

# Stonewall jackson: a man in his moment

[Business](#)



Thomas “ Stonewall” Jackson was among the most revered commanders of the American Civil War, admired by military historians from both the North and South. An eccentric man in most regards, even the borderline fanatical religious fervor that earned him the ire of many of his contemporaries couldn’t fully obscure his worth as a general. From his iconic battle at First Bull Run to his final assault at Chancellorsville, Jackson’s victories were the stuff of legend.

Some “ Lost Cause” writers even insist that Jackson might yet have turned the tide of the war either at or after Gettysburg had he lived. However, there exists room for contention as to how much of his success was due to pure military genius, and how much to the particular circumstances he fought under. True, his trademark audacity was the catalyst of many Confederate victories, but his aggression and speed spilled over into recklessness on occasion, from which only the incompetence of his opponents rescued him. His successes were indeed brilliant, but are properly understood within their context, in which an extraordinary leader thrived within certain environments ideally suited to his talents and temperament. If there was one vital attribute Jackson brought to the Confederate ranks even before they went off to battle it was discipline. Jackson was an instructor from the Virginia Military Institute (VMI) who was known for both his religious conviction and harsh leadership style.

On the eve of the Civil War, he stood firm with his home state and joined the Confederate cause, along with most of the other VMI officers and cadets (Robertson 215). Many of his original enlistees were green militia and volunteers who still possessed the civilian democratic mentality and self-

<https://assignbuster.com/stonewall-jackson-a-man-in-his-moment/>

important insubordination that would characterize much of the early Civil War (McPherson 326-327). The rest were the VMI cadets, militia officers, political appointees, and a small number of former army veterans who formed the officer corps. Such a volatile mixture of inexperience and conflicting interests would have normally bogged down a new command for weeks or even months with inefficiency and internal problems. Jackson, however, was able to not only weed out the incompetents and problem cases, but also turn the raw and untrained leaders who were willing to better themselves into able field officers, instilling into them the rule that, “[m]ental lapses were tolerated, neglect of duty and insubordination were not” (Robertson 228). Those officers who managed to adapt and grow into the kind of subordinates he wanted became crucial to his later successes.

While his officers and men enjoyed a reputation for excellent training, there was a mutual distrust that lingered between Jackson and his peers. Many had issues with his lack of empathy for the personal matters of his subordinates and his sometimes overzealous religious conviction. He once refused permission for one of his men to be by his dying wife’s bedside during her final hours, asking “ man, man, do you love your wife more than your country” (Gingrich 17)? This issue was especially acute whenever a new unit was brought under Jackson’s command, as his new subordinates chafed under this unusually stern atmosphere. For his part, Jackson had trouble investing faith in his subordinates. After one attack during the early stages of the Shenandoah Valley campaign was foiled by the miscarriage of his orders, he never again held a council of war (Gingrich 23). While this did prevent unnecessary leaks about his plans, not informing his own troops about the

purpose of their assignments often wrought confusion and squelched initiative.

If Jackson's forces carried the momentum, were well concentrated, or were under very specific orders, this deficiency could be overcome via his personal leadership in battle. During protracted engagements or when his forces were more scattered, however, his subordinates often lost direction and effectiveness. This became apparent in engagements like the Peninsular Campaign and the Battle of Port Republic, in which some of Jackson's commanders stalled or flailed without direct knowledge of their commander's intent, and subsequently lost important opportunities or took heavy casualties (United States 32, 40). When Jackson's army did move, however, it moved so swiftly and effectively that it was nicknamed "Jackson's foot cavalry," marching over 350 miles and winning three battles in five weeks in the Shenandoah (McPherson 457). This mobility was critical to the Valley Campaign, Second Bull Run, and Chancellorsville, where decisive movement enabled the Confederates to slip past enveloping Union armies and perform surprise attacks on idle ones.

