



A Campaign of Giants: The Battle for Petersburg, vol. 1: From the Crossing of the James to the Crater by A. Wilson Greene.

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Historians have analyzed in great (some would say excessive) detail most campaigns of the US Civil War (hereafter, “War”). The Petersburg Campaign, however, remains understudied. Works on various aspects of the operation are available, but not many on the entire campaign. In *A Campaign of Giants*, historian A. Wilson Greene¹ aims to fill that void in the scholarly literature.² He is well aware of the challenge that poses.

Four armies fought around Petersburg for more than nine months. The campaign spanned both sides of the James and Appomattox Rivers and included cavalry raids that strayed miles from the Cockade City. Conventional wisdom tallies some 70,000 casualties in the battles for Petersburg, not to mention the impact—fatal and otherwise—on the 18,000 residents of the Confederacy’s seventh largest metropolis. Military engineering reached its Civil War zenith around Petersburg, soldiers on both sides endured unprecedented living conditions, and the United States conducted an election campaign that levied an enormous impact on the conduct of military operations. (xiii)

Greene works to present “enough tactical detail to satisfy demanding consumers of military history” (xiv) without losing sight of the big picture. Readers will not be disappointed by his granular and vivid discussions of battles and troop movements. Unsurprisingly, he focuses on generals like Robert E. Lee, P.G.T. Beauregard, William Mahone, Ulysses S. Grant, George G. Meade, and Benjamin F. Butler, with attention to cooperation and conflict among them and the logic of events as seen from the perspective of each side’s headquarters. But he also injects the voices of common soldiers through his meticulous use of manuscript collections, memoirs, regimental histories, the *Official Records*, other government documents, and newspaper articles wherever possible. The book is replete with apt quotations, including some real gems.

The author skillfully weaves together analyses of military aspects of the campaign with accounts of civilian lives in the besieged city. Like all good military historians, he draws in social, economic, and political history to demonstrate that nothing occurred in a vacuum. Actions on the battlefield influenced common people’s daily lives, just as political and economic factors affected military affairs.

Greene concentrates on three distinct US Offensives. The first (15–18 June) saw Union forces capturing some of the original Confederate defensive line, but, heartbreakingly, not the city itself: Sergeant Zerah C. Monks of the 62nd Pennsylvania, commented that “the boys don’t seem to think so much of Gen. Grant now as they did some time ago. They think he has crowded us on their works too hard. It is nothing but charge, charge, and the ones that escape today fall tomor-

1. His previous work includes *Breaking the Backbone of the Rebellion: The Final Battles of the Petersburg Campaign* (Mason City, IA: Savas Publ, 2000) and *Civil War Petersburg: Confederate City in the Crucible of War* (Charlottesville: U Virginia Pr, 2006).

2. *Campaign of Giants* is the first of a three-volume set on Petersburg.

row” (211). The Second Offensive (22–24 June) “failed miserably” (253). Washington A. Roebling remarked “I can’t but wonder [that] there should be men who are such fools ... and that is the trouble we are laboring under now—the fools have all been killed and the rest think it is about played out to stand up and get shot” (254).

The Third Offensive (26–30 July) will be most familiar to readers. It featured the digging of a mine under Confederate lines by Lt Col. Henry Pleasants and the men of the 48th Pennsylvania and the resulting Battle of the Crater. Greene captures in stark detail one of the cruelest episodes of the War. Besides the three offensives, he examines cavalry campaigns, smaller skirmishes, and the hardships of daily life in the trenches.

Most students of the War know about the vicious internal politics of the Army of the Potomac, the backbiting, jealousy, suspicion, gossip, and ugly rumors. The author notes repeated instances of quarrels and disagreements among commanders. Meade, for example, “possessed a personality that seemed to alienate everyone, including those subordinates most critical to his army’s success” (11). He often wrangled with General Butler, commander of the Army of the James, who owed his position to his prominence as a War Democrat. Butler had a mixed record as a commander and inspired revulsion in his enemies (and some friends). Greene includes one of the most vivid Confederate denunciations of the man:

[in] Benjamin F. Butler’s face, scarce an element is wanting of absolute repulsiveness. Rapacity finds appropriate expression in his vulture nose—sensuality in his heavy pendant jaws—despotism in his lowering eyebrow; and to those facial charms is added an optical derangement which permits him to scrutinize you with his left eye—the one he seems to place the most dependence on—while the right, revolving in a different plane ... wanders away in another field of vision. (6)

Greene acquits Butler of the old charge of being “bottled up” at Bermuda Hundred. Nevertheless, he time and again fell short as a commander, though he kept his post due to a shrewd sense of self-preservation. Butler was not the only poorly performing officer and the author judiciously assigns criticism and praise in assessing each side’s leaders.

An intriguing aspect of the book is Greene’s discussion of U.S. Grant, whose leadership he finds disappointing. Although Grant stole a march on Lee, he “must, as during the previous day, share the responsibility for squandering the chance to isolate Petersburg on June 16” (139). To be fair, Greene admits that Grant may have shown “scant interest in overseeing the culmination of his brilliant maneuver from Cold Harbor [because he] saw his primary role as ensuring that army commanders Meade and Butler had the means to carry out his instructions” (217). Nevertheless, during the Second Offensive, “Grant’s delusional conception of extending two army corps across the Petersburg and South Side Railroads, anchored on the Appomattox River upstream from Petersburg, lacked even superficial plausibility” (254). Hence, the first six weeks of the campaign comprised “a series of tactical failures and bloody defeats” (515). Union soldiers fought bravely, but their commanders too often squandered advantages. On the other hand, US engineers worked miracles, for instance, in building a pontoon bridge nearly two thousand feet long and ten feet wide in eight hours! An observer marveled at “the greatest bridge which the world has seen since the days of Xerxes” (65).

Rebel forces performed somewhat better. Still, though their interior lines gave them an edge, Grant outfoxed Lee at the beginning of the campaign and came close to seizing Petersburg. Some rebel generals were as incompetent as the worst of their Union counterparts. Greene indicts the rebels for well publicized atrocities, among others, the massacre of African American soldiers at the Crater. Beauregard denied a cease-fire to allow US forces to collect their dead and wounded

after the attacks of 18 June 1864. Greene calls this “remarkably callous [and] after a century and a half no credible justification emerges for such an inhumane decision” (220).

A Campaign of Giants is a welcome, deeply researched account of the first six tumultuous weeks of the Petersburg Campaign. Its author evokes both the dramatic and the mundane aspects of campaigning in the War’s Eastern Theater by tapping the accounts of common soldiers, high-ranking officers, politicians, white civilians, and slaves. Anyone interested in the Civil War should read this book with care and look forward eagerly to volumes 2 and 3.