

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Albert Castel. *Victors in Blue: How Union Generals Fought the Confederates, Battled Each Other, and Won the Civil War*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2011. xii + 362 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-1793-7.

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In the pantheon of Union generals who by their skill, audacity, and courage directed the North's military efforts and won the Civil War, most historians place Ulysses S. Grant, William T. Sherman, and Philip H. Sheridan at the top of the list. With his new book, Albert Castel challenges this inveterate ranking and resurrects William S. Rosecrans from the tomb of the mostly unknown generals to place him in the company of these commanders as the major reason why the North won the Civil War. With advice from Brooks D. Simpson, author of *Ulysses S. Grant: Triumph over Adversity, 1822-1865* (2000), Castel weaves a tale of lost opportunities, skill, luck, and political backstabbing into a highly readable and engaging work. It is a major contribution to Civil War studies.

Castel's goal is threefold. First, he identifies and describes the battles and campaigns that he believes contributed decisively to Union victory, and he explains why these battles and campaigns were so important. Second, he examines the performances of Union generals and judges the quality of their leadership. Third, and this is where the book explores new territory, the author investigates the political in-fighting among Union generals to discover the impact this had on who was promoted and who commanded the major armies in the critical battles of the war. Castel reveals that generals were not always promoted on merit, as in the case of Sherman, who the author describes as adept at self-promotion, but not necessarily adept at command decision making. Reminding readers as Karl von Clausewitz reminded his nineteenth-century professional audience, the biggest adversary to a general was not the enemy, but those unexpected unplanned events that Clausewitz

described as friction. "Everything in war is simple, but the simplest thing is very difficult.... Countless minor incidents—the kind you can never really foresee—combine to lower the general level of performance, so that one always falls far short of the intended goal." [1] As Castel points out, the incidents generals did not foresee (at least some) had nothing to do with supply lines, enemy strength, or selecting the ground on which to fight. Instead, the friction came from fellow generals in the form of political maneuvering, lies, artifice, and ambition.

Castel's prose flows across the pages of the book in a steady rhythmic pattern that is sometimes concise and brief, sometimes playful and humorous, and always vigorous and engaging. Describing the second day of fighting at Shiloh, he writes, "The rain ceased, the sun rose, and the federals attacked" (p. 80). Discussing President Abraham Lincoln's political skills in dealing with his generals, the author observes, "Lincoln may have been saintly in ways, but he did not lack at least a soupçon of Machiavellianism" (p. 159). Recounting Major General Ambrose Burnside's appearance, he portrays the general as a "prematurely bald but superbly sideburned thirty-eight-year-old from Rhode Island" (p. 98).

As an operational study the book covers familiar ground although it does not always come to familiar conclusions. For example, while many point to the significance of Grant's victories at Shiloh and the opening of the Mississippi River to Union supply and commerce at Vicksburg, Castel joins historians Thomas Connelly, Archer Jones, and Herman Hattaway in speculating about the importance of Grant's victories. (Here is one area where I am sure the author and Simpson dis-

agreed.)

Evaluating the performance of Union generals, Castel, however, uses some misdirection. He acknowledges Grant as the finest general the North produced (he believes Robert E. Lee the greatest general of the war), yet he challenges the strategic impact of Grant's major victories. According to the author, Grant was a skilled fighter, but his victories did not accomplish all historians think. Conversely, Castel admits that Rosecrans was a rogue. He lacked political skill and refused to play the political game, but his major victories at Rich Mountain, Iuka, Corinth, Stones River, and the Tullahoma campaign did have a significant impact on the outcome of the war. Castel writes that "Rosecrans conducted one of the most brilliant military operations of the Civil War both in conception and execution, an operation that, unlike Grant's Vicksburg campaign took place in a region where for the most part it was impossible for a large army to live off the land" (p. 215). After describing operations in western Virginia in 1861 and discussing how Lee failed to breach Cheat Mountain Pass, the author states that Lee's maneuver "probably would have succeeded had it been carried out by Rosecrans" (p. 25). Furthermore, Castel argues that it was Grant who called off the pursuit of Earl Van Dorn's army at Corinth, and it was the rogue Rosecrans who created the idea of the "cracker line" at Chattanooga to save the army from starvation. All Grant did was agree to Rosecrans's plan and take credit for it.

