

Decided on the Battlefield: Grant, Sherman, Lincoln and the Election of 1864

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Review

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Johnson, David Alan *Decided on the Battlefield: Grant, Sherman, Lincoln and the Election of 1864*. Prometheus Books, \$27.00 ISBN 978-1-61614-509-5

At the Intersection of Military Policy and Politics

The purpose of David Alan Johnson's book, *Decided on the Battlefield: Grant, Sherman, Lincoln and the Election of 1864*, is to examine the critical factors in 1864 that led to the re-election of Abraham Lincoln. Written for the general audience, Johnson, a freelance writer who has authored a number of popular histories, argues that the success or failure of Union armies determined Lincoln's political future, and hence the fate of the Union.

Popular history is difficult to write. It requires the author to tell a complex story in a lively narrative and make history come alive while integrating the latest scholarly thinking. Finding the balance between what professional historians expect and the general public demands requires considerable skill. Unfortunately, despite a number of strengths, Johnson's *Decided on the Battlefield* will disappoint both audiences.

Johnson builds his narrative around the military and political events of 1864, arguing that the public mood in the North was growing restive and disillusioned. Military defeats followed by stalemate eroded the belief in many quarters that the Union could be saved. Additionally, dissatisfaction with Lincoln's handling of the war rapidly grew to the point that members of his own political party considered nominating someone else as the Republican standard bearer. Even Lincoln thought his own prospects for re-election were dim. Had Lincoln lost the election of 1864, Johnson contends, the South would have won its independence. The crucial factors that changed northern public opinion and led to Lincoln's re-election were the military successes of Ulysses S. Grant and William Tecumseh Sherman. Grant's and Sherman's successes late in the summer of 1864, Johnson argues, were the deciding factors that permitted Lincoln to win

the election and save the Union.

Johnson's narrative has a number of strengths. He establishes a good feel for the flow of events and the interplay between military action and public morale. His discussion of the impact upon northern politics and public morale of Confederate Jubal Early's thrust toward Washington D.C. in June and July of 1864 is particularly insightful. Johnson also provides excellent descriptions of how the terrain influenced military strategy for a number of the key battles fought that summer. His account of the fall of Atlanta and the battle of Mobile Bay are especially strong, describing the tactical difficulties facing the armies and navies. Another strength of the narrative is Johnson's talent for capturing the personalities of the leading politicians and generals. Clearly an admirer of Ulysses Grant, Johnson effectively depicts Grant's dogged determination. While not always balanced in his evaluations, Johnson is nevertheless clever, as for example in how he characterized General Oliver Howard as having all the "flamboyance of a New England pastor at a funeral" (117).

Professional historians will find little to object to Johnson's overall interpretive framework. They will, however, be disappointed in Johnson's failure to use current scholarship. Johnson relies a great deal upon the solid but very dated works of Bruce Catton, Shelby Foote, Henry Steele Commager, and Carl Sandburg, and upon generalized popular histories, such as Alistair Cooke, Time-Life Books, and Wikipedia. He used few primary sources and those he did use, he seldom quoted. Professional historians will also be frustrated by Johnson's overall lack of historical balance. He tends to overly praise Grant and Sherman and overly criticize Confederate generals, particularly John Bell Hood. The lack of historical balance is also evident in Johnson's discussions on a number of other issues, such as his declaration that "as far as Lincoln was concerned, Ulysses S. Grant was the first real general he ever had....," an unsupported statement that overly simplifies Lincoln's hopes and expectations for other generals (26).

Many historians will question most Johnson's ahistorical approach. For example, Johnson chides Lincoln for omitting the economic reasons for the Civil War from the Second Inaugural Address, as if Lincoln believed or should have believed that economics were the root cause of the conflict (254). Historians will have even greater reservations with Johnson's Epilogue which is a lengthy speculation on "what if" Lincoln had lost the election of 1864. Making up names of future presidents and events through the late 20th century, Johnson speculates

on what the history of the United States and the Confederate States of America could have been, including how those “nations” would have behaved in two world wars, the Civil Rights Movement, and the confrontation with the Soviet Union. While one can applaud Johnson’s imagination, such speculation more properly belongs in historical fiction.

For many of the same reasons that historians will question *Decided on the Battlefield*, general audiences will also be left frustrated. While Johnson has a journalist’s ability to explain a complex story with a crisp and engaging style, his narrative fails to capture the drama and passion of the time. Part of the reason Johnson is unable to adequately describe and convey the emotions of 1864 and 1865 is because he does not let the participants speak for themselves. Not using primary sources robs the narrative of the genuine drama of the time. A second reason why Johnson’s book will not satisfy general audiences is the strong air of inevitability. For example, while discussing public criticism of Grant during the Overland Campaign, Johnson tells the reader that few people realized that “as long as Grant kept applying pressure, Lee was bound to surrender and the war would be over” (159). Johnson’s frequent injection of inevitability not only drains the narrative of the real drama in the Summer of 1864, but it also makes it impossible for Johnson to describe the uncertainty, subtleties and nuances of the time. A third reason general audiences may be disappointed in *Decided on the Battlefield* is because Johnson provides little information about the relationship between Lincoln and Grant. This complex and highly debated relationship is overly simplified and mostly ignored by Johnson which leaves a critically important human aspect out of the narrative.

Good history written for general audiences fills an important educational need in society by making scholarship accessible to the public. It requires a special talent, which is why we celebrate authors like Doris Kearns Goodwin and David McCullough who have succeeded in making complex historical events and people come alive while educating the public to the intricacies and subtleties of the past. Through the use of a lively narrative, good popular history tells a complex story accurately and respectfully while integrating current scholarship into the story and making the real drama of events come alive. Unfortunately, despite its strengths, David Alan Johnson’s *Decided on the Battlefield* does not meet this standard.

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