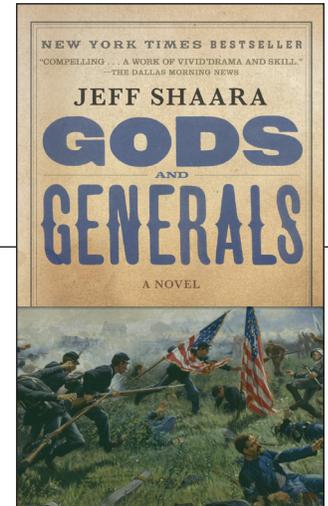




Gods and Generals

A Novel of the Civil War

by Jeff Shaara



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Also available as an abridged audiobook download, e-Book, hardcover and a trade paperback.

Reading Level: 7.8

about this book

Introduction/Summary

From 1858, when the conflict between the states was just beginning to escalate, through 1863 and five years of fighting, the federal government under Presidents Buchanan and Lincoln had the ability to vanquish the rebellious Confederacy and bring the Civil War to a halt. Yet it repeatedly failed to do so. In battle after battle, the Confederate troops succeeded in forcing back the Union Army. How could 50,000 underfed, undersupplied soldiers prevail against a well-prepared, well-equipped force of 150,000? This is the question that haunts *Gods and Generals*, Jeff Shaara's moving novel of the early years of the Civil War.

A prequel to his father's Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Killer Angels*, *Gods and Generals* depicts the deepening conflict as it splits the nation and erupts into war. Using a novelist's tools and the techniques of psychohistory, Shaara takes us inside the minds of the great military figures of the period—Robert E. Lee, Winfield S. Hancock, Jonathan “Stonewall” Jackson, Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain—as well as those who served with them, allowing us to witness “the tragedies and successes of their personal lives and their experiences as soldiers.” These experiences illustrate how, for five costly years, error and arrogance at the highest levels undermined the Union Army and set up the Confederacy for a victory it could never achieve.

Because Shaara takes no ideological sides but gives us human beings who are complex, flawed, and wrestling with their own truths, *Gods and Generals* deals only peripherally with the moral issue of slavery. It focuses instead on the waste of human life engendered by war, finds few villains, but celebrates those who live by their beliefs and carry on honorably, despite egotistical or inept superiors, the vicissitudes of chance, and the physical suffering of war.

Shaara has divided his novel into four parts. Chapters are headed by character, month, and year, with events moving chronologically. The alternation of points of view and the rapid onrushing of events sets an often breathtaking pace, and those unfamiliar with the facts of the period will be flooded with the quantity of detail that Shaara is able to encompass in each brief chapter.

PART I spans the period from November 1858 through June 1862. First we witness the peacetime return from Texas of a dispirited Lieutenant Colonel Robert E. Lee, who must settle the estate of his father-in-law, grandson of Martha Washington. Lee is mired in sadness at the long absences from his ailing wife Mary and the children he hardly knows. He is bogged down with the details of the plantation, including complex questions of slave-holding, but most of all he regrets his lackluster career and his inability to tolerate the politics that would enable him to advance.

Next we are introduced to Jackson, a hero of the Mexican War, wracked with personal loss, the death of his former wife and child, the child of his second wife, the childhood loss of his mother. All of this he attributes, as he does all that occurs, to

God's judgment. Jackson is deeply religious, verging on fanatic, a perfectionist, misplaced in the classroom at Virginia Military Institute where his students call him "Tom Fool." He appears to be a man thoroughly out of sorts with his life, except on the artillery field of V.M.I.

Then we see Chamberlain, wandering the Maine woods, a brilliant yet restless professor at Bowdoin College who is inexplicably dissatisfied with his recent accomplishments and wonders whether he should have attended West Point rather than become a scholar. And finally we find Hancock, with a fine wife and children, but professionally dissatisfied as quartermaster of a far outpost of Los Angeles, a hundred miles from the nearest military depot. All four men believe that real opportunity has passed them by.

The anti-slavery uprising led by John Brown at Harper's Ferry in November 1859 briefly delivers Lee and Jackson from their peacetime ennui. President Buchanan calls upon Lee to quell the insurrection, which he does with great skill and no loss of life. Jackson is then charged with containing the violent crowds at Charleston who threaten to interfere with Brown's execution.