Unfortunately, this uncanny mobility didn't characterize all of Jackson's campaigns. In fact, Jackson's tactical brilliance seemed to only manifest itself in the areas of Virginia he was familiar with, such as Spotsylvania, Manassas, and the Valley. During his brief incursion into West Virginia in the winter after his stand at Bull Run, he attempted to march his men at the near-impossible paces for which he would later become known. Instead, he found the roads bogged and even frozen with mud, and blocked by hungry and exhausted men who had been unable to get appropriate rations or uniforms

<https://assignbuster.com/stonewall-jackson-a-man-in-his-moment/>

(Robertson 308-309). The result was an abortion of the operation and a low point in Jackson's career, with no conceivable gain and considerable loss in men, material, and morale. Of even more drastic consequence were Jackson's failures during the Peninsular Campaign.

When called upon to support the Confederate counteroffensives against General George McClellan's massive Union force, Jackson moved slowly and sometimes in the wrong direction, causing the Confederates to take significant losses due to unsupported attacks and unrelieved defenses. At one point, General A. P. Hill attacked an entrenched Union division expecting support from Jackson, who was only a few miles out, but Jackson never arrived while Hill lost 1, 500 men. A few days later, Jackson spent an entire day rebuilding a bridge rather than merely fording the river, a delay that cost General Prince Magruder an opportunity to overrun and capture the Union rearguard. Both the terrain and climate of the Peninsula are different than those of northern and northwestern Virginia, and indeed, many of Jackson's men were reported to be suffering from heat exhaustion in the unfamiliar territory, including Jackson himself (McPherson 466, 468).

One widely lauded aspect of Jackson's leadership was his ability to attack swiftly against superior foes while holding his smaller force together, even as resistance hardened against them and momentum petered out. Pressing his men past this "culminating point"—the point at which the initiative generally shifts to the defending force—was what made him such a feared and admired commander. His ability to see his "tactical objectives beyond the culminating point and seek to capitalize on temporary risk to achieve success at a higher level" helped him turn tactical setbacks into strategic

<https://assignbuster.com/stonewall-jackson-a-man-in-his-moment/>

victories (Emberton 4). At Kernstown, one of Jackson's early Shenandoah Valley battles, he convinced the enemy that his forces were far stronger, and therefore a larger threat, than they actually were. He sacrificed temporary tactical advantage to force the injection of more Union troops into the Shenandoah, relieving pressure on Lee's dogged army on the Potomac. This became a recurring pattern, especially in the Valley Campaign, where insurgent tactics were highly effective.

Jackson would move his troops hard and fast, attack the enemy when and where he least expected it, soak up initial casualties, and bank on the enemy retreating or stalling rather than counterattacking against his smaller force.

This tied up Union armies three times Jackson's strength and saved the Shenandoah from being overrun during 1862 (United States 38, 40).

Jackson's audacity and charisma, however, didn't always directly translate into battlefield effectiveness. There were several instances in which the risks he took by pressing past the culminating point could have ended in catastrophe. One of the most notable of these was at Second Bull Run, where his speedy advance towards Union General John Pope left him isolated from the rest of the Confederate body and his line exposed, while a stalemated attack at Stony Ridge left his forces reduced in the face of a quickly massing Union front (United States 44).

Had Pope's army consolidated and counterattacked on all sides the next day, Jackson would have been either encircled or routed by superior numbers carrying the initiative. Instead, poor intelligence and communication on the Union side allowed Jackson to beat back a disjointed assault by several Union commands working out of sync, until his more stoic and conventional

<https://assignbuster.com/stonewall-jackson-a-man-in-his-moment/>

counterpart, General James Longstreet, arrived with reinforcements on Jackson's flank later that day (McPherson 529). Certainly the most famous example of Jackson's extreme audacity came at Chancellorsville, the site of both his most celebrated victory and his ultimate demise. While his night march around the Union right flank virtually undetected was a major feat of both tactics and reconnaissance, both that and the subsequent attack along the Turnpike Road comprised a very risky gamble on the part of the Confederates, with their numerically inferior army split into three forces under Robert E. Lee (south of Chancellorsville), Jackson (west of Chancellorsville), and Jubal Early (still defending the heights near Fredericksburg to the east) (McPherson 641). Jackson's flank attack, once underway, did its job of wrecking the Union Eleventh Corps under General Oliver Howard, but "the line of Union resistance stiffened as the Confederate advance reached its culminating point, and as the attack met fresh elements from adjacent Union units dug in on earthworks" (Canty 36).

