

On To Petersburg: Grant And Lee, June 4-15, 1864

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Review

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Gordon, Rhea C. *On to Petersburg: Grant and Lee, June 4-15, 1864.* LSU Press, \$45.00 ISBN 9780807167472

Petersburg and the Strategy of Persistence

Author Gordon Rhea has something of a cottage industry going with regard to Virginia's so-called "Overland Campaign" of the spring/summer 1864. His fifth in series on the subject (sixth or seventh if one counts several ancillary works), concludes the saga of Grant and Lee forever side-slipping southward from the Rapidan to the James in adroit thrust and parry, constantly entrenching or probing for openings and most of all – bloody, inconclusive head-to-head battles that only perpetuated the carnage people associate especially with "Butcher" Grant. If one is a student of detailed tactical/operational analysis, leadership, tactics and the implementation of field fortifications foretelling the Western Front in World War I, then Rhea's books are perfect. To his signature narrative style, almost a literal replication of Grant's dogged foot by foot pace, he adds a modicum of illustrations, useful operational maps and orders of battle and fittingly offers a short campaign perspective in this final series' volume. This is traditional military history – battles and leaders with injection of personal observations from all ranks. Rhea offers sound (although hardly profound) judgement on Grant and Lee, where each one and his army succeeded or failed at critical junctures. This is not Bruce Catton, K.P. or T. Harry Williams even Douglas Southall Freeman from yesteryear. They are available from used bookstores and remain staples of Civil War scholarship. Rhea invites a fresh approach for studying the anatomy of leadership, organizations and procedures in an evolving way of war.

Rhea's work does less with high command, the contextual background of the fortnight he covers in terms of integrative political, economic, socio-cultural background. But, he is superb at weaving a portrait of educating Grant to eastern army ways, the frictions of army group command, foibles and eccentricities of

the Army of the Potomac in particular and why Grant could afford battlefield butchery and Lee could not! Lee comes under less scrutiny perhaps and, at times, the narrative is briefly repetitive for knowledgeable readers. Let's face it, Rhea is best at operational detail. Correspondingly, one wishes for similar treatment of the logistics crucial for better understanding the unfolding events.

Nevertheless, here is the mesmerizing post-Cold Harbor phase of the war, when the Army of the Potomac raced to cross the James and beat its foe to Petersburg so cutting invaluable supply lines from the deeper south. Ironically, this stratagem was precisely what McClellan had evolved two years earlier only to be stymied by Washington war lords. Now, it was Grant's turn to win President Lincoln's confidence and he did so by persistence and determination, advancing not retreating in the face of adversity and by determining Lee's army was not at Richmond was his true objective. Therefore, as we know, Grant's story was one of persistence - the essence of Rhea's multi-volume study - at the cost of blood and treasure. The Union juggernaut kept going to Lee's detriment. It attrited itself but more so Lee's army which was Grant's objective, not Richmond. Yet, Lee's valiant men hung on, the Lost Cause incarnate.

Rhea arguably suggests virtually limitless resources lay behind Grant's purposes but not so for Lee. Nonetheless, resources have to be mobilized, a political act requiring public will and stamina. Here is where Rhea's approach leaves the reader unsatisfied. The evolving spring and summer of 1864 was political. Success for Union arms faced a timetable and that timetable climaxed a few months hence with elections. Grant and the armies of the Republic (for he commanded and directed many, not just the Army of the Potomac), could not afford to play the Confederate game of waiting out survival at northern polls. High casualties did little to endear Grant, or Lincoln, to voters across the Union. Success did affect public opinion and Grant determined its meaning by pushing past setbacks like the Wilderness, Spotsylvania, North Anna, Cold Harbor and a myriad of other combat encounters that constituted this campaign. Success could be measured back home by what today we call "endless war" - the fact that Grant did not allow eastern armies to retreat as they had in previous encounters. In so doing, Grant hamstrung Lee's control of events, counter-offensive flexibility and drained the Confederacy of ability to supply guns and butter to its minions. Rhea doesn't do much with this theme, so, in some ways, his most enduring themes revolve around Grant's decision to travel with the Army of the Potomac and beat it into a decisive force to win the war.

Uneven analysis of Northern and Southern commands is one of the book's only shortcomings. For example, Rhea pinpoints deficiencies in Grant's communication of strategic intent to subordinates by describing the somewhat faulty and inadequate attempt at unity of command between Army of the Potomac commander George Gordon Meade and Army of the James leader politico-general Benjamin Butler. In contrast, Rhea readily attributes Lee's command shortcomings to wounded, ill, and superseded corps commanders or maladies that left the Confederate commander unable to judge his opponent's intentions, abilities, method and determination.

In all of this recounting, Rhea is adequate for his purpose. His portrayal of the roles of respective commanders-in-chief Lincoln and Davis (or their war administrations) remains opaque and we do not gain real appreciation of logistics and army-navy cooperation nor really a thorough scrub of the Overland Campaign (surely the subject for a whole capstone volume of its own). Even some snapshot of the political, economic, and socio-cultural (not to mention diplomatic) implications for both sides in the first few weeks of June would have been welcome. Moreover, since war is an extension of politics and the first part of June was central to Lincoln's re-nomination (and, by extension, Confederate survival and independence), surely in-depth evaluation of home front impact of the bloodletting to date would have added to the context. Nonetheless, Rhea's contribution to modern Civil War military scholarship is laudable. Whether campaign scholarship now demands a more holistic approach prompts our consideration.

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