



2012-033

Albert Castel and Brooks D. Simpson, *Victors in Blue: How Union Generals Fought the Confederates, Battled Each Other, and Won the Civil War*. Lawrence: Univ. Press of Kansas, 2011. Pp. xii, 362. ISBN 978-0-7006-1793-7.

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Nathan Bedford Forrest is often, but incorrectly, credited with declaring that victory in battle is a matter of “getting there firstest with the mostest,” suggesting that numbers and speed are the guarantees of success. In *Victors in Blue*, Civil War historian Albert Castel, with the assistance of Brooks Simpson (Arizona State Univ.),¹ begs to differ. Castel points out that numbers and mobility were almost universally the advantage of the Union Army, yet it often failed to defeat significantly smaller Confederate armies. The reason for ultimate Union victory, the authors write, was the quality of command: the North produced a better leadership corps, while the Confederacy produced only one great leader—Robert E. Lee. The overall superior leadership of the Union, however, emerged only through the overcoming of great difficulties, a determined enemy, and, Castel emphasizes, the rivalries and egos of the generals themselves.

Castel evaluates Union commanders by posing a series of questions meant to measure combat performance in various battles over the duration of the war, not just a specific battle. First, if victorious, did the commanding general directly contribute to the victory? This question excludes incidental triumphs by subordinates in the absence of a commander who later took the credit. Ulysses Grant, for example, contributed directly to the early victories at Forts Henry and Donelson by seizing the initiative against a defensively-minded Albert Johnston, who was in a position to counter his move had he acted as decisively as Grant.

Second, why did the Union general win? Through his own actions or the mistakes of his Confederate adversary? In this regard, the authors cast new light on George Meade’s actions at Gettysburg. Instead of the traditional interpretation that Meade survived Lee’s best efforts by sitting back defensively, they credit him for achieving what he could when he could. Furthermore, opposing Abraham Lincoln’s view that Meade lost a golden opportunity to destroy Lee, Castel commends him for not rashly counterattacking after Pickett’s Charge.

Third, what did the victorious Union general accomplish in terms of broader objectives? That is, how did the battle lead to a successful conclusion of the war rather than simply prevent the destruction of a Union army? William Rosecrans, for example, captured Chattanooga and most of eastern Tennessee in 1863, enhancing his reputation in comparison to Grant’s futility around Vicksburg at the time, but failed to inflict significant damage on Braxton Bragg’s army, which then went on to defeat Union forces at Chickamauga.

Next, did the general achieve maximum success or leave some possibilities unfulfilled? Castel applies this question to gauge the magnitude of a particular victory rather than seeing them all as equal. Grant’s lucky victory at Shiloh certainly rates high by this criterion, as does William Sherman’s capture of Atlanta. Castel interestingly contrasts the criticism of George McClellan for his obsession with taking cities with the praise given Sherman for doing the same thing and allowing John Hood’s army to escape in the process.

Lastly, if a general did not seize all the opportunities available to him, why not? This question enables Castel to discriminate the truly great commander from a merely average or lucky one. It is also central to an understanding of the personality clashes and rivalries he highlights. To achieve maximum victory, Union generals had to rely upon more than the forces under their immediate commands by acting in concert with other generals. Timing, coordination, and clear communication were all necessary to achieve a crushing victory, but time and again, as Castel shows, Union generals failed to capitalize on these critical elements. A

1. “The first thirteen chapters reflect my views on the subject matter therein discussed. For the final five chapters, I have had some assistance from ... Brooks D. Simpson.... When we have disagreed, the views expressed in the book remain mine” (xii).

delay in concentration nearly doomed Grant at Shiloh, and the dispersal of Union forces hampered Rosecrans's efforts at Iuka.

The book's content is well crafted and presented. By his own admission, Castel does not offer much new material; after all, the book aims to determine the cause of an already established outcome—Union victory. But he accomplishes no small feat in presenting the Civil War in a new light. His battle descriptions are those of an experienced military historian and skilled writer: he shows just how good big-picture history can be when shaped by a clear thesis. The brisk and fluid operational accounts avoid bogging down in details and excessive drifts into secondary topics. A masterful blend of fact and interpretation gives the reader a clear understanding of both historic events and the authors' own opinions. On the other hand, the maps are inadequate, especially for multi-day and evolving battles. And the omission of any bibliography is odd in a work certain to find readers wishing to debate the authors' conclusions.

Although *Victors in Blue* has much to recommend it, its content is, in one regard at least, misleading. The spectacle promised in the subtitle of generals engaged in soap-opera style interpersonal struggles is little in evidence; readers looking for juicy "he said, she said" exchanges will be disappointed. Instead, Castel and Simpson too often second guess the commands by generals on the ground, turning well weighed decisions based upon available knowledge into errors of judgment visible only in 20/20 hindsight and disregarding possible Confederate countermeasures. The authors blithely designate as foolish and unwise the choices made by men with much more at stake than an academic reputation. This is particularly the case with Rosecrans, whose decisions are constantly compared to Grant's. He is ranked last among major Union commanders in the Epilogue—no surprise, given the authors' desire to see a new revisionist biography of Rosecrans.

Castel and Simpson also concentrate exclusively upon West Pointers. While the personalities and professional relationships of Union commanders were, understandably, formed at the Military Academy, we are left to believe that only a formally trained officer could have achieved victory for the Union. One wonders, however, what a rising amateur, like John Logan, might have achieved, given the chance. And, too, the authors do little to explain why it was that Union generals—much like their supposedly inferior Confederate counterparts—could be successful in one battle and inept in another.

Victors in Blue is an entertaining and comprehensive view of Union command decisions and the reasons behind them but does not definitively explain why the Union won.