

A Campaign of Giants: The Battle for Petersburg: Volume One, From the Crossing of the James to the Crater

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Review

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Greene, Wilson A. *A Campaign of Giants: The Battle for Petersburg. Volume One, From the Crossing of the James to the Crater.* University of North Carolina Press, \$29.95 ISBN 9781469638577

The conclusion of the Centenary of World War I may be the appropriate moment to re-visit America's forerunner to modern siege warfare, the ten-month Richmond-Petersburg campaign which all but concluded the agonizingly long struggle in the eastern theater. Just as the Western Front in France eventually cracked, opening the way to the Armistice, so too did Robert E. Lee's determined stand for the Confederate capital, thus leading to the Appomattox solution. In a comprehensive, labor of love based on encyclopedic knowledge of men and events, long-time Petersburg authority A. Wilson Greene prepares a three-volume treatise, the first of which covers what essentially can be found in essays in Gary Gallagher and Caroline Janney, *Cold Harbor to the Crater: The End of the Overland Campaign* (2015) or Earl J. Hess, *In the Trenches at Petersburg; Field Fortifications and Confederate Defeat* (2011). For those readers wishing to explore twists and turns in detail or visit what is left of sites and terrain in this fast-urbanizing section of Tidewater Virginia, Greene's efforts are most rewarding. He has written, lectured and roamed the written and physical landscape in great detail and authority.

Whether or not we actually need campaign tomes like this or even concur with Greene's titular suggestion of some battle of titans, the rich detail (often leading to thicketed coverage but supported by more than adequate documentation) especially will delight tactical and operational Civil War historians. Illustrations are absent but clear tactical maps will help with the thickets. Greene's first volume illustrates how a war of movement, obstacle side-stepping and Grant's implementation of what may have been originally George B. McClellan's recognition two years before that Richmond could be taken from the Southside finally found resolution after much spillage of gore and treasure. What Lee had so brilliantly parried in the Seven Days of 1862 was

no longer possible when facing Grant and his army group of boundless resources logistically supplied by joint cooperation of the navy and contract merchant public-private partnering. Petersburg, thirty miles south of Richmond and the James River, lying on the south side of the Appomattox River and rail hub for five absolutely indispensable logistical rail links with the rest of the Confederacy now became the last major killing ground. Along the path to fortified stagnation lay a trail of failed subordinate implementation of grand plans, sometimes controversial decision-making by senior leaders, botched use of evolving military technology and much scratching of heads then and now as to really why did it take ten months to finish off what by the summer of 1864 was a civil war writhing in death agonies. Of course, was it?

Greene's treatment goes toward an answer – but at the tactical level. His work is just right for long winter nights and a good toddy in hand. Readers must pick their way searching for more optimal insights on Lee's brilliant ploy of sending Jubal Early not to the Shenandoah Valley per se but rather the Union's center of gravity - Washington D.C. and Mr. Lincoln's government. Indeed, the impact of the Richmond-Petersburg impasse upon the grand strategies in the political summer of 1864 does not shine through clearly even from the background. Views of Lincoln, Jefferson and their national security teams resourcing the events in the field, the multi-theater war how Richmond-Petersburg did or did not affect events elsewhere, say internationally for example, frankly even the logistics of this six week slice of the great saga remain opaque. Make no mistake, how an author chooses to handle a monumental topic will always run the gamut of seeming criticism about any approach. Greene's work is voluminous, discursive and of interest and value to buffs, military educators and practitioners thus worthy of inclusion in libraries (personal and institutional). It is solid traditional military history with new insights from a master of the craft. One simply must have the next two volumes to appreciate what A. Wilson Greene has contributed to our body of knowledge in a particular genre that should never be eclipsed by political sensitivities or correctness. Besides, his story of the Giants remains unfinished even if we know how it turned out.

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