

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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Green, A. Wilson. *A Campaign of Giants: The Battle for Petersburg, Volume One, From the Crossing of the James to the Crater.* University of North Carolina Press, 2018 \$45.00 ISBN 978-1-4696-3857-7

While it's generally acknowledged that the American Civil War (April 12, 1861 – April 9, 1865) was the world's first modern war, the myriad nuanced characteristics that earned the conflict such a designation may not be as well-known. In *A Campaign of Giants: The Battle for Petersburg, Volume One, From the Crossing of the James to the Crater*, author A. Wilson Greene peels away the layers of General Ulysses S. Grant's Overland Campaign (lasting from spring and into the summer of 1864) to expose the realities that made the Civil War progressively more horrible in its lethality and impact.

Greene quickly provides a substantial explanation of the economic, political, and cultural factors that made Petersburg a primary target that was too good to overlook in the overall objective of capturing Richmond. A city with a “distinguished military heritage,” (33) Petersburg possessed a “busy port” (33) and railroads that connected Richmond, Lynchburg, and Norfolk. There was also a rail connection with Weldon, North Carolina, all of which combined to bless Petersburg with economic clout in peacetime while cursing it with heightened strategic value during the Civil War.

The city's value was further enhanced by Petersburg's being the location of several thriving industries, including tobacco production, cotton mills, flour mills, and iron foundries. Another point of distinction for Petersburg was its “large free black population” (36) some of whom, by the “outbreak of the Civil War . . . led a relatively comfortable lifestyle.” (36) Greene does not understate the travesty of the slave system that always stood ready to impose its special miseries onto black people but simply asserts that the culture of Petersburg accommodated possibilities beyond the usual brutalities of slavery. In doing so, he offers a perspective that demands a more creative

understanding of the complexities of human interaction that existed within the bizarre nightmare of antebellum slavery.

For example, when Greene observes that, among Petersburg's free blacks, a "handful owned slaves" (36) and that when the war started "a substantial number of free black men of military age enthusiastically expressed their desire to serve the Confederacy, either as soldiers or laborers." (37) It becomes plainly apparent that nineteenth-century antebellum southern society cannot be easily fitted into inflexible binaries of right-and-wrong, good-or-bad, slave-and-free. Petersburg proved that, when it came to the system of race-based chattel slavery, the boundaries governing relations between slaveholders and their complex human property were both rigid and malleable.

A Campaign of Giants is appropriately titled given the cast of luminaries within its pages. The main actors were, of course, General Ulysses S. Grant, General-in-Chief of the Union Army and General Robert E. Lee, Commander of the Army of Northern Virginia. Working with Grant were men (giants in their own right) like George G. Meade, who'd defeated Lee at Gettysburg (and then let him escape); Winfield Scott Hancock known as the "Thunderbolt of the Army of the Potomac" after his display of bravery and tactical skill at Gettysburg; Philip H. Sheridan, intrepid Commander of Union Cavalry; and Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain whose heroism as leader of the Twentieth Maine at Gettysburg earned him the Medal of Honor.

The "giants" in Lee's orbit included P.G.T. (Pierre Gustave Toutant) Beauregard with his considerable strategic talent and elegantly aloof gravitas; the dashing Jeb Stuart, the "eyes" of Lee's army (at least, until he was killed in action at Yellow Tavern on May 11, 1864); mercurial, hard-driving Jubal Early who terrorized Washington, D.C. in July 1864; and the reliable support of W.H.F. (William Henry Fitzhugh) "Rooney" Lee (R.E. Lee's son); and capable cavalry commander Fitzhugh Lee (R.E. Lee's nephew).

Grant and Lee are, appropriately enough, given much page space but Greene generously ensures that subordinate commanders who wielded their own significant influence during the campaign are highlighted. Drawing directly from the primary sources at his disposal, he uses those tools to describe the people who proved so influential in the Overland Campaign. For example, Greene notes that Union General Benjamin Butler "left a distinct impression on everyone who met him." (5) Small wonder

since the “short, fat, shapeless” (6) Democrat from Massachusetts was also a “very bald-headed . . . queer looking man” (6) who nonetheless, as a political general, pursued his abolitionist agenda in a manner that helped him stay prominent in the headlines.

Regarding William Farrar “Baldy” Smith the author shares that the “Short, quite portly” (82) Union officer with the “light imperial and shaggy mustache” and “round, military head” (82) considered Ulysses S. Grant “obstinate” and perceived Gen. Benjamin Butler “as helpless as a child on the field of battle.” (82)

On the southern side, Lee had his own share of questionably talented commanders like former Virginia Governor Henry A. Wise. The fifty-seven-year-old Wise had been Virginia’s Governor during John Brown’s raid and subsequent execution in 1859. His “advancing age and utter lack of military training” (92) did not prevent Wise from being commissioned a “brigadier general in early June 1861” and subsequently proving himself an “abject failure” (92) during his first important field action.

