

Bloody Spring: Forty Days That Sealed the Confederacy's Fate

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Review

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Wheelan, Joseph *Bloody Spring: Forty Days That Sealed the Confederacy's Fate*. Da Capo Press, \$27.50 ISBN 978-0-306-82206-3

The Overland Campaign as a Shift in Warfare

In the spring of 1864, after three years of conflict, the Union and the Confederacy pitted their two best generals, Ulysses S. Grant and Robert E. Lee respectively, in a massive game of blood and maneuver across the breadth of central Virginia. The Overland Campaign, as it became known, brought a new style of warfare previously unknown to American soldiers and civilians on such a grand scale. Joseph Wheelan, a prolific author whose previous works of history include *Jefferson's War: America's First War on Terror 1801-1805* and *Terrible Swift Sword: The Life of General Philip H. Sheridan*, skillfully chronicles this critical yet often undervalued campaign. Wheelan focuses his attention on the Virginia Theater from the Wilderness to Petersburg, battle-by-battle and story-by-story. Utilizing the Official Records, memoirs, published journals, regimental histories, and a wealth of other sources, he brings to life the men who endured, the decisions made, the twists of fate, and the chaos of war that led to untold carnage in an incredibly brief period of time. The Overland Campaign forever changed the lives of hundreds of thousands of soldiers and civilians and ultimately helped hasten the end of the Civil War.

Wheelan's greatest strengths come from his mastery of detailed description throughout the manuscript. Each chapter covers one of the major battles of the campaign and everything that happened within them. Wheelan weaves a narrative that takes the reader onto the battlefields through the eyes of the soldiers, both Union and Confederate, who fought there. He especially excels at describing troop movements, the vividness of battle, mini biographies of the prominent officers of the campaign, and personal anecdotes of ordinary soldiers. Readers learn about a Union soldier starting an impromptu boxing match with a Confederate soldier during the Battle of the Wilderness, Union skirmishers

nearly capturing General Lee by accident, a wounded soldier who survived by drinking dew on nearby grass, and many others. The book also describes the tactics and strategies utilized by both sides, including the important subordinate roles played by Generals Sheridan and Butler in the overall master plan developed by General Grant. In addition, Wheelan cites numerous examples of the constant flux of battle and the dependence on chance in the outcome. For instance, on page 141 Wheelan notes that the Union army nearly intercepted the Confederates at Spotsylvania but the Confederate First Corps arrived at the town with only a minute to spare. These details cover nearly every aspect of the campaign from a wide variety of viewpoints.

Along with description, Wheelan provides several insights about the campaign. Relying on the "overwhelming numbers" theme of the Lost Cause tradition, he argues that General Grant mainly used his numerical advantages in a strategy of attrition to wear down the Confederates. General Lee, in contrast, utilized skillful defensive tactics while waiting for an opportunity to return to the offensive. As a result, with some exceptions, Wheelan largely emphasizes Lee's strengths and Grant's major errors, attributing the Union's advances mainly to their advantage in men and material rather than superior tactics or strategies. Not all readers will agree with these conclusions but they present an evaluation of this traditional thesis in the context of the Overland Campaign. Citing the significance of the campaign to ending the war in the Union's favor, Wheelan claims that the Wilderness symbolized a major turning point because it forced General Lee to go on the defensive for the remainder of the war, robbing his army of the offensive power it used to wield against its opponents. In addition, Wheelan enhances the argument that the Overland Campaign represented a significant shift in the future of warfare by utilizing trenches as a primary tool rather than simply an afterthought. Summarizing this idea, on page 238 Wheelan writes, "In two weeks, the war in the East had irrevocably changed. During the weeks and months to come, entrenchments would become the dominant feature of Grant's and Lee's chess game across northern Virginia." Warfare became an endless daily grind of shooting and digging, a model for future wars well into the twentieth century. One of Wheelan's most interesting insights, however, concerns the Battle of Cold Harbor. Long cited by historians as one of the greatest slaughters of the war, Wheelan instead argues that Cold Harbor was one of the least bloody episodes of the campaign. All the other battles were far bloodier but Cold Harbor misleadingly receives attention because the casualties were so one sided against the Union. This insight should provide historians with

a reevaluation of Cold Harbor.

While the manuscript has plenty of strengths, there were still several areas that could have used greater analysis and elaboration. The book concentrates so much on battlefield details that the contributions of the campaign in ending the war often get lost. Implying that the campaign ensured Union victory, Wheelan ignores other critical events like General Sherman's campaign in Georgia, the siege of Petersburg, General Early's raid on Washington, etc. The Election of 1864 in particular only gets minor treatment even though the entire campaign was largely fought to influence the outcome of that election. In addition, Wheelan provides so many different stories about so many different people that he is often forced to rush through them without adequate elaboration. Readers will also only see brief discussions of the effect of the battles on the civilian populations, which leaves out a critical component of the campaign's importance to the war effort for both sides. The maps, while informative, only provide a snapshot of the tactical and strategic movements of both armies. More maps were needed to give a greater visual display of the unfolding of the campaign. One of the biggest limitations of this book, however, is the heavy reliance on counter-factuals. For example, while describing the aftermath of the Bloody Angle, Wheelan speculates that had General Grant overseen the battle closer to the frontlines instead of relying on subordinates, he might have won a major victory. Nevertheless, he provides little evidence to show how this could have happened. Such speculations should be used sparingly, if at all, in a volume of this nature.

Overall, this book provides a detailed and entertaining addition to our understanding of the final spring and summer of the Civil War in Virginia. While lacking in historiographical analysis, readers will still enjoy one of the most comprehensive tactical accounts of the Overland Campaign in its entirety.

David Ross Zimring is an adjunct professor at Montgomery College Germantown and the University of Maryland Baltimore County. He is the author of "Secession in Favor of the Constitution: How West Virginia Justified Separate Statehood During the Civil War." West Virginia History: A Journal of Regional Studies 3, no. 3 (Fall, 2009), and is currently working on a study of native northerners who fought for the Confederacy during the Civil War. He can be reached at David.Zimring@montgomerycollege.edu.