

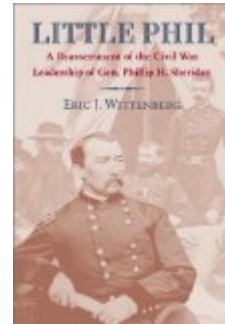
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Eric J. Wittenberg. *Little Phil: A Reassessment of the Civil War Leadership of General Philip H. Sheridan*. Washington, D.C.: Brassey's, 2002. x + 250 pp. \$25.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57488-385-5.

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Sheridan under Siege

According to both academic and popular belief, the Civil War produced three great Union generals. At the head of this list stand Ulysses S. Grant and William T. Sherman. According to conventional history, just behind these two comes Philip H. Sheridan, the short, fiery, and aggressive Irishman who rose up through the ranks of the Western armies to command the army of the Potomac's cavalry in the Overland Campaign, destroy the Confederate forces in the Shenandoah Valley, route the Confederates at Five Forks, and then relentlessly pursue Robert E. Lee's army until it surrendered at Appomattox Court House. These accomplishments have won Sheridan a virtually unchallenged place among the pantheon of great Civil War commanders.

Eric J. Wittenberg completely disagrees with the popular notion that Sheridan was a great general. In a short work, written, as the author concedes, as a lawyer's brief, Wittenberg sets out to demonstrate that Sheridan does not deserve the praise that history has bestowed upon him. Wittenberg contends that Sheridan was a poor cavalry commander who lost most of the engagements he fought. The famous Richmond Raid that resulted in Yellow Tavern was "ill-advised" because it failed to achieve its objectives, which were to defeat the Confederate cavalry and enter Richmond, and left Grant with only five regiments of cavalry to scout for him. This "cost Grant a prime opportunity to win the war on the North Anna" (pp. 31). Sheridan's raid on Trevilian Station was also a failure. The failure of these raids and other cavalry operations prolonged the war into the spring of 1865. Witten-

berg also argues that Sheridan's claim to have used the cavalry in a new way, namely to destroy the enemy cavalry, was completely false. In fact, as a cavalry commander, Sheridan used "unimaginative tactics" and "rarely demonstrated a true understanding of the nature of the mounted arm" (pp. 52). The major contribution Sheridan made to the cavalry corps of the Army of the Potomac was to instill "a new confidence, bordering on arrogance," in the men (pp. 33).

The general's performance in the Shenandoah Valley was only slightly better. He performed adequately enough to win, but was not aggressive and "failed to follow up" on his victories "by vigorously pursuing the vanquished enemy" (p. 85). Quite simply, he lacked the killer instinct, was too cautious, and thus failed to destroy his opponent. Wittenberg further argues that this was a campaign any competent commander could have won and Sheridan's success rested more on the performance of the good subordinates in his army rather than on his own performance. Sheridan's tactics "were unimaginative and often flawed" and victories, such as Fisher's Hill, rested on the battle plan developed by subordinates, in this case George Crook. The superior general in this campaign was actually Jubal Early. Wittenberg also vigorously faults Sheridan for failing to adequately deal with John Mosby's guerrilla operations, although Wittenberg admits that "perhaps no commander could have suppressed Mosby" (pp. 82). In both the Overland and Shenandoah campaigns, Sheridan's failures prolonged the campaign and resulted in heavy casualties.

In fact, Wittenberg contends that the Shenandoah Campaign “ended indecisively, without military victory” (p. 85).

It was only at the end of the war that Sheridan finally demonstrated the attributes of a great general. During the Appomattox Campaign, Sheridan was aggressive and showed that “he could effectively command a combined arms operation” (p. 165). This was his finest moment.

Wittenberg also examines several other facets of Sheridan’s Civil War career. He argues that throughout the war, Sheridan refused to “obey the direct orders of superior officers” (p. 91). He disobeyed orders from both George G. Meade and Grant. His relationship with Meade was particularly bitter, but Sheridan somehow managed to escape censure. Instead, Grant rewarded Sheridan’s insubordination by promoting him. What makes this insubordination ironic was that Sheridan relieved officers of command for what he perceived to be their disobedience of his orders.

Sheridan also unfairly ruined the careers of two subordinate commanders, William W. Averill and Gouverneur K. Warren, because they disobeyed his orders or he was unhappy with their performance. Sheridan also destroyed his friendship with George Crook, because he refused to give Crook credit for his role in the Shenandoah campaign. These actions demonstrated that Sheridan “had little concern for the well-being of the officers and men who served under his command” (p. 131). Finally, Wittenberg contends that Sheridan continually lied in order to cover up his mistakes and advance his career. His reports and memoirs are full of lies, such as his claim that he used the cavalry in new ways, he developed a sound strategy to deal with Mosby, and his Richmond Raid caused Robert E. Lee to retreat. The author calls Sheridan “a congenital liar” (p. 135).

If Sheridan was such a poor commander, why did he advance in rank and attain such important positions? His advancement was due almost entirely to Grant, who held a special fondness for the pugnacious Sheridan and believed he was “the greatest general our civil war produced” (p. 102). Without Grant, Sheridan would never have achieved the fame that led many to believe he was one of the great generals of the war. An assessment that Wittenberg argues was completely un-

warranted.

This is a highly controversial and provocative work that seeks to demolish one of the Civil War’s great icons; a fact the author is well aware of. Nevertheless, it is a rewarding book for it is well researched, written, organized, and argued. The author bases his analysis on an abundance of primary and secondary sources, including unpublished papers, newspapers, books, and articles. He does, however, rely too heavily on the opinions of Confederate officers in evaluating Sheridan’s military performance.

The writing is clear, straightforward, and easily understood, allowing the author to effectively present his case. The book is organized topically. Wittenberg examines Sheridan’s career as a division commander in the Army of the Cumberland and as cavalry corps commander in the Army of the Potomac and subsequent campaigns in the Shenandoah. He then looks at how Sheridan disobeyed orders, destroyed the careers of several fellow officers, and lied to advance his career. Finally, Wittenberg reviews the Appomattox campaign. As a result of this organization, there is a lot of repetitiveness, as the author looks at several incidents many different times. Despite this, the book’s organization allows Wittenberg to effectively present his case for each of what he sees as Sheridan’s flaws in a clear, concise manner that strengthens his overall thesis.

Although Wittenberg’s thesis is controversial and many readers will disagree with his evaluation of Sheridan’s military abilities, the book is thought-provoking and should be read by all of those interested in the Civil War, especially those who study cavalry operations and Civil War generalship. Many readers will certainly disagree with the author’s contention that Sheridan was a failure as a cavalry commander and especially with his argument that the Shenandoah campaign ended without achieving military success. Wittenberg’s evaluation of Sheridan’s personal characteristics—his disobedience, lying, and destruction of other officers’ careers—is especially noteworthy and, regardless of how one views Sheridan’s military performance, casts a cloud over Sheridan’s character. This is an excellent book that is certain to stir debate on one of the Union’s most famous commanders.

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