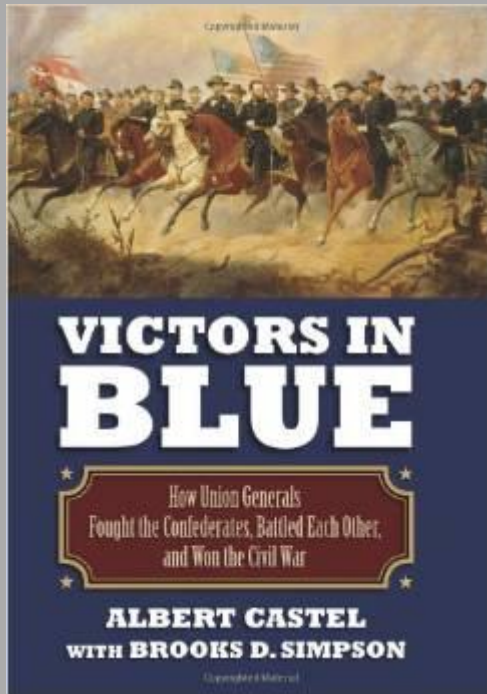


Book Review

Victors in Blue: How Union Generals Fought the Confederates, Battled Each Other, and Won the War

by Albert Castel with Brooks D. Simpson

University Press of Kansas (2011)



There are of course numerous ways of looking at, appreciating, and critiquing the Civil War. And there are also several ways to analyze victories and losses during and after the war; some of these measures can be which side had the more manpower, the greater material resources, better incentives, or even superior strategy and tactics. But probably nothing is more compelling and significant to serious Civil War students than are the respective commanders at various levels.

While hundreds of biographies, autobiographies, and memoirs about the commanders of both sides have been published over the past 150 or so years, there is only a small minority of books that attempt examine the relationships among the commanders and how those relationship influenced the outcomes of battles and campaigns. In this vein Castel and Simpson have offered a valuable contribution to Civil War literature, especially as it relates to how commanders helped (or hindered) to eventually win the war for the Federal government.

The authors are experienced and respected historians, Albert Castel has written several widely acclaimed books, including another of my favorites, *Decision in the West: The Atlanta Campaign of 1864*, University Press of Kansas (1992). Brooks Simpson, a professor at Arizona State University, has written several books, including a couple about Ulysses S. Grant

The eighteen chapters in *Victors in Blue* cover battles and campaigns from the beginning to the end, starting with the campaign in western Virginia to of course Lee's surrender at Appomattox. Most of the chapters analyze victorious events but some chapters are written about failures, for instance the difficult relationship between Halleck and Grant prior to and after Shiloh. Indeed the majority of chapters features Grant and his decisions and relationships with a variety of other commanders, some who were his subordinates and others who had equal standing with him.

Other than their treatment of Grant, the authors give second billing to Rosecrans who began his Civil War career as McClellan's subordinate in the western Virginia campaign. Much of Rosecrans' reputation has been based upon his actions during and in the immediate aftermath of Chickamauga as well as the manner Rosey was treated in Grant's memoirs. These two very capable Union generals endured a very difficult relationship that began to go sour in the battle for luka and continued intermittently throughout the remainder of the war. For various reasons, not the least of which Grant usually enjoyed senior rank over Rosecrans, Grant has usually managed to have the upper hand in the public's eye but Castel and Simpson provide insightful defenses of Rosecrans and the way he has been treated by the bulk of historians, especially those who have relied upon Grant's versions in his memoirs.

Incidentally the relationship between Grant and Rosecrans has also been examined earlier by Peter Cozzens in *The Darkest Days of the War: The Battle of luka & Corinth* The University of North Carolina Press (1997) and later by Frank P. Varney in *General Grant and the Rewriting of History: How the Destruction of General William S. Rosecrans Influenced Our Understanding of the Civil War* Savas Beatie (2013). Both these books are also at great variance with Grant's version in his *Memoirs*.

Other chapters describe more constructive and harmonious relationships, including the partnership between Grant and Sherman, later to include Sheridan.

At the book's epilogue the authors provide their assessments of several generals. Not only are these judgments are measured and dispassionate but interestingly also provide evaluations of other books about the respective generals. But consistent with the theme of their book they rate the degree to which the leading commanders each contributed to the Union victory.

Victors in Blue, thoroughly researched and well written, is a vital resource for the serious Civil War reader who wants to look beyond backgrounds, personality quirks and other imperfections. If our purpose in studying the Civil War is to better understand how and why one side prevailed, this book is an essential part of any complete Civil War library.