Greene’s relentless detail in presenting facts about the Overland Campaign testifies to the determined effort that structured the superb, dedicated quality of research for this project. While the narrative is occasionally overwhelmed with such finite detail that the larger story of Grant’s and Lee’s efforts to, respectively, conquer and defend Petersburg is obscured, those instances do not diminish the richness of the information that underscored the sheer misery of this phase of the Civil War.

The diligent investigative discipline of the author produced a work which demonstrates, once again, that a thoroughly examined subject like the Civil War can still yield fresh treasures of knowledge. This is especially true with regard to those portions of the narrative relating the actions of African American soldiers and the challenges they faced from their Union counterparts and Confederate opponents.

Writing with bold transparency, Greene exposes the raw, toxic racism which was the normal attitudinal posture of northern soldiers and officers. In fact, the author provides substantial evidence that the general attitude of northern whites toward African Americans was just a slightly altered version of the vile beliefs advanced by southern pro-slavery advocates who insisted that blacks were inherently suited for lives *only* as laboring beasts (in perpetuity). Greene notes that during one engagement, a Confederate officer exhorted his men to stand firm against black soldiers, shouting that he and his men

“only had niggers to contend with” (89) whereas, on another occasion, a northern white soldier, expressing surprise at the courageous performance of black soldiers said he “Saw the nigger troops make a charge & I must say they are perfect bricks & make splendid soldiers.” (185)

Although those were, respectively, singular instances of a southerner and northerner using such an inflammatory descriptor when speaking of black troops, those incidents exemplified the general disdain for blacks prevalent in the North as well as the South. In the final analysis, when it came to the general quality of life for African Americans, whether as soldiers or civilians, the existence of mass slavery in the Confederacy and the South’s willingness to literally fight for its maintenance stood as the only difference [albeit significant] between the combatant governments and societies.

One of the finest achievements arising from the pages of *A Campaign of Giants* is the author’s skillfully communicating the awful, numbing grind and drudgery of the Civil War’s latter months. A similarly good job is accomplished with regard to explicating the persistent atmosphere of industrial death and despair which added their own special touches to the carnage. For this was, and in subsequent conflicts became, the hellish common denominator of modern warfare.

Old notions of conflict, especially among those who still entertained expectations of chivalric behavior, were bludgeoned into obsolescence as the Overland Campaign dragged into the summer months. Southern commanders and civilians in Petersburg were outraged when Union artillery started shelling “the city at an early hour...without giving the slightest notice” for the benefit of “helpless women and children.” (311) Confederate commanders were obliged to take charge of civil government, evacuating civilians to locations less exposed to the fury of Union bombardment.

A swelling refugee crisis found the once well-to-do, and those of the more ordinary, trudging together out of the city into the countryside to live in tents and forage for food. Hunger, an equal opportunity slayer of hope in all conflicts, obtained such power that some “decided to go back to their Petersburg homes, where at least the possibility of a square meal existed.” (321) The author observes that one soldier, described Petersburg as “a huge camp, or hospital, or graveyard.” (324) Such a sparse assessment accurately summed up a conflict in which no one could casually assume that

armies would [more or less] be limited to the battlefield. By the summer of 1864, as the war machine of Ulysses S. Grant pressed down upon the beleaguered but unconquered remnants commanded by Robert E. Lee, the location of the war and its attendant hazards were *everywhere*.

Greene's study winds down by examining the Union debacle at the Battle of the Crater on July 30, 1864, and fearlessly articulating the brutality visited upon African American soldiers who were captured by the Confederates. The accounts of vengeful murder and abuse heaped onto those black Union soldiers adds another grim variable to the overall equation of what had become modern war. It also underscored the urgent necessity, demanding the South's utter conquest. For even at this late stage of the war, Southerners refused to "recognize liberated chattels as soldiers," insisting that they were merely "slaves in rebellion, deserving only of summary execution." (504)

The awesome collection of notes compiled by A. Wilson Greene testifies to the total investment of the author in this project. Drawing his sources from repositories across the United States and making use of diaries, family papers, antiquarian records, presidential libraries, national battlefield parks and a host of others offers robust proof that there was a concerted effort to leave no stone unturned in acquiring the data needed to write this masterful work.

Fittingly enough, the author does not end the book on a triumphant note, and for good reason. By late summer 1864, President Abraham Lincoln was increasingly concerned about his prospects for the upcoming election. Northerners were restless for a faster resolution to the war. Festering resentments grew about the war's being fought to explicitly end slavery. And General Jubal Anderson Early had ridden north, at Lee's command, to harass Washington, D.C., buying the wily Commander of the Army of Northern Virginia [and the Confederacy] some much needed time.

With all of that obtaining, the author closes *A Campaign of Giants: The Battle for Petersburg, Volume One, From the Crossing of the James to the Crater* by referencing a July 31, 1864, letter from General George G. Meade to his wife in which Meade confides that General Grant has "gone to see the President," adding "What the result will be I cannot tell" but "Matters here are becoming complicated." (516)

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