Lee's Army during the Overland Campaign: A Numerical Study

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The initial confrontation between Union general Ulysses S. Grant and Confederate general Robert E. Lee in Virginia during the Overland Campaign has not until recently received the same degree of scrutiny as other Civil War battles. The first round of combat between the two renowned generals spanned about six weeks in May and early June 1864. The major skirmishes?Wilderness, Spotsylvania, and Cold Harbor?rivaled any other key engagement in the war. While the strength and casualties in Grant's army remain uncontested, historians know much less about Lee's army. Nonetheless, the prevailing narrative depicts Confederates as outstripped nearly two to one, and portrays Grant suffering losses at a rate nearly double that of Lee. As a result, most Civil War scholars contend that the campaign proved a clear numerical victory for Lee but a tactical triumph for Grant.

Questions about the power of Lee's army stem mainly from poor record keeping by the Confederates as well as an inordinate number of missing or lost battle reports. The complexity of the Overland Campaign, which consisted of several smaller engagements in addition to the three main clashes, led to considerable historic uncertainty regarding Lee's army. Significant doubts persist about the army's capability at the commencement of the drive, the amount of reinforcements received, and the total of casualties sustained during the entire campaign and at each of the major battles.

In Lee's Army during the Overland Campaign, Alfred C. Young III addresses this deficiency by providing for the first time accurate information regarding the Confederate side throughout the conflict. The results challenge prevailing assumptions, showing clearly that Lee's army stood far larger in strength and size and suffered considerably higher casualties than previously believed.

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