Jackson's advance ran into the stumbling blocks of darkness, exhaustion, and enemy repositioning. This was fatal to the Confederate plan, or at least Jackson's, which called for the assault to continue until it reached and overran the fords over the Rappahannock River between four and nine miles away. If the Union forces weren't completely routed and put to flight, then the entire Confederate line would be exposed. Perhaps Jackson had overestimated his men's ability or underestimated his opponents, but his corps fell into confusion and sluggishness once night set in, and the offensive stalled far short of its objectives. Here, Jackson's need to directly project his will onto his commanders in the field betrayed him.

Caught ahead of his lines while trying to renew the attack, Jackson was wounded and had to be taken from the battlefield, leaving his men motionless, leaderless, but most of all, vulnerable. During the night, Howard's shattered corps was reformed on the Union left, General John Reynolds's First Corps secured the right flank on the Rapidan River to the north, and the Third and Fifth Corps under Daniel Sickles and George Meade respectively repositioned themselves between Jackson's corps (now under J. E. B. Stuart) and Lee.

The Confederates were uncomfortably arrayed on either side of a bulge in the Union line surrounding Chancellorsville and Hazel Grove (United States 74). Meanwhile, the Union Sixth Corps under General John Sedgwick had done what the entire army had failed to do the previous December, taking Fredericksburg and driving Early into retreat all the way to Salem Church. Lee was now facing imminent attack from his rear, separated from Stuart by a large and well-fortified Union salient, and completely outmatched in men and material. It was not the Confederates' tactics, morale, or position that saved them that day, but rather the mysterious timidity of the Union commander General Joseph Hooker. Most of the Union line had been left unaffected by Jackson's ferocious attack and could have very well enveloped both parts of Lee's divided army at Chancellorsville while Sedgwick overwhelmed Early to the east. Yet Hooker, previously known for his aggression and still holding a numerical advantage of three to one, instead ordered the salient pulled back, giving the high ground to Lee and allowing him to reunite his scattered forces and send reinforcements to Early (McPherson 644).



Sedgwick was stopped, Hooker retreated, and Jackson died as a hero who had repeatedly saved the Southern cause, rather than with the ignominy of leading it to an early Gettysburg. Such became the pattern of Jackson's role in the Confederate campaigns; brilliant and terrifying on the attack and in motion, lackluster and even feckless when forced into a set-piece battle. For Lee, who employed an approach to war dubbed "offensive-defensive," it worked well because he had two capable lieutenants who specialized in the twin aspects of the plan. Jackson, aggressive and brave, would take his half of the army into more independent actions, striking the Union forces where they were vulnerable, while Longstreet, prudent and steadfast, would defend against any counterattack and cover Jackson when the need arose. During the Second Bull Run Campaign, this methodology was applied in both strategy and tactics.

Jackson moved completely around Pope's position, got into his supply base at Manassas, and then lashed out at the scattered elements of Pope's army that had been sent to find him. Once Jackson was boxed in, however, it was the more deliberate arrival of Longstreet's corps that secured the victory. Pope's army decimated itself against a stronger position than they realized, one that had had its flanks newly secured. Even so, Jackson was eventually forced to ask Longstreet for further reinforcements to bolster his own strained ranks. Longstreet then relentlessly shelled the exhausted Federals and allowed both sides of the army to converge on them at once, forcing Pope back (McPherson 531).

It was during these kinds of static encounters that Longstreet appeared to rise to the occasion while Jackson floundered. During the Antietam

<https://assignbuster.com/stonewall-jackson-a-man-in-his-moment/>

Campaign, Jackson was initially sent to crush the Harper's Ferry garrison to the south before rejoining Lee above the Potomac. When battle was joined near Sharpsburg, Jackson was assigned the role of defending the Confederate left. Here Jackson, while not incompetent, didn't display any particular brilliance either. He merely absorbed and demonstrated as the enemy came, allowing the Union forces to control the tempo of battle.