Lee does not grasp the depth of the conflict brewing in the nation, however, and from September 1860 when he returns to his post at Fort Mason Texas, through April 1861 when Virginia secedes from the Union, Lee holds fast to the hope that the voice of reason will prevail and Virginia will remain neutral. Lee sides neither with "the radicals of the deep South" nor with the northerners who speak of "radical abolition," but when he is forced to make a choice, it is his loyalty to his home state that becomes the deciding factor. One month later, Lee is named Brigadier General by his former West Point classmate Jefferson Davis and assists in the transfer of all the Virginia troops into the Confederate forces.

Gods and Generals looks closely at the divisive nature of the Civil War in which friends and colleagues were often forced onto opposite sides. In California, Hancock's superiors, Majors Albert Johnston of Texas and Lewis Amistead of Virginia, join their home states and the Confederate cause. "I do not believe we are a collection of independent states, but one nation," Hancock tells them as he prepares to report to Washington. Yet at a farewell party, he and Amistead are overcome by emotion, for they know they will never meet again. "I hope you will never . . . feel what this has cost me," Amistead tells him, "If I ever . . . raise my hand . . . against you . . . may God strike me dead."

In September 1861, Hancock and his wife arrive in Washington. Rumors of "the savage rebel army . . . a general panic" have proven untrue. The city is tranquil. But there was real carnage at Manassas, or Bull Run, where General McDowell accompanied by congressmen, dignitaries and carriages filled with brightly dressed women watched Union soldiers massacred by a determined Rebel army. The war is real, and it is not going to disappear as many northerners seem to believe, and it will give Hancock, Lee, Jackson, and Chamberlain a chance to fulfill their long-held ambitions.

Hancock's opportunity arises in September of 1861 when General McClellan promotes him from quartermaster and captain to Brigadier General. Hancock welcomes the opportunity to be a fighting soldier at last. But at the Battle of Williamsburg with General McClellan believing his army outnumbered and reluctant to attack, the command falls to General Sumner who, with inexplicable timidity, orders Hancock's advancing troops to retreat at a point when Hancock sees their position is still strong. "The plan came to him like a clear blue light, like a window opening in his brain." Appearing to retreat, Hancock wages a counterattack, losing only thirty men.

Shaara shows us the difficulty on both sides in the early days of the war, the clash of egos, the concern for reputation that made "quick actions and smooth organization impossible." But when Jefferson Davis appoints Lee Commander of the Army of the Confederacy, the south gains a key advantage, for Lee is a brilliant leader with a keen understanding of both tactics and strategy.

PART II begins in July 1862 as Lee organizes the independent southern troops into a confederacy and John Pope replaces an error-plagued General McClellan as commander of The Northern "Army of the Potomac." Meanwhile, Chamberlain leaves the safety of academic life, says farewell to his wife and children and joins the Union Army. Because of a lack of good officers and despite having no previous military training, he is appointed Lieutenant Colonel, second in command of the Twentieth Maine Regiment under Colonel Adelbert Ames.

By 1862 the Arlington estate of Lee's wife has been ransacked and is under federal control, his wife given safe conduct to Richmond by General McClellan; Lee laments his neglect of his family but believes that through this, God is allowing him to become "a better father" to his troops. Using General Pope's egotism to trap him, Lee plans the Manassas strategy that will sweep Pope's army from the field and send them into retreat. When a fall from his horse results in serious injury to

both hands, the courageous Lee carries on, inspiring his troops with “the intangible sprit of the commander.” He agonizes over his men’s lack of food, uniforms which are “rags, barely strung together,” then orders Jackson and Longstreet to Harper’s Ferry where 12,000 Federal troops pose a danger to the Confederate flank.

In September 1862, after the Union suffers a second disaster at Manassas (Bull Run), General Pope is replaced. Confederate successes far out-number the Union’s. But a chance interception of Lee’s Special Order 191 gives McClellan advance knowledge that Jackson is headed for Harper’s Ferry and Longstreet is moving north into Maryland.

On September 17, Hancock is stalled by a lack of orders from General Sumner. And though McClellan succeeds in turning back the invading Confederates at Antietam, he does not press his advantage, so no decisive victory results. The cost in lives is high. Chamberlain views the dead strewn over the battlefield and feels a sudden wave of horror as he experiences the reality of war.

On September 19, Hancock articulates the Union problem: “They would have won this war by now if it weren’t for the generals.” By November, the Union Army is dispirited. No one talks of a quick end to the war. Gloom has taken over and soldiers speak of Lee’s “mysterious power.” McClellan is replaced as commander by General Ambrose Burnside, who many consider to be “as culpable as anyone else for the failures of Antietam.”

