

**A. Wilson Greene.** *A Campaign of Giants: The Battle for Petersburg: Volume 1: From the Crossing of the James to the Crater.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018. 728 pp. \$40.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4696-3857-7.

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While volumes have been written about the military history of the American Civil War in Virginia, the last year of the war has received relatively little scholarly scrutiny. In particular, the nine months between June 1864 and April 1865, during which Lieutenant General Ulysses S. Grant's Union Armies of the Potomac and the James besieged General Robert E. Lee's Confederate Army of Northern Virginia at Petersburg, have received only passing treatment from most writers. In *A Campaign of Giants*, A. Wilson Greene thoroughly fills this historiographical gap. An introductory essay by Gary Gallagher firmly places the book within the historiography. This book, the first in a three-volume study, provides an in-depth analysis of the opening two months of the Petersburg operations and demonstrates that the Siege of Petersburg was a highly costly military operation that had crucial ramifications for the outcome of the Civil War.

*A Campaign of Giants* explores the beginning of the Petersburg operations by briefly examining the town of Petersburg during its antebellum years and quickly proceeds into a detailed description of Captain Charles Dimmock's attempt to fortify it to resist Union Major General George McClellan's forces in 1862. Greene's work proceeds chronologically through early 1864, summarizing

Major General Benjamin Butler's halting and unsuccessful attempts to threaten Petersburg and Richmond in May of that year. Since the Confederates had effectively neutralized Butler's Army of the James, most Southern soldiers in the area were sent to reinforce Lee's Army of Northern Virginia, then locked in its incredibly bloody struggle with Grant's forces in the Overland Campaign. By early June 1864, Federal forces were only a few miles from Richmond, and Grant decided to cross the wide and treacherous James River to capture Petersburg, thus threatening Richmond's vital railroad connections with the rest of the Confederacy.

In his narrative, Greene clarifies many of the controversies surrounding this early stage of the Petersburg operations and provides the most detailed account yet published of the Union forces' initial assaults on the Confederate defenses. In particular, he defends Lee from charges that he was "fooled" by Grant's crossing of the James, and thus almost neglected to reinforce Petersburg until it was too late. Using the surviving Confederate correspondence, Greene demonstrates that General Pierre G. T. Beauregard, the excitable Confederate commander at Petersburg, exacerbated his desperate situation by failing to keep Lee adequately informed of the location and strength of Union forces, and further complicated matters by

constantly proposing grandiose and hopelessly impractical schemes for the Confederates to take the offensive. At the same time, Greene does not exonerate Grant's subordinates, namely XVIII Corps commander Major General William Smith, and II Corps commander Major General Winfield Hancock, for failing to press their overwhelming numerical advantage during their initial attacks.

Greene's analysis of this and subsequent actions at Petersburg is thorough and well substantiated. Instead of relying on often self-serving and inaccurate postwar accounts, he centers his evaluations on battlefield reports and surviving written orders. He carefully assesses the plans of both Grant and Lee, explaining how their strategies evolved as it became clear that the Siege of Petersburg would be protracted. His account emphasizes that, despite apparently remaining hopelessly deadlocked around Petersburg, the Union and Confederate armies were continually shifting their units back and forth between the Richmond and Petersburg fronts as Grant sought a decisive breakthrough and Lee moved his smaller units to blunt the Federal thrusts.

In his narrative, Greene provides fascinating insights into the command styles and shortcomings of both commanders, especially Grant. As Greene argues, Lee was slow to act at times and relied too much on personal observation instead of delegating responsibility to his subordinates. While this has been a common criticism of Lee, Greene also faults Grant's more indirect leadership style. In contrast to the current scholarly trend of depicting Grant as sometimes a literal military genius, Greene finds multiple errors and flaws in his leadership. If Lee was reluctant to delegate authority, Grant was often entirely too trusting of his subordinates. Repeatedly, Grant entrusted vital military operations on the Petersburg front to the Army of the Potomac's commander, Major General George G. Meade. While Meade was the victor of Gettysburg, he had repeatedly displayed excessive cautiousness and a willing-

ness to engage in petty bickering with most of his ranking subordinates. Grant repeatedly displayed a shocking indifference to events on the Petersburg front.

Greene does not limit his insightful analysis to the commanders of the opposing armies. By using voluminous primary and secondary accounts, he provides succinct yet accurate and compelling portraits of subordinate officers and common soldiers of both armies. He dedicates an entire chapter to the civilians of Petersburg, demonstrating how they faced even greater hardships than most Confederates, yet remained defiant and determined to support the Army of Northern Virginia. In these accounts, Greene vividly depicts the horrors of the war for military personnel and civilians alike, and emphasizes that despite their apparently superhuman endurance, soldiers and citizens alike suffered terribly.

Greene's book provides insightful coverage of racism within the Union and the Confederate armies. In his account, the United States Colored Troops (USCT) emerge as untested soldiers who suffered from their lack of experience, not as heroic crusaders who were so determined to free their people that they always fought flawlessly on the battlefield. As Greene admits, USCT troops often performed poorly in the early actions at Petersburg, largely because they had never been permitted to engage in combat before. At the same time, Greene emphasizes that Confederate soldiers tended to fight more tenaciously than usual whenever they engaged black soldiers. He describes the multiple Confederate massacres of black prisoners, especially at the July 30 Battle of the Crater, in gruesome detail. At the same time, he reveals that many Union soldiers harbored racial attitudes little different from those of their enemies; at the Battle of the Crater many even shot their own black comrades in the back hoping to receive better treatment from the Confederates who were overrunning their positions.

*A Campaign of Giants* has a few flaws. Although this book is extremely well sourced and highly detailed, it is still enormously ambitious in scope. In particular, Greene claims that the Siege of Petersburg "all but sealed the fate of the Confederacy" (p. xiii). To claim that any single military operation was so decisive to the outcome of the Civil War is questionable at best. While this book is only the first of three volumes, it has set such a high burden of proof for itself that the succeeding volumes may never fulfill it.

*A Campaign of Giants'* most disappointing shortcoming, however, is its coverage of the Battle of the Crater. Greene spends over a hundred pages covering the planning and digging of the mine that was to be exploded under the Confederate defenses and covers the explosion and the subsequent failed Union offensive in horrific detail. His account of the battle itself is appropriately grotesque, and he clarifies some of the controversies surrounding the Confederate counterattacks there while acknowledging that some will likely never be settled. After providing such a masterful treatment of the action itself, however, Greene does not provide any summary of the battle from a strategic perspective. For the other Union offensives at Petersburg, he provides detailed analysis of their objectives, evaluating how realistic they were and allotting blame for their failures. Greene does not examine the Crater in similar detail, instead merely providing a summary of the casualties without assessing whether the plan could have succeeded. Likewise, he does not examine the politically charged question of which Union officers were most responsible for the attack's failure.

Overall, though, *A Campaign of Giants* is an incredibly detailed, masterfully written work that should serve as the definitive account of the first two months of the Siege of Petersburg.

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