Lee was unable to coordinate his units—especially the famed divisions of Stonewall Jackson, who moved with uncharacteristic slowness in these battles—in such a way as to destroy McClellan's forces. In the final battle, at Malvern Hill, Lee also unwisely and unsuccessfully assaulted a strong Union artillery position at a huge cost of Confederate lives. Nevertheless, after this string of defeats at Lee's hands, McClellan retreated back down the peninsula, ending his attempt to take Richmond, and overnight, Lee became the hero of the Confederacy.

Lee's aide-de-camp was Major (later Lieutenant Colonel) Walter H. Taylor, who wrote the above account of the battle in 1906 for general readers. In contrast, McClellan wrote his account for his superiors soon after the Seven Days.

ASSIGNMENT: Using the above information and sources, write an essay in which you discuss McClellan's and Taylor's differing *descriptions* of the battles, as well as their differing *perceptions* of the battles. Address the following questions: How do the contents of the documents reflect the different circumstances of their writing, as well as their different audiences? Whose account is more accurate? How does McClellan describe his own actions? What does he think of Lee? How does Taylor differ in these regards? What can you tell about McClellan's personality from reading these documents? You should also discuss other issues that occur to you.

This essay should be typed and double-spaced. It must be a minimum of four and a maximum of five pages in length. It is due at the beginning of class on Monday 7 July.