The Union defeat at Chickamauga was perilous, so much so that Charles A. Dana's report to Secretary of War Edwin Stanton expressed Chickamauga's memory as comparable to that of Bull Run. Following the disaster, General William Rosecrans's Army of the Cumberland lingered back in Chattanooga, low in morale and supply, forcing General Ulysses S. Grant to their aid. David A. Powell unpacks this Union perspective in *The Impulse of Victory: Ulysses S. Grant at Chattanooga*, highlighting Grant's role in the western theater. What unfolds is an insightful study on Grant, his personality, generalship, command, and strategy in the context of the Chattanooga campaign. Powell thematically lays out the historical debates in the historiography in a chronological manner. Despite only examining the Union experience, when maneuvering through these conflicting accounts, Powell relies extensively on memoirs and diaries as his sources, elucidating the nuanced reports that precede his own interpretations.

Beginning with a discussion of the immediate removal of Rosecrans's command of the Army of the Cumberland and replacing him with General George H. Thomas, Powell assesses Grant's understanding that despite it being a “controversial step” due to its surrounding politics, Thomas was “a safe bet” for both Grant and Stanton (pp. 17, 18). Powell examines Grant's strategies of the next several months—the development and implementation of the Cracker Line, Joseph Hooker's role in the campaign, the fight at Lookout Mountain and Missionary Ridge.

Yet most impressive is Powell's examination of Grant and Thomas's relationship. Historians have extensively explored this relationship in the American Civil War. Powell details the initial interaction as Grant arrived at Thomas's headquarters in Chattanooga on October 23, 1862, highlighting the historiographic debate of Thomas's disrespect of Grant upon his arrival. Meanwhile, Powell reconciles this debate with three distinct historical accounts. Lieutenant Colonel James H. Wilson's perspective suggested “an undercurrent of disrespect, even contempt, directed toward Grant by Thomas and his staff,” though Powell assesses that this argument is ultimately sparse (p. 24). Yet Powell's method effectively demonstrates the varying subjectivity of an individual's memories, engaging readers to both speculate and analyze historical events based on their sources.
Toward the end of the book, Powell asks, “Was Grant essential to the success of Chattanooga, or was he just lucky?” (p. 187). Convinced that Grant’s role was indeed necessary for the Union victory at Chattanooga, Powell delves into one moment at the Battle of Missionary Ridge that set Grant apart from any other general. When William Tecumseh Sherman’s attacks at Missionary Ridge were repeatedly unsuccessful, Grant commanded that Thomas’s men ought to “carry the rifle pits at the base of the Ridge” (p. 139). Though, instead of doing so, Thomas reported that, “inspired by the impulse of victory,” they instead ‘carried the hill simultaneously at six different points’” (p. 140). What happened exactly on Orchard Knob when Grant commanded this order became a historical debate. Despite the conflicting reports on this event, Powell assesses that any disparagement toward the Army of the Cumberland prior to the order should be discredited. The Army of the Cumberland, as Powell puts it, “was far from inactive,” and, “in reality, at least half of Thomas’s force had spent that time marching and countermarching Grant’s direction” (p. 144).

Grant’s order that day led to an outcome no one expected. Grant was, in fact, essential to the success of Chattanooga, as Powell concludes, ultimately because of his ability to think about the overall campaign, to please the Lincoln administration through his elaborate communication—showcased in this Chattanooga campaign. “Military history is replete with generals who lose their larger perspective to focus on an immediate objective: Grant never did,” Powell writes. “Grant was willing to make what by conventional military wisdom was a foolhardy attack, a frontal assault against the Confederate lines at the foot of Missionary Ridge. That gamble paid dividends far in excess of what any of the watching commanders expected: the complete collapse of [General Braxton] Bragg’s center” (pp. 190-91).

Despite its slow buildup, The Impulse of Victory is highly informative, a significant work for readers interested in the Union perspective of the Chattanooga campaign. Military historians comprehend the difficulty of writing about campaigns and battles, yet Powell succeeds in this task with his excellent writing. Accounting for more than what happened at Chattanooga, Powell’s study is insightful for showing why decisions were made and what implications they had overall.
If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
https://networks.h-net.org/h-war


URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=59026

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.