The book's third goal, the politics of generalship, sheds new light on the role that politics played in helping a general survive in an atmosphere of jealousy, suspicion, and ambition. For example, after Grant's victories at Forts Henry and Donelson, generals Henry W. Halleck and George B. McClellan attempted to remove Grant from command. Neither man trusted Grant (they knew of his drinking, and they believed he was a maverick with too much ambition), and Halleck hoped soon to be in command of all the Union's western armies. Halleck also believed that with his own command he would be out from under the invidious control of McClellan, a man also driven by too much ambition. There is a pattern here. The pretext for Grant's removal was that after his successful campaign on the Cumberland and Tennessee rivers, Grant had failed to communicate his after action report to Halleck, Grant's direct superior. The breakdown in communication came because Confederate saboteurs broke off telegraphic contact. Halleck knew this, yet he complained to McClellan about Grant's insubordinate conduct.

McClellan wanted Grant arrested. Halleck pretended, once in contact with Grant, that the pressure to remove Grant was coming from Washington DC, not from Halleck. Grant, sensing the political danger, sent his friend and patron, Elihu B. Washburne, to the White House. Washburne, a Republican congressman from Illinois and avid supporter of Lincoln, sought answers about the charges leveled at Grant. So Lincoln asked Secretary of War Edwin Stanton to look into the matter. Stanton demanded from Halleck and McClellan direct proof of allegations brought against Grant. Since there were none Grant maintained his command.

Conversely, Rosecrans's political skills were poor. Castel writes that the general had an icy and sarcastic pen and "possessed a talent to offend, marking him for obscurity in the wake of battlefield setbacks" (p. 149). After Rosecrans maneuvered Confederate General Braxton Bragg's army from middle Tennessee, Stanton suggested that Rosecrans now had a chance to pursue Bragg and defeat his army in battle. Rosecrans responded, "Just received your cheering dispatch announcing the fall of Vicksburg and confirming the defeat of Lee [at Gettysburg]. You do not appear to observe the fact that this noble army has driven the rebels from middle Tennessee.... I beg in behalf of this army that the War Department may not overlook so great an event because it is not written in letters of blood" (p. 212). These responses isolated Rosecrans so when he finally suffered a defeat at Chickamauga there was no one to advocate for him. When Lincoln read his reports after Chickamauga and Rosecrans's plans for breaking the Confederate siege at Chattanooga (Bragg chased Rosecrans back to Chattanooga), the president remarked that Rosecrans acted "confused and stunned like a duck hit on the head" (p. 233). The general had no political capital to change the president's view of him.

The book's shortfall, however, is that it spends too much time on campaigns and much less time on the political machinations of the generals. For example, when Congressman Washburne went to the White House on Grant's behalf after the Henry and Donelson campaigns, we are not told how Washburne learned of the situation. Was there correspondence between Grant and Washburne? When did Grant contact the congressman? What was said? There are other omissions. As Congress, led by Washburne and other Republicans, proposed a bill to promote Grant to lieutenant general, Lincoln at first failed to support it. The president feared Grant as a political rival in 1864. Grant shrewdly wrote letters to confidants of Lincoln assuring them he had

no political ambition. Once Lincoln learned this about Grant, the president supported Grant's promotion. He became a lieutenant general on March 9, 1864, the only other man to hold the rank besides George Washington (Winfield Scott was brevetted a lieutenant general thus temporarily holding the rank). Two other omissions come to mind. Generals Henry Slocum and Darius Couch were the ringleaders behind an effort to oust General Joseph Hooker from command of the Army of the Potomac after Chancesorsville, and in the months after Gettysburg, generals Daniel Sickles, Daniel Butterfield, Abner Doubleday, and David Birney attempted to impugn General George M. Meade's reputation for his failure to destroy Lee's army.

The book does move beyond the battlefield, however, and reveals the intrigue and politics that often determined who would command the major armies during the major campaigns of the war. Castel's book has introduced us to some of the political forces that influenced the outcome of the Civil War. Hopefully, the book will succeed in influencing the manner in which scholars think about the components of successful generalship.

#### Note

[1]. Karl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 119-121.

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