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Review

COLD HARBOR SYNDROME

'Balanced, compelling study' examines Grant's Overland miscalculations

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Furgurson, Ernest B. *Not War But Murder: Cold Harbor, 1864.* Alfred A. Knopf, 2000-06-01. \$27.50 ISBN 679455175

Ulysses S. Grant's offensive against Robert E. Lee's entrenched Army of Northern Virginia at Cold Harbor on June 3, 1864, summons powerful images. Northern assaults that day stand alongside Ambrose E. Burnside's attacks at Fredericksburg and John Bell Hood's at Franklin as examples of seemingly pointless slaughter of brave but doomed soldiers. Even casual students of the conflict know that Grant admitted as much in his memoirs when he confessed that he "always regretted that the last assault at Cold Harbor was ever made."

Despite the well-known drama and gruesome butcher's bill on June 3, historians have devoted relatively little attention to Cold Harbor. It served as the last major battle of the Overland campaign, greatly influenced morale behind the lines in the North, and set the stage for Grant's brilliant crossing of the James River - all attributes that invite scrutiny. But historians have focused on the opening rather than the closing battles of the Overland campaign, writing several detailed studies of the Wilderness and Spotsylvania. Perhaps the apparent simplicity of the action at Cold Harbor on June 3, with unimaginative and costly frontal attacks that ended in predictable failure, has discouraged potential investigators.

Ernest B. Furgurson's **Not War But Murder** offers the first full-scale treatment of the subject. Furgurson brings to his task skills that produced successful earlier books on the Chancellorsville campaign and Richmond's wartime experience - careful research in an array of published sources and unpublished manuscripts, an engaging and sometimes eloquent writing style, awareness of the many ties between the battlefield and the home front, and a deft touch with brief biographical sketches.

The book emphasizes that the celebrated fighting on June 3 represented just one element of a much larger set of maneuvers and clashes near Cold Harbor between May 28 and June 11 that produced more than 15,000 Union and between 3,000 and 5,000 Confederate casualties. A pair of chapters set the stage with an overview of events from the Battle of the Wilderness on May 5-6 through action along the North Anna River three weeks later. Subsequent chapters highlight the cavalry engagements at Haw's Shop on May 28 and at Matadequin Creek on May 30, the armies' jockeying for position and skirmishing along Totopotomoy Creek on May 28-31, fighting at Bethesda Church on May 30, and aggressive Confederate movements and Union responses at Cold Harbor on June 1-2. Furgurson allocates less than 10 percent of his narrative to the combat on June 3, moving on to a consideration of the battle's aftermath, its impact on northern politics and Union and Confederate civilian morale, and the reshuffling of units that preceded Grant's march to the James River.

Furgurson introduces a good deal of analysis into his chronological narrative. Much of it centers on Grant, George G. Meade, and the Union high command. He argues that Grant's decision to accompany the Army of the Potomac while leaving Meade as its titular head fueled tensions and prevented efficient application of superior northern manpower and resources. "Grant did not know the Army of the Potomac intimately enough to give detailed orders as if he were the only general in charge," observes Furgurson, while "Meade did not feel deep personal responsibility for managing operations that Grant had broadly planned."

Dangerous misconceptions about both the Rebel army and his own force contributed to Grant's decision to launch the attacks on June 3. He believed the Confederates suffered from low morale after being hammered at the Wilderness and Spotsylvania but thought Union soldiers retained high spirits despite heavy casualties in attacks against entrenchments during the first three weeks of May. On June 3, he hoped his men would win a decisive success against a weakened foe. But "Grant badly misunderstood the enemy, from Robert E. Lee down to the leanest Alabama rifleman," argues Furgurson. "He also misunderstood his own army, from George G. Meade down to the weariest Massachusetts private. That helps explain why the assault failed so miserably."

Grant refused to concede

Furgurson further criticizes Grant for failing to admit defeat after June 3. The Federal commander allowed wounded Federals to lie helpless between the lines rather than raise the white flag in order to have them removed. Sending a formal request to Lee under a white flag of truce, Furgurson notes, for Grant would have "meant conceding what every soldier in both armies could see but had not yet been absorbed in Washington and beyond: that he had been decisively beaten in the climactic battle of the bloody spring offensive, his first campaign as general-in-chief." Although indicating that Lee bore part of the blame for unnecessary delay in getting relief to the wounded Federals, Furgurson judges Grant much more harshly.

Grant insisted that Cold Harbor gave Confederates only a momentary lift and had no long-term negative effect on Union soldiers. Furgurson notes persuasively that nearly the reverse was true. The bungled Union attacks against Petersburg in mid-June underscored the pernicious influence of a "Cold Harbor syndrome" that rendered northern troops less effective than in previous battles. Cold Harbor also sent tremors through the North, contributing to a period of growing doubt about the outcome of the War. As for Grant, he admitted failure in his effort to defeat Lee's army north of Richmond but blamed that failure "not on his own strategy, but on the Confederates' unwillingness to abandon their trenches and fight on his terms."

Although generally well-written and soundly argued, Furgurson's narrative sometimes claims too much or relies on questionable evidence. For example, Furgurson asserts that Cold Harbor marked a tactical "turning point of the Civil War," after which "the war of maneuver became a war of siege; stand-up attack and defense gave way to digging and trench warfare." Yet as the opening section of **Not War But Murder** makes clear, digging and trench warfare had become standard features of the confrontation between Grant and Lee before Cold Harbor. Earlier campaigns of maneuver also had given way to sieges at Vicksburg and elsewhere. Similarly, Furgurson's statement that no other major battle of the War was "so shamefully one-sided as that in the first week of June 1864, at the country crossroads of Cold Harbor, Virginia" certainly would provoke lively disagreement.

In terms of evidence, Furgurson falls into the trap of using postwar testimony to describe wartime events and attitudes. He suggests that on the evening of June 2 "every man in both armies knew the grand assault was next," supporting this highly questionable assertion with an 1880s quotation from

Confederate general Evander M. Law. Law claimed in retrospect, with the advantage of knowing what had transpired on June 3, that he was "as well satisfied that [the attack] would come at dawn the next morning as if I had seen General Meade's order directing it." Furgurson also accepts Joshua L. Chamberlain's postwar avowal that for a time after Cold Harbor the Union army ceased to compile routine morning reports of unit strengths because "the country would not stand it, if they knew" about the heavy casualties. Elsewhere, Furgurson employs dramatic but questionable quotations, most notably the purported Union diary entry that read: "June 3, Cold Harbor. I was killed."

These weaknesses do little to diminish Furgurson's accomplishment in writing a balanced, compelling study of an important part of the Overland campaign. After more than a century and a third, Cold Harbor finally has emerged from the shadows of Civil War literature.

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