



On to Petersburg: Grant and Lee, June 4–15, 1864 by Gordon C. Rhea.

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Since 1994, lawyer and military historian Gordon Rhea has brought a fresh perspective to bear on Ulysses S. Grant's Overland Campaign in a number of closely focused volumes.¹ *On to Petersburg* is the final installment in that series. In these books, he dispels many persistent myths about the bloody and confusing battles fought from the Rapidan to Appomattox. In the process, he humanizes Grant and Robert E. Lee, discussing their flaws and miscues along with their successes.

Rhea's work has had the salutary effect of counterbalancing the greater scholarly attention paid to earlier battles in the Eastern theater of operations, which were characterized by intervals of inactivity; this slower pace of warfare between the Army of the Potomac and the Army of Northern Virginia allowed historians to write cleaner narratives. Rhea, by contrast, boldly concentrates on the more fluid and confusing later period of the struggle between the two great armies.

On to Petersburg may be the best of Rhea's remarkable series. It begins with the horrific aftermath of the tragic failed assault on Lee's works at Cold Harbor, in a comparatively understudied but critical period of the Overland campaign. The author sheds needed light on the last phase of the campaign and the beginning of the siege of Petersburg. He contends that the Overland Campaign did not end with Cold Harbor but with the initial assaults on the Dimmock Line east of Petersburg (15 June 1864). This period was no quiet interlude but a pivotal moment of transition. This approach allows Rhea to showcase the best and worst of Grant as he tried once more to outmaneuver Lee in a brilliant, well-conceived movement that went for naught in a fiasco of poor staff work and unclear direction.

The time and effort Rhea has put into his series ensures a narrative that flows smoothly from one volume to the next, each building on the arguments of its predecessors. Readers who have followed this story from the crossing of the Rapidan will not be surprised to read that

The campaign from the Wilderness to Cold Harbor had sapped the Army of the Potomac, which was scarcely recognizable as the same force that had marched to battle a month earlier.... Casualties approached 55,000 men, and the terms of enlistment for more than thirty veteran regiments were fast expiring, threatening to rob the Army ... of its most experienced troops when it most needed them. (17)

Grant's relentless onslaught was rapidly destroying the Army of the Potomac, but he knew that it had left the Army of Northern Virginia in an even more precarious state. Lee had previously made good his losses by summoning all available men in the areas he controlled, but that source of manpower had now been exhausted. And, too, Lee's senior leadership was afflicted by sickness, casualties, and a lack of self-confidence. Rhea persuasively maintains that Lee's army

1. Viz., *The Battle of the Wilderness, May 5–6, 1864* (Baton Rouge: LSU Pr, 1994), *The Battles for Spotsylvania Court House and the Road to Yellow Tavern, May 7–12, 1864* (id., 1997), *To the North Anna River: Grant and Lee, May 13–25, 1964* (id., 2000), *Cold Harbor: Grant and Lee, May 26–June 3, 1864* (id., 2002).

was no longer capable of the quick strikes it had executed in the first two years of his tenure as commander.

The author believes that the maneuvers Grant now undertook differed fundamentally from those he had attempted after the other battles of his Overland Campaign. Building on tactics he had developed throughout the campaign, he stole a night march to disengage from Lee, while deploying other armies' troops and his own cavalry to screen the forces he was moving toward the James River to pin the unsuspecting Lee in place before Richmond. His whole plan hinged on his resourceful engineers' near-miraculous construction of a two-thousand-foot pontoon bridge across the James.

Rhea clarifies the thinking behind Grant's sudden change of strategy and its continuity with his earlier decisions. Rather than besieging Petersburg, he intended to bypass it and force Lee to defend Richmond, where he could be destroyed. The author also explains Lee's passivity during these critical days. Bereft of solid intelligence as to Grant's intentions and forced to cover Richmond with a limited force from multiple avenues of advance, Lee knew a false move in any direction could lead to the fall of the Confederate capital.

Rhea's perceptive assessments of Generals William ("Baldy") Smith and Winfield Hancock and the opening assault on Petersburg are more evenhanded and nuanced than in previous accounts. In contrast to the author's earlier works, he follows the Union armies more closely than their Confederate counterparts, in part because of a disparity in available source materials (see preface). The number of future primary sources was shrinking throughout the campaign, as diarists and other writers were killed or injured. Moreover, the Confederates were mostly static in Rhea's target period; hence the greater prominence of the Federals. This imbalance is astutely offset with an excellent epilogue:

If the campaign is viewed in terms of which general came closest to realizing his overall strategic goal, Grant comes out ahead. The rebel commander's grand objective was to hold the Rapidan line, and in this he failed. His secondary goal was to avoid being pinned in the Richmond and Petersburg defenses, and he failed in that objective as well. Grant's goal was to negate Lee's army as an effective fighting force, and in that he largely succeeded. At the campaign's outset the Army of Northern Virginia held much the same line that it had defended for the previous two years. Antietam, Chancellorsville, Gettysburg, and all the other battles of 1862 and 1863 had taken a serious toll on the rebel force, but it remained a formidable military machine. An army of 65,000 Confederates waited along the Rapidan River, confident as ever of victory. In little over a month, Grant broke Lee's offensive capacity and locked the Army of Northern Virginia in the fortifications protecting Richmond and Petersburg, materially changing the battlefield of Virginia in the Union's favor. (334)

The drama of *On to Petersburg* lies not in its battle narratives, but in the race toward Petersburg. Although we know, of course, who will win, Gordon Rhea's fresh approach to the campaign, together with his lucid and engaging style of writing enlivens this definitive account of the last act of the great Overland Campaign.