

No Turning Back: A Guide to the 1864 Overland Campaign, From the Wilderness to Cold Harbor, May 4-June 13, 1864

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Recommended Citation

Stowe, Christopher S. (2014) "No Turning Back: A Guide to the 1864 Overland Campaign, From the Wilderness to Cold Harbor, May 4-June 13, 1864," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 16 : Iss. 3 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.16.3.11

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol16/iss3/9>

Review

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Summer 2014

Dunkerly, Robert M. and Pfanz, Donald C.. *No Turning Back: A Guide to the 1864 Overland Campaign, from the Wilderness to Cold Harbor, May 4-June 13, 1864.* Savas Beatie, \$12.95 ISBN 978-1-61121-193-1

A Guide to the 1864 Overland Campaign

In time to capitalize on the Overland Campaign's sesquicentennial commemoration, commercial publishing house Savas Beatie has produced a small wave of titles covering the bloody six-week confrontation between Ulysses S. Grant and Robert E. Lee, who had by the spring of 1864 cemented their reputations as the Civil War's foremost military leaders. Recent Savas Beatie volumes offer the general reader accessible introductory narratives of the battles of Spotsylvania Court House and Cold Harbor that serve secondarily as touring guides, while the subject of this review, *No Turning Back*, is the finest and most durable of the set. It provides for the veteran battlefield stomper and casual visitor alike the means to explore the course of the whole campaign within a single, compact cover.

The Overland Campaign has been the subject of one prior guidebook: Burd Street Press's *No Backward Step* by Charles Siegel. Though admittedly a valuable tool, its large size (nearly 300 pages), the number of tour stops contained within (over 200), and an execrably manufactured binding limit its usefulness for some users. It too recommends a ten-day journey adequately to cover the campaign in its entirety, an option simply unachievable to all but the truly hard-bitten—and least financially constrained—Civil War enthusiasts. For these reasons alone, the need for more streamlined and functional touring aid is clear. Veteran National Park Service personnel Robert Dunkerly, Donald C. Pfanz, and David R. Ruth have, in producing *No Turning Back*, improved upon the competition without sacrificing too much in the way of content or context.

No Turning Back consists of eighty-six tour stops arranged in four chapters (Wilderness, Spotsylvania, North Anna, and Cold Harbor) that cover skillfully

the continuous and sequential operations which resulted in some 88,000 American casualties. Beginning at Germanna Ford along the Rapidan River and concluding at Wilcox's Landing along the James, its tour design adheres closely, if not entirely, to the "Virginia Civil War Trails" driving circuit and is meant to complement the latter's on-site interpretation. The collective expertise of the ranger-historians shapes the effort: each stop contains carefully chosen first-person accounts that provide more than colorful sidelights—they form the basis of what is a crisp and thorough narrative that eschews the "who, what, when . . ." organizational model that characterizes many recent titles in the genre. Moreover, the authors invite the reader to explore Overland sites often bypassed by the average Civil War tourist, including Myers Hill (Spotsylvania), Henegan's Redoubt (North Anna) and Matadequin Creek (Cold Harbor campaign). GPS coordinates assist visitors in finding these and all other places contained within the volume, as do operational, tactical, and tour-stop maps finely executed in grayscale by noted Civil War cartographer Hal Jespersen.

As in any all-inclusive study covering events as inherently complicated as a military campaign, there exist a few interpretive and design faults in *No Turning Back*. For instance, in devoting much of their attention to tactical actions, the authors at times neglect the operational- and strategic-level decision-making processes that led Lee's and Grant's forces to clash as they did in the spring of 1864. In addition, a tighter editorial process would have eliminated variances in spelling between the guide's text and that contained within the maps. (Is it "Ny" or "Ni" River?) Finally, the placement of the tour-stop maps at the front of the volume forces the reader to thumb through the guide repeatedly in order to reorient as s/he proceeds through the central Virginia countryside. Still, none of these weaknesses detract seriously from *No Turning Back's* great value as an interpretive and narrative tool. Dunkerly, Pfanz, and Ruth have together produced an educational, comprehensive, and eminently readable guide that will endure beyond the current sesquicentennial remembrance to inform Civil War tourists for years to come.

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