Preparing for what will become The Battle of Fredericksburg, Hancock sees another disaster in the making. Between the two sides lies the Rappahannock River; Burnside has ordered pontoon bridges which do not arrive. “They would sit still again,” Hancock realizes, “The great power of this army would be held up one more time because something went wrong.” When Hancock explores the Rappahannock, he sees a herd of cattle make its way across and promptly reports to General Couch that the river is shallow enough to ford. When Hancock and Couch report this to Burnside, advising him to begin the crossing immediately, Burnside rejects the plan as too risky. He insists they must wait for the pontoons to arrive. It will be December before this happens, cold and late, and by then Lee’s forces will be ready.

PART III opens the same morning with Lee surveying the terrain and speculating on the battle to come. The Union troops number nearly 120,000, Longstreet’s only 40,000, but the Confederates have the good ground, above the river on Maryes Heights, and Jackson’s forces are on their way with 35,000 additional troops. Lee realizes that this will be the largest force he has yet commanded. He understands as well Burnside’s plan of attack and waits patiently for the Union forces to cross the Rappahannock.

In December, just before the battle, Jackson learns that his wife has borne a daughter, “You did not take her from me, Thank You,” he prays.

Hancock learns of an additional Burnside blunder: he has ignored crucial information presented by General Sumner—a map that showed a deep canal cutting across the open field behind Fredericksburg, one that will be a difficult obstacle for the Union forces, especially in the face of artillery fire. Burnside declares the map wrong, denying the existence of a canal. Hancock and Sumner are ordered to cross the river and take Maryes Heights. They know “it will be a bloody mess,” but they are soldiers first, whose duty is to obey their superiors.

Jackson and Lee also realize Burnside’s errors in advance, and Lee wonders if it might be “God’s way of evening up the sides.” As the battle rages Hancock watches his men dropping everywhere, “a vast carpet of blue . . . the canal filled with . . . bodies.” Chamberlain uses dead soldiers as shelter against the attack and feels the waste, the tragedy. The retreating Union forces destroy the town of Fredericksburg in a barbaric display of frustration after a “bloody, stupid defeat.”

PART IV spans the period between January and June of 1863 when Burnside is replaced by “Fighting Joe” Hooker who proves no less distinguished than he. Mud stymies Burnside’s new plan, ground troops and wagons are mired in it, the assault is halted, the army ordered back to Falmouth, and the winter camps behind Fredericksburg. Jefferson Davis ignores Lee’s plea for supplies for his “glorious fighting force” which is “slowly starving to death.” And after suffering a heart attack, Lee quickly resumes command amid tributes of love and respect from his troops. Jackson befriends a five year old child, frolicking unashamedly with her, then grieves openly when she dies of scarlet fever. “A general cannot cry for his men,” but this child’s death galvanizes all the pent-up grief he has been carrying, the personal losses, the losses he has witnessed in battle. Even “Stonewall” Jackson is a man of feeling, Shaara shows us.

In April 1863 Chamberlain becomes Commander of the Twentieth Maine, and the new Union commander, Major General Joseph Hooker, has reorganized the Army into the corps system with individual units identified by insignia which boosts morale. Hooker moves the army quickly and efficiently into position around Chancellorsville, and his May 1 assault is a success, the rebels “have been pushed back to the edge of the open ground.” But then, inexplicably, both Hancock’s and Couch’s divisions are ordered to withdraw. In a nightmarish repetition of the mistakes of his predecessors, Hooker pulls back, ordering his troops to dig defensive trenches. “He stopped believing in his own plan. He just ran out of nerve,” Couch says.

Stonewall Jackson understands that Hooker is simply “waiting for us to take the fight to him.” He takes full advantage and appears to withdraw, then surprises the Union forces from the rear. Once again the Union Army is in chaos, and suffers a new defeat. But on the second of May, Jackson himself is shot by friendly fire, men of the Eighteenth North Carolina who will “carry this with them for the rest of their lives.” General Jeb Stuart takes over Jackson’s command and joins with Lee. Hooker is forced to retreat north to the Rappahannock River.

