

Richmond Must Fall: The Richmond-Petersburg Campaign, October 1864

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Review

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Newsome, Hampton *Richmond Must Fall: The Richmond-Petersburg Campaign, October 1864*. Kent State University Press, \$65.00 ISBN 978-1-60635-132-1

A Focused Look at Pivotal Moment of an Important Campaign

The Siege of Petersburg continues to be, as a campaign unto itself, too massive a subject for one volume to truly encompass. The nearly year-long struggle by the Union to take Richmond by seizing its vital railroad hub at Petersburg in the face of a determined Confederate defense involved nine major Union assaults directed by Ulysses S. Grant, countered by repeated efforts by Robert E. Lee to disrupt the siege and contain Union attacks to sever the remaining roads and railroads into Petersburg. Thankfully, however, there are several excellent books about particular phases of the Petersburg siege that detail the strategic importance of the campaign while describing the tactical operations in detail. To that list, one can add Hampton Newsome's *Richmond Must Fall: The Richmond-Petersburg Campaign*. In a lengthy, but thoroughly described, volume, Newsome depicts the actions taken in October 1864 by Grant to find military success on the eve of the northern presidential election and Lee's equally determined effort to prevent Union battlefield success from becoming Republican political gain.

In October 1864, both sides in the struggle for Petersburg were facing difficult choices. As Newsome describes, Grant was under pressure to provide military results within the political timeframe of the upcoming election. In addition to the criticism he received because of the massive casualties incurred in the Overland Campaign the previous summer, Grant had failed in five previous major attacks to either breach the Petersburg defenses or sever the last logistic links into Petersburg. These failures placed Grant in a disadvantageous strategic position as the election loomed in November. With Abraham Lincoln's reelection uncertain, Grant was aware that what he did on the battlefield might

sway the election one way or the other. A victory in October would be an obvious help to Lincoln's reelection hopes. But a defeat might lead to a fall in public support, and even just maintaining the status quo by doing nothing might be viewed by voters as an admission of strategic failure. Lee, on the other hand, faced more purely military issues, such as failing logistics, increasing desertion rates, and holding General Philip Sheridan's campaign in the Shenandoah Valley. He was also very aware of the importance of the upcoming political timeframe, and knew the risks of launching a preemptive offensive (the failure of which might bolster the Lincoln's election chances) or simply holding the increasingly difficult line.

Within this framework, Newsome crafts an intensely detailed account of Lee's attack on Grant's right along the Darbytown Road east of Richmond early in October, and Grant's six offensives against the South Side Railroad south of Petersburg later in the month. Both fights depict the styles, advantages, and limitations of Lee and Grant. Lee knew he needed to act to protect his tenuous supply lines, but had to temper his usual audacious offensive proclivities because of the need to prevent crippling casualties to his dwindling army. He also had to be mindful of Union offensives elsewhere, and aware of the balance between accomplishing his near-term goals versus preserving sufficient force for the long-term struggle. A successful offensive in October would, if he pushed too hard and suffered too many casualties, could prove a disaster at a later date. Grant, on the other hand, had plenty of resources, but was handicapped in how he could employ them. His large army demanded massive logistic support, and while Grant tried to sever the Confederate railroads, he himself was tied to his supply base at City Point, Virginia and its associated lines. He was also saddled with a cumbersome command system. Benjamin Butler, commanding the Army of James at Bermuda Hundred, provided not only inadequate leadership, but an additional layer of command that proved unnecessary. Likewise, Grant had to issue commands to the Army of the Potomac through its cautious commander, George Meade, with instances where orders often lost something in translation. The consequent battles, therefore, did not play out as either side had hoped. While Grant was able to contain Lee's attack in early October (one of Lee's last offensives of the war), he own attack also fared poorly. As a result, the election of 1864 occurred the following month under the shadow of recent events, ending in a victory for Lincoln. Grant, analyzing the battle in the weeks after, determined that future attacks would be unhindered by the troublesome logistics that had limited him to that point, a strategy that proved successful the following

spring.

The descriptions of the battles are the strong points of Newsome's work. While meticulous to an extent that will befuddle an inexperienced reader, the specific nature of the book's subject demands such a level of detail. An experienced reader, however, will appreciate Newsome's attention to detail, sense of timing, and exhaustive level of research. He seamlessly integrates personal accounts from letters and diaries into the text, providing a field-level sense of how the clashes unfolded. Newsome also provides a well-crafted sense of presence to the conflicts in the book. Battles do not just play out, but unfold, have a sense of ebb and flow, and reach conclusions based upon the actions of the players involved. The battles do not just occur and then end; Newsome displays a great sense of how events came to be and their subsequent influence on future actions. The reference to prominent players, such as Winfield Hancock and William Mahone, keeps the discussion centered on the action without diverting the reader toward too many unnecessary side notes. The result is a highly detailed but very readable description of the October battles around Petersburg.

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