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Jeff Shaara. *The Fateful Lightning: A Novel of the Civil War*.  
Ballantine Books: New York, June 2015.

Book Review

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Robert Smith, PhD

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There are those who think Jeff Shaara's books on the American Civil War are like sausage, that they are simply cranked out. As noted in *Gone with the Wind*, the response can only be “Fiddle-dee-dee!” for such an assertion shows that person has simply not read any of his works. It is easy to toss around words like masterful, but Shaara's trilogy on the American Civil War in the West is a tour de force of an area generally—and blissfully—ignored, as it did not have Confederate General Robert E. Lee and it was not Gettysburg.

*The Fateful Lightning* begins with the period after Union General William T. Sherman's occupation of Atlanta. Sherman's capture of the city ended the immediate political crisis by ensuring Lincoln's reelection. However, Sherman realized there was also a political and military crisis to be faced, particularly with his commander, General Ulysses S. Grant bogged down around Petersburg, Virginia. Sherman, with his knowledge of the South, understood that for the war to end, the level of Southerners' pain and suffering needed to be elevated. Shaara nicely allows us to see that Sherman's decision to march to the sea and to make Georgia howl was a decision of the highest strategic order; Sherman—as we see through the author's eye—wanted the war to be over but also knew he must become more brutal. The beauty of this new work is that a reader can appreciate it as a stand-alone volume.



Figure 1 Photograph of author Jeff Shaara, used by permission.

What makes *The Fateful Lightning* even more fascinating is that there are no large pitched battles until the Battle of Bentonville, North Carolina in March 1865. Instead, the astute story telling sweeps readers along with the Army as it marches to the sea, continuously out maneuvering and perplexing the thin forces of militia and Confederate Cavalry attempting to stop the onslaught. Shaara's Sherman

is very earthy, very real, and human. As an armor officer, this reviewer has extensively read on Sherman—and this is Sherman. However, the reviewer’s most admired character was Confederate General William Hardee, who wrote the book *Rifle and Light Infantry Tactics (1853-1855)*—otherwise known as *Hardee's Tactics*—that officers on both sides of the struggle learned to master and employ. Seeing the war through his eyes invoked memories of the German officers in 1945 attempting to stem the Soviet steamroller, doing their duty, and knowing that nothing they do will produce victory.

Shaara has completed his American Civil War universe. Readers will see the war and its social implications through the life and experience of a slave freed from bondage by the Army and his promise of a new life. They will feel the depression and fatigue of the Confederate Cavalry Captain, hoping his tired mounts, troops, and himself can survive the war while continuing to do their duty for a lost cause. They will feel the sweat, the stink, the smells, and the sounds of the Union Army on the March. Shaara's small asides about the complications and political challenges of the Confederacy to find good senior leadership due to Jefferson Davis's pettiness is a cautionary tale for today's era where politics has come to the forefront seemingly as a litmus test.

A small aside—this reviewer had hoped that Shaara would delve into the punch and counterpunch of Confederate General Joseph Johnston and Sherman battling through the Atlanta Campaign. It would have been very interesting to read his handling of that Fabian campaign, which lasted until the disastrous replacement of Johnston by General John Hood. Shaara's view on the political machinations surrounding that debacle, together with Jefferson Davis's limited options and ego—and how these played into the outcome—would have been masterful. However, that is simply a wish and that story is outside the scope of Shaara's vision here. Ultimately, the success of the book, like those preceding it, is this—it feels like history. That is good enough, and coupled with it being a loving read, means it is a book to keep.

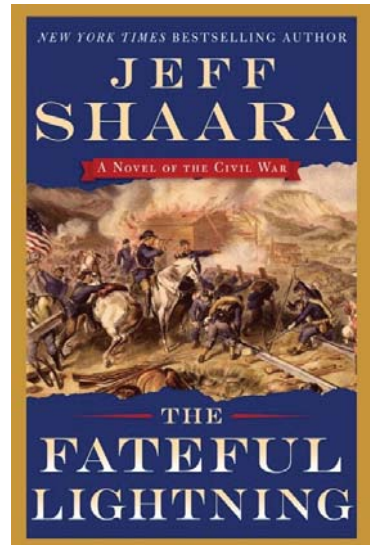


Figure 2 Cover art, used by permission.

Our reviewer: Dr. Robert G. Smith, LTC (Ret) US ARMY, graduated from Juniata College with a BS in Poli Sci cum laude. LTC Smith attended the Pennsylvania State University, receiving his MA (cum laude) in American Military History in 1982, and a Juris Doctorate in 1992 from West Virginia University. LTC Smith has served in the capacity of an armor officer, logistician, military intelligence, and engineer officer. He is a graduate of the Armor Basic Course, the Armor Advanced Course, Command and General Staff College and Army Combined Arms Staff College, the Advanced Joint Professional Military Course in Joint Warfare and Air War College. After 9/11 he was recalled to active duty, serving as the lead Army military historian at the US Army Center of Military History for the attack on the Pentagon. He has subsequently served as the Vth Corps historian for the initial invasion of Iraq and in the Deputy Directorate of Special Operation (DDSO) on the Joint Chiefs of Staff. While on the DDSO he wrote a highly classified study on SOF in the Global War on Terror. He was the CoS of the Army one man GWOT record collector, tasked to collect all the lost records. In three years he collected 7 1/2 TB of records. His last duty station was serving as the Deputy Command Historian at CENTCOM before placement into the Army Wounded Warrior Program to heal. He was appointed as a Kentucky Colonel by the Governor of Kentucky in 2010. Dr. Smith is proudest of his Combat Action Badge from his tour in Iraq. Dr. Smith was honored in 2014 at AMU by being awarded of the Excellence in Teaching Award. He is married to Katie. They have two sons, one a recent graduate of the Officer Basic Signal School and the other a combat veteran of Afghanistan where he received the Combat Infantryman Badge. They happily retired from the Army near where he grew up in PA.