His line nearly broke repeatedly, and he required reinforcements from the other Harper's Ferry units and Longstreet's corps to hold on through horrific casualties (United States 54). Later that year at Fredericksburg, Jackson was once again playing defense along with the rest of the Confederate army, this time on the right flank. Once again, the Federal army nearly broke his line, this time when a major blunder by him and his staff left a fairly large swamp in the middle of the line unoccupied (Robertson 657). This opening nearly allowed the relatively small Union division that assaulted it to cut his line in two. Fortunately for Jackson, the attack went unsupported by his opposing commander, General William B. Franklin, and catastrophe was averted.

The fate of the battle was eventually decided elsewhere and this serious oversight became a mere footnote to the Confederate victory. This was one of many times during Jackson's campaign that he benefitted from the mistakes of opposing commanders who were subpar, timid, or caught in a bad position. In the Valley, he was facing Nathaniel Banks and John Fremont, political generals who were appointed in order to help Lincoln with regional concerns rather than for any military acumen. Pope's army was plagued by dysfunction and bickering, with many of the senior commanders distrustful of his leadership, agitating for the return of George McClellan, or just nakedly <https://assignbuster.com/stonewall-jackson-a-man-in-his-moment/>

ambitious. Pope himself suffered from lapses of judgment and sudden changes in mood or confidence. McClellan was prone to wild overestimations of Confederate troop counts and a reluctance to commit his forces to battle.

Franklin at Fredericksburg was both timid and indecisive, sending Meade's mere division against Jackson's entire corps. Hooker, the man once known as "Fighting Joe," lost his nerve at Chancellorsville and withdrew from a strong position, snatching defeat from the jaws of victory. While Jackson occasionally faced very competent and very bold division or corps commanders—James Shields, John Reynolds, John Sedgwick, and George Meade—any gains made by them were usually rendered ineffectual by blunders at higher levels of command. Jackson never had to face such stalwarts as Ulysses Grant, William Sherman, or Phillip Sheridan. Indeed, such a bold and reckless adversary as Jackson was just what Grant most desired when he was doggedly chasing a cagey Lee down in the late stages of the war, trying to draw him into a full engagement where his growing Union mass could carry the day.

In fact, when John Bell Hood tried the Jacksonian approach against Sherman in the west during that stage, it led to the annihilation of Hood's army.

Jackson was a loyal soldier, strong disciplinarian, daring tactician, charismatic leader, and imposing opponent for the Union to be sure.

However, his talents were only fully effective under a certain set of conditions – familiar territory, extreme mobility, tentative adversaries, and dependable allies. When such conditions weren't met, the results were at best mixed. That isn't to diminish the importance of Jackson's generalship.

He routed the Union several times and changed the balance of power in the Virginia theater of the war significantly.

His audacity, had he survived, may well have brought the South a tactical victory at Gettysburg on the chaotic first day, a strategic inflection point which in turn may have won the war before Grant could even step up into Supreme command. Still, his genius needs to be evaluated within its limitations. He was a man in his moment, a weapon to be employed for a particular purpose, yet who even then always seemed to operate just inches from disaster. In the end, disaster found him. Works Cited: – Canty, Jeremiah D, Major.

Stonewall Jackson at Chancellorsville. Quantico, Virginia: United States Marine Corps Command and Staff College, 1997. PDF file. – Emberton, Keith D, Major. Operational Leadership Once Beyond the Culminating Point. Newport, Rhode Island: Naval War College, 1996.

PDF file. – Gingrich, Stewart L, Commander. Stonewall Jackson's Valley Campaign. Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama: Air War College, 1995. PDF file. – Johnson, Creid K.

“Stonewall” Jackson: A Military Genius? Fort Lesley J. McNair, Washington, DC: National War College, 1998. PDF file. – McPherson, James. Battle Cry of Freedom. New York City, New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.

Print. – Robertson, James I, Jr. Stonewall Jackson: The Man, The Soldier, The Legend. New York City, New York: Macmillan Publishing USA, 1997. Print. – United States Military Academy, Department of History.

<https://assignbuster.com/stonewall-jackson-a-man-in-his-moment/>

The West Point Atlas of War. Ed. Vincent J Esposito. New York City, NY: Tess Press, 1995. Print.