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Edward H. Bonekemper, III. *A Victor, Not a Butcher: Ulysses S. Grant's Overlooked Military Genius.* Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 2004. xviii + 456 pp. $27.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-89526-062-8.

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Ulysses the Great; or How to Make a General Blush

"Far from being the butcher of the battlefield," writes Edward H. Bonekemper, III in his preface, Ulysses S. Grant was "the greatest general of the Civil War" (pp. xvii-xviii). He repeats this statement in the final paragraph of his concluding chapter (pp. 269-270) and doggedly argues his point in every chapter in between. It is a simple premise: Grant was an exceptional military leader whose battlefield successes demonstrated a greatness too often overlooked by historians.

The problem, Bonekemper points out, has been a misrepresentation based on the repeated assumption that Robert E. Lee was a superior commander, regularly outdoing his Northern counterparts, including Grant, despite the Confederacy's lack of manpower and supplies. Within this framework, Grant's achievements seemed dependent on an abundance of resources and a willingness to bloody his men. The number of Union casualties in early 1864 engendered "dark talk," according to Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles, that Grant was "a butcher who harbored too little regard for human life" (p. 184). Both during and after the war, Grant's political enemies in the North agreed with this view, and in the South, the image became a favorite among proponents of the Lost Cause ethos. Bonekemper counters this idea by following Grant from his first battles in the West through his final victory at Appomattox Court House. Tallying the number of dead and wounded for each side, he concludes that forces serving under Grant suffered acceptable battlefield losses in comparison to the Confederates. For example, 15 percent of Grant's soldiers were killed and wounded, while Lee lost 20.2 percent of his men. Grant's forces also imposed 190,760 total casualties on the Confederates yet suffered losses totaling 153,642 men (pp. 268, 286-287). Furthermore, Bonekemper contends that Grant exhibited sixteen "winning characteristics" that not only demonstrated his abilities as a soldier, but also reinforced his status among the great men in American history (pp. 255-266).

Bonekemper's findings are generally convincing. It helps that most modern Civil War scholars and knowledgeable students of the war agree that Grant was a superb commander and strategist, even a military genius, and despite the erroneous yet persistent lore about thousands of Yankee doughboys dying within a few minutes at Cold Harbor, he was no butcher of his own men. Bonekemper relies on like-minded scholars and writers such as J. F. C. Fuller, James McPherson, Gordon C. Rhea, and Jean Edward Smith to reinforce this thesis and, often, to carry his narrative and make his point. Bonekemper's primary contribution to his cause, and more generally to scholarship on the war, comes in appendix 2 where he enumerates the soldiers killed, wounded, and missing for each of Grant's battles, beginning with Belmont in 1861.

Over the years, Civil War casualty records have proven difficult to gather, authenticate, and tabulate, and as a result, the accuracy of battlefield losses is often unclear. Using inflated or undercounted casualty figures, writers from one side or the other often misused them to make a point, such as attacking or defending Grant's generalship. Conscious of these discrepancies and their impact, Bonekemper clarifies the losses suffered under Grant. He includes the figures given by various authors for a particular battle and adds his own "best estimate" (pp. 288-323). Looking at the losses for the Cold Harbor campaign from May 31 to June 12, 1864, he suggests the number of Union soldiers killed to be 1,844 as compared to the 1,769 posted by the U.S. War Department. He estimates the total casualties to be 12,737, which is comparable to the figures mentioned in other accounts, but in his text, for whatever reason, he cites separate sources that put the figure at 16,000 (pp. 310-311, 190). Insisting that his data will "disprove the canard that Grant was a butcher," Bonekemper recognizes, as did Welles and others at the time, the high Northern casualty rates for the spring campaigns (p. 288). Unlike Grant's con-

temporaries who viewed the war and the upcoming election campaign with uncertainty, Bonekemper can justify these casualties as "militarily acceptable" because he is supported by events (p. 197). With each battle, despite the cost, Grant weakened Lee's army and reduced its ability to fight. By this period in the war, Grant understood his course, and veterans like Elisha Hunt Rhodes shared his confident outlook. "Grant is a fighter," Rhodes reported, "and bound to win" (p. 178). But it is this success that has made Grant vulnerable to historians, including Bonekemper.

In his attempt to rescue Grant from simplistic and distorted versions of history, Bonekemper creates an equally simplistic view that adds little to our understanding of Grant's life or career. Describing a selection of the Grant historiography in appendix 1, he divides them into two camps: those who have written favorably about Grant and those who have not. The earliest critics included Edward Pollard and Jubal Early, promoters of the Lost Cause, and friendly accounts came from Adam Badeau and Horace Porter, Grant's former staff officers. Among modern writers, the British military historian J. F. C. Fuller "strongly endorsed the greatness of Grant," and Bonekemper lauds all like-minded Grant biographers such as Jean Edward Smith (pp. 277, 278-282). The exception is William S. McFeely, "an academic historian who was influenced by the Vietnam War and denigrated Grant's critical role in Union victory" (p. 280). He particularly dislikes McFeely's assertion that "Grant's strategy was to make sure more Southerners than Northerners were killed. It was a matter of simple arithmetic" (p. 279). Oddly enough, that is the basis of Bonekemper's thesis. McFeely won the Pulitzer Prize and other awards for his biography, and although his interpretation has flaws, he presents Grant with frailties.

In Bonekemper's opening chapter, "Living a Troubled Life," we learn about Grant's early financial setbacks and his excessive drinking as a young officer. Overcoming such difficulties seem a prerequisite for becoming a true hero, but except for occasional worries about whether Grant took a drink during one campaign or another, Bonekemper's Grant has neither personality nor soul. Instead, he becomes what Southerners made of Lee: a marble man who is modest, displays moral courage, shows good judgment, and makes bold decisions. Grant would have blushed! This is a problem when portraying historical figures as something more than human, and it is unfortunate because they simply become one-dimensional figures. Bonekemper understands the many elements that made Grant an effective leader–his decisiveness, the innovative use of his personal staff, the clarity of his orders, and his strategic vision–but he hesitates to portray him as a person. What made Grant a great leader was not "simple arithmetic" but an understanding that war involved people like him, whether on the battlefield or at home.

Overall, Bonekemper's study is a useful reminder about the importance of Grant's role and leadership in the Civil War, but it is hardly the myth-debunking history heralded by its publisher. It is a straightforward synthesis reliant on earlier works that have revised Grant's story and rescued him from obscurity and infamy. The author continually counts on other scholars to make his arguments and provides little or no analysis of his own. At the same time, Bonekemper's knowledge and use of this vast Civil War bibliography, particularly articles from the many journals designed for a popular audience, makes this a worthwhile book for anyone interested in Grant.

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