Grant and Lee: Victorious American and Vanquished Virginian

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Who's the Best General?

A favorite around-the-lunch-table diversion of students of military history is a game called Who's the best general. One of its major attractions is that none can unequivocally win or lose, because the criteria for declaring victory are all so subjective that new challenges can always be made. And so the debates go on endlessly, as they presumably have since the dawn of civilization. For the most part it is a harmless but endlessly fascinating entertainment. However, when regional loyalties (such as Civil War-era North versus South) and their attendant iconic personalities (such as Robert E. Lee versus Ulysses S. Grant) are invoked, the discussions can, and often do, become acerbic.

There is a school of thought that has long yearned for objective criteria so that Who's-the-best disputes could be laid to rest. However, finding such criteria is a tricky business. It cannot be something as simplistic as simply counting the numbers of battles won or lost, or for that matter noting the victor if the two generals meet face to face. Scipio Africanus eventually defeated Hannibal, but does anyone argue that the Roman was superior to the Carthaginian? Or to move to more modern times, does the fact that Irwin Rommel lost at El Alamein mean that Montgomery was the better general?

The difficulty in determining which of two generals was best has always been that no one could think of an objective standard of performance. A major reason, of course, was that no two generals ever fought the same battle. While Lee and McClellan fought in the same battle at Malvern Hill, the two men nevertheless actually fought two entirely different battles, so there was no way of directly comparing performance. Even if by some magic one could fight the battle over again but with the commanders reversed (that is, Lee commanding the Army of the Potomac and McClellan leading the Confederate army) the
problem would not be solved, because such factors as the subtle interrelationships among a general and his subordinates, upon which so much depends in battle, would be so different as to defy prediction.

Into this intellectual morass Edward H. Bonekemper has stepped, brandishing the dread weapon of statistics. While not specifically elucidated, Bonekemper's thesis seems to be that the number of battle-related casualties accumulated over the course of a war by the forces under a general's command is an effective measure of the competence of that general. That is, he who loses the least is the best. The notion has a certain charm. Certainly the life of a man is a valuable commodity, and so our sympathies tend to go to the man who spent the smallest number. But is sympathy an objective measure of command performance?

Assuming for the moment that it is, we must admire Bonekemper's boldness in invoking Civil War battle casualties in support of his argument, considering the wildly varied figures provided by the various records and reporters. Bonekemper faces this difficulty by explaining why the numbers are often so different—the two armies used different protocols for identifying and reporting casualties; the two armies were not equally reliable in reporting losses; and various reporters and commentators have, over the years, used different methods of making estimates—and then explains that he used none of them! Bonekemper is meticulous about preserving a detailed record of the variability of the original data. He presents them in two invaluable and exhaustive appendices (Appendix I, Casualties in Grant's Battles and Campaigns, p. 267, and Appendix 2, Casualties in Lee's Battle and Campaigns, p. 302). It is doubtful that this compilation will ever be improved upon. Wisely, Bonekemper did not average those various reports and estimates (presumably because the rule of statistics is that all samples must be derived from the same population, and it cannot be demonstrated that Civil War casualty figures meet that criterion). Instead, he made his own estimates. Frankly, being personally not unfamiliar with Civil War casualty numbers, I am neither surprised nor disturbed by Bonekemper's failure to describe the precise methodology he used to make such estimates. He has studied—and I suspect meditated over—those records more than any other person, and I am perfectly happy to accept his estimates as the best that are humanly possible.

What is perhaps less appealing is that Bonekemper quite obviously had reached a conclusion as to the identity of the best general before he began
analyzing the casualties-records of Lee and Grant. Fortunately, he makes no bones about this. The very first sentence of the very first paragraph in his book makes it clear that Grant and Lee is intended as a justification for an already established opinion. It is well that he does so, because without it, by the time the reader had reached about page 100, the repetition would have grown tedious. Bonekemper is a solicitous guide to his conclusions; at every step along the way he is there to steer us back into the straight and narrow.

As a firm believer in Count Belisarius's dictum that military strategy is no more than applied geography, I am perhaps hypersensitive to the need for appropriate maps of the region in which operations were conducted. Maps are by far the most effective way of conveying the spatial arrangement of essential or critical points. Thus, to me, a military history book in which the prose cannot be conveniently tied to a reliable map is an exercise in frustration. One simple criterion for the adequacy of the maps is this: Do the accompanying maps show every place named in the text? If not, then the innocent reader is left in an intellectual vacuum. Unfortunately, attractive and elegant as they are, Bonekemper's maps do not meet this criterion. To be sure Grant and Lee is not primarily a book about strategy, operations, and tactics, but Bonekemper introduces those concepts and uses them as major players in the reasons for the casualties incurred, and provides maps illustrating them, and that makes them fair game for analyses.

A single example will suffice. On page 21 is a map entitled Grant's Early Western Battles and Campaigns, 1861-62," which is presumably intended to illustrate Chapter 3: Late 1862 / Early 1863: Lee's First Loss and Grant's Early Victories. Excluding the names of states, which we would expect everyone to know, only 12 of the 22 geographic names mentioned in that portion of the text devoted to Grant are actually on the map. There is no map dealing with Lee's early campaign in western Virginia, so none of the 28 geographic place names in that portion of the text dealing with Lee's early experiences have a map referent. Lee was presumably operating in a Never-Never Land for which no maps are available.

And in a sense, that bias characterizes the book. With but few exceptions, Lee's experiences are described as consequences of flaws of character or intellect, while Grant's are associated with positive or desirable traits. To be sure, as I indicated above, Bonekemper warned us that his objective was to prove that Grant was the better general. Nevertheless, it was disturbing to read a historical
analysis that seems so obviously to have been spun in favor of an individual. Yes, I understand that the Lost Cause writers have been doing that in favor of Lee (and other Southern generals) for nearly a century. Nevertheless, I suspect that a spoonful of even-handedness would have made it easier to swallow the medicine.

I am not sure that Bonekemper intended to write a summary of the Civil War from the point of view of its two most prominent generals, but he nevertheless succeeded admirably. If one ignores the partisanship and reads only for historical content, *Grant and Lee* is a remarkably concise and coherent narrative of the war that sweeps aside the irrelevancies and focuses on the campaigns that decided the war. As such, I commend it to both neophytes and aficionados. The neophyte will gain a historically accurate appreciation of the war-as-a-whole, and the buff will see it as a neat summation of a gigantic and indescribably-bloody chess-game between two nations, both struggling for existence, and each represented by one remarkable man.

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