



“My Greatest Quarrel with Fortune”: Major General Lew Wallace in the West, 1861–1862 by Charles G. Beemer.

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My Greatest Quarrel with Fortune is both a biography and a defense brief for Civil War general Lew Wallace, best known as the author of the popular novel *Ben Hur*.¹ The book’s blend of the historical and the forensic reflects its author’s background: Charles Beemer is a retired attorney who holds a master’s degree in history (Univ. of Wisconsin).² This is his first book.

The book’s first half concerns Wallace’s early life, including his mother’s death during his childhood, his father’s West Point background, and his own success in marriage and politics. Beemer then reviews his subject’s military career—his rapid rise as a result of his recruiting abilities, his training of raw recruits in Indiana, and his small but notable successes in West Virginia, most notably at Romney. Several chapters examine Wallace’s role at forts Henry and Donelson, his stultifying posting at Pittsburg Landing, and his actions at Shiloh. These were followed by a period of political exile and his command of a scratch force in a forlorn effort to delay Confederate general Jubal Early’s invasion of the North in 1864.

The rest of the book discusses in detail the controversy over Wallace’s late arrival at Shiloh on the battle’s first day; Beemer alleges that a lengthy cover-up by Gen. Henry Halleck was tacitly agreed to by Gen. Ulysses Grant to deflect blame from Grant for the surprise and near defeat of the Army of the Tennessee. Wallace’s inability to work with others and his dogged efforts to clear his name before Congress and in his voluminous correspondence alienated his military colleagues and superiors in the Union army and led to his exile to less prestigious assignments.

The book’s seventeen chapters will appeal to students of the early part of the Civil War on the western front, admirers of Lew Wallace as an exemplar of able political generalship, and anyone interested in the politics of the US Army during the Civil War. The book samples generously from Wallace’s own writings, as well as his contemporaries’ and associates’ concerning the Fort Donelson and Shiloh campaigns.

Beemer offers a focused and technically detailed case for Lew Wallace’s competence as a military leader. Describing his successful countering of the attempted Confederate breakout on 15 February 1862 at Fort Donelson, he writes that

His bold resourcefulness and audacity ... saved Grant’s right flank from a possible rout. By his actions, Wallace gave Grant two tactical military elements usually common to success in any military venture—time and opportunity. Once he became the beneficiary of these two elements, Grant seized the initiative from the staggered Confederates and engineered a brilliantly conceived, spontaneous counterattack. If nothing else, the ferocity of that counterattack exerted a profoundly negative psychological effect on

1. Subtitle: *A Tale of the Christ* (NY: Harper, 1880).

2. He has also completed graduate courses at Northwestern University and is a member of the board of the Lew Wallace Scholars.

Confederate command now back inside Fort Donelson. In the process, armed with the two elements Wallace had given him, Grant also redeemed his military reputation. (88)

These are cogent points in the case for Wallace, but elsewhere Beemer's argument devolves into pure speculation about the behavior of other commanders:

on a subsidiary point, [Gen. John Aaron] Rawlins offered no explanation why, during the twenty minutes or so that elapsed as Grant steamed upriver from Crump's to Pittsburg Landing, he failed to take the time to prepare two written dispatches to Wallace. In one, he could have given Wallace specific, detailed instructions in the event the Rebels were attacking in force at Pittsburg Landing. In the other, he could have afforded Wallace equally specific orders what to do in the event the attack was descending upon Crump's Landing. In the latter, he might even have taken a moment to inform Wallace that two days before he had put [generals William T.] Sherman and W.H.L. Wallace on notice that in such an event, both were ordered to go to Wallace's aid immediately. True, as he paced the quarterdeck of the *Tigress*, he still may not have known exactly where the primary Confederate attack struck. Arguably, he already possessed that information from the dispatch given to him from the *Warner*. Assuming, for the sake of argument, Grant required more precision in the information than he had at the moment, he nevertheless had ample time to take the simple precaution of writing out alternative orders. Grant, however, did nothing. (213)

Since Wallace was but one of a half-dozen division commanders in Grant's army during the chaos of a surprise attack, it is unrealistic to think Grant could have taken the time to write multiple, precise instructions to his most distant division commander.

Beemer is at his best in mustering the testimonies of contemporaries to Lew Wallace's tactical abilities as a commander. He also rightly concedes that Wallace—on the evidence of his own correspondence—could be insubordinate and a poor team player. This compelling biography features a persuasive revisionist assessment of the tactics used at Fort Donelson and Shiloh. But the momentum of its argument flags badly when the author tries to defend Wallace by impugning the motives and competence of Grant, Halleck, Sherman, and others, based on ill-founded and shadowy accusations of ineptitude in the aftermath of Shiloh.

Beemer is throughout far too preoccupied with the supposed West Point clique of Halleck, Grant, Sherman, and their lesser known associates. He and others³ have criticized the professional West Point-educated soldiers of Grant and his coterie, many of whom exercised great influence for decades after the war in various civil and military institutions, in order to stress the talents of other commanders, like George H. Thomas or, in this case, Lew Wallace.

In defending Wallace from longstanding historical slander about his tardiness and dilatory nature as a leader, Beemer makes a solid case for his unrecognized importance to the Union cause at Fort Donelson and on the banks of the Monocacy during summer 1864. He is far less convincing in faulting Halleck for Union forces being caught off guard at Shiloh, while glossing over the fact that Wallace led his men on a seventeen-mile roundabout path that made them too late either to attack the Confederate flank or to provide fresh troops for the Union defense on that desperate first day of the battle. In the last analysis, Lew Wallace was at best a good tactician, especially for a political general, but a very poor collaborator.

Despite these reservations, I encourage all serious students of the Civil War to reflect carefully on the well researched revisionist brief Charles Beemer presents with such zeal in his new biography of Lew Wallace.

3. E.g., Benson Bobrick, *Master of War: The Life of General George H. Thomas* (NY: Simon and Schuster, 2009) 334.