

The Impulse of Victory: Ulysses S. Grant at Chattanooga

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Review

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Powell, David A. *The Impulse of Victory: Ulysses S. Grant at Chattanooga*. Southern Illinois University Press, 2020. HARDCOVER. \$34.50 ISBN 9780809338016 pp 246.

Independent scholar David A. Powell is the author of nine books on the Civil War, and is a leading authority on the Chickamauga and Chattanooga campaigns. In this, his tenth book, part of a new series from Southern Illinois University Press on the world of Ulysses S. Grant, Powell trains his lens on Grant's generalship in the campaign to retain possession of the critical Tennessee River rail junction of Chattanooga, Tennessee. In late September 1863, General William S. Rosecrans led the Federal Army of the Cumberland back into Chattanooga after its defeat in the Battle of Chickamauga, and Confederate forces under General Braxton Bragg laid siege to the city, squeezing Federal supply routes down to one tortuous, mountainous land route from the Tennessee River at Bridgeport, Alabama. Rosecrans and his army were at a low ebb in morale and effectiveness, and were isolated both from Union logistics and supplies in West Tennessee and from Ambrose Burnside's small force operating in East Tennessee.

Throughout 1862 and 1863, President Abraham Lincoln turned to his most successful general to flip the strategic script in the Western Theater. Grant had opened first the Tennessee River, and then the Mississippi River to Union control with the Henry/Donelson, Shiloh, and Vicksburg campaigns, and now Lincoln charged him with rescuing Chattanooga. After receiving his marching orders from Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, Grant arrived in Chattanooga on 23 October and set to work. He started by relieving Rosecrans of his army command, and elevating corps commander George H. Thomas in his place. He then issued orders to William T. Sherman to move the Army of the Tennessee to Chattanooga, and set about opening a new, shorter supply line dubbed the "Cracker Line." Over the next month, Grant's army group defeated Bragg in the battles of Lookout Mountain and Missionary Ridge, removing the Confederate threat to Chattanooga and establishing a secure base for further offensives into the Deep South.

Powell argues in *The Impulse of Victory* that Grant's generalship was the essential factor for Federal victory in Chattanooga. This is a widely accepted viewpoint, but Powell argues it in a concise but lucid and deeply researched way, creating an account that is accessible enough for the general reader while offering cogent analysis for the Civil War specialist. Powell is especially adept at describing and analyzing the interpersonal relationships between the senior Northern commanders, and is sensitive to army politics and competing agendas. He effectively interweaves the events of the campaign with the war of words that erupted after the war, when reputations and legacies were at stake, and expertly evaluates contemporary accounts and official correspondence against postwar memoirs and letters. Grant's arrival and assumption of command was a contentious moment that Powell analyzes in great depth, demonstrating that much of what we think we know about the relationship between Grant and Thomas is a product of the intrigues and agendas of two observers. War Department envoy Charles A. Dana was bombastically critical of Rosecrans, and set the Lincoln Administration firmly against the general, who was widely popular among the officers and men of the Army of the Cumberland. Staff officer James H. Wilson, a lieutenant colonel on Grant's staff who later became a favorite of Grant's and commanded cavalry raiding forces at the war's end, portrayed Thomas as a fractious, unwilling subordinate of Grant. Powell's personality-centric analysis works well because the author leavens the narrative with a solid understanding of the tactical and operational events, and effectively portrays the entire theater of operations in its strategic and political context. Lincoln was constantly concerned about the Unionist population of East Tennessee, and the presence of Federal troops in this region disrupted Confederate logistics and transportation throughout the war.

This sophistication is on display in the author's excellent narrative of the Battles of Lookout Mountain and Missionary Ridge. Powell employs a solid balance of primary and secondary sources to describe both the action on the battlefield and the enduring historiographical discussion of the actions and decisions of Grant, Thomas, and Sherman. Hal Jespersen's maps supplement the text. Powell argues that without Grant's presence and aggressiveness, Thomas would not have chosen to attack Bragg's position, but as he notes in his conclusion, Bragg's incompetence was a major factor in Grant's victory in any case. Powell's evenhanded assessment of Thomas's generalship in the campaign is a valuable corrective to the

popular idea that Grant was victorious at Missionary Ridge in spite of the Army of the Cumberland's commander.

Grant was victorious because he had the emotional intelligence and military skill to step into a new and difficult situation, assess what needed to be done, and employ the forces at his disposal to accomplish his objectives. In doing so, Grant understood the capabilities and shortcomings of his army and corps commanders, and developed effective command relationships in spite of the constant political scheming that accompanied Civil War operations. *The Impulse of Victory* should be required reading for anyone interested in Ulysses S. Grant, the Civil War in the West, or Civil War generalship. It is highly recommended.

Charles R. Bowery, Jr., is a retired U.S. Army officer and Executive Director of the U.S. Army Center of Military History in Washington, D.C. He is the author or coeditor of three books on the Civil War in Virginia, including The Army War College Guide to the Richmond-Petersburg Campaign (University Press of Kansas, 2014).