But the discrepancy between the troops is growing, barely 25,000 exhausted and underfed Confederates facing an army of nearly 120,000, many of whom have not yet seen action. And the following day the Union forces succeed in pushing back the Confederates. Stuart cannot get control of the battle that is being fought by small groups of men, many of whose officers are down. When Hooker’s headquarters in Chancellorsville are attacked, Hooker himself is wounded. He transfers field command to Couch but orders his army to withdraw to “the safety of the river.” The Union generals see that the order is folly and urge Couch to override it. As the order is carried out, Hancock grieves for his men who are running from an enemy they have defeated.

When Jackson learns who has shot him, he places no blame and ascribes his injury to “the war.” We see his final days, as he moves in and out of a nightmarish reverie, is visited by his wife Anna and new baby and prayed for by his men. Ultimately, on May 10, Jackson dies. A great cry goes up from the men on that day: the Rebel yell.

With Hooker unable to take action, Lee left with a mere 40,000 troops, and Jefferson Davis fixated on the defense of Richmond, Lee realizes that the Confederates cannot keep fighting on their own ground, that the Union will be able to return with more men and more equipment “and eventually they will find a commander who understands . . . who is capable.”

In June 1863 they find that commander in George Gordon Meade. Meanwhile, Lee awaits the arrival of Stuart’s cavalry, which has been separated by an advancing column of Federal troops. He has “felt a dark hole, small but growing” as he senses his great mission “slipping away.” The novel ends with an image of the Union Army making camp in preparation for the next battle amid “the peaceful farms and quiet streets of a town called Gettysburg.”

→ discussion and writing

discussion and comprehension

1. Why does Robert E. Lee continue to keep slaves on the Arlington estate if he “would be happy to allow them to leave”?
2. How do the religious beliefs of Lee, Jackson, and Hancock influence the way each one views the private and public events in their lives? What specific examples of this do we see in *Gods and Generals*?
3. If Hancock had been Commander how might his decisions have differed from the ones made by General Sumner at Williamsburg, McClellan at Antietam, and Burnside at Fredericksburg? How might the war have been different as a result?
4. The Union soldiers have neither respect nor affection for their various commanding generals, and suffer from serious loss of morale. The Confederate soldiers, on the other hand, admire and love General Lee despite the hardships they must endure. What are the causes for this contrast in attitude?
5. Chamberlain is a professor who believes it is necessary to act on your principles. What principles lead Chamberlain to leave his college and volunteer for the Twentieth Maine? What kind of education does Chamberlain’s experience in battle offer him? What kind of a military leader does he prove to be?

6. Hancock, Summers, and Couch all must follow orders that they know to be wrong, orders that result in the loss of thousands of lives. How do they justify this? How does history regard soldiers in later wars such as World War II and Vietnam who “just followed orders”? What are the moral questions that this raises?
7. How does Jackson take advantage of General Hooker’s weakness to surprise the Union troops at Chancellorsville?

→ suggested activities

activities and composition

1. Before reading *Gods and Generals*, list everything you know about three of the following: Abraham Lincoln; Robert E. Lee; Stonewall Jackson; Winfield Hancock; Joshua Chamberlain. What is your view of each? After reading *Gods and Generals*, do the same.
2. In an informal essay, discuss the ways that Shaara’s novel added to your knowledge of these five individuals. In what way has your view of them changed? What aspects of the novel contributed to this change?
3. Assume the identity of Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain and compose a lecture to be delivered at Bowdoin College on the nature and reality of war based on the experiences “you” have had as leader of The Twentieth Maine Regiment at Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville.
4. “The Lost Chapters.” Write brief chapters that might have appeared in *Gods and Generals* had the author chosen to include the following characters: Mira Hancock, Anna Jackson, Mary Lee. Select dates in the novel that would add to our understanding of the human dimensions of the story.

vocabulary

loose cannon: (slang) person who speaks without restraint

martial law: temporary rule by the military

radicals: revolutionaries

abolition: elimination

confederation: alliance

brigade: a unit of soldiers comprising two or more regiments led by a brigadier general

insignia: emblem

barbarism: brutality, savagery

artillery: troops armed with large caliber weapons

volley: burst of gunfire, barrage

pontoon: flat-bottomed boat used as support for a temporary military bridge

ford: to cross

reconnaissance: exploration, surveying

→ beyond the book

additional resources

(Note: this section is adapted from Alice Jones-Miller’s selections included on *The Killer Angels* guide.)

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You can also visit www.jeffshaara.com for more information!

— about this guide's writer

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