



To the Gates of Richmond: The Peninsula Campaign

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This is a history of the largest and bloodiest campaign of the American Civil War - one in which a quarter of a million men fought, and one in four died.

To the Gates of Richmond: The Peninsula Campaign Details

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Sean Chick says

I almost gave this two stars, but relented. I heard this was Sears' worst book and my fears were correct. It lacks the narrative punch of his other books and his deft analysis of command relationships is absent. The book is the pinnacle of McClellan bashing, and Sears (who is known to pick his favorites) spares nothing to blast McClellan as an incompetent and arrogant. McClellan here is an idiot who was also a coward of sorts. McClellan's solid grasp of strategy and logistics is barely mentioned. Lincoln and Stanton, who did much to torpedo the campaign, are generally given a pass.

If McDowell had come down to Richmond the city would have fallen. As it is Lincoln took the bait in the Valley and the Rebels won. McClellan was a deeply flawed general. I just don't see him as a strutting fool. Sears, at least at this stage, was unable to thread the needle and see where McClellan, Lincoln, and Stanton were right and wrong. He does elude to Lincoln making some errors, but as ever Abraham Christ avoids criticism.

My other knock is a lack of information on the Confederates (at least until the Seven Days) and the politics of the campaign. The whole thing could have been deeper. Instead, one gets an adequate but highly biased account. The book came at the height of McClellan bashing, buttressed by Ken Burns' cruel treatment of the general. Fortunately, the debate is still raging and McClellan is being reassessed.

Colleen Mertens says

This book covers a time in the Civil War when McClellan attempted to capture Richmond via the Hampton Roads area. I was amazed by how many times misinformation directed the campaign and how one man's fear caused the war to drag on longer than maybe was needed. You think a lot of "what ifs" as you read this book. At times, it gives many details that seem repetitive.

Brian says

Stephen Sears delivers an excellent account of the Peninsula Campaign waged by the Army of the Potomac aimed at capturing Richmond in 1862. The plan to use the navy to land and march to Richmond via Williamsburg was one of the most daring operations of the war and provided for two largely untested armies to engage in major combat. It was the highest number of soldiers committed on each sides and while not the bloodiest it comes close in terms of numbers lost. It sealed McClellan's fate and gave rise to Lee as he retooled the Army of Northern Virginia. This story also includes the famed clash between the Merrimack and Monitor that changed how naval warfare would be perceived until World War II. Sears writes very clear and easy to understand military campaigns that take into account domestic politics or north and south, naval conditions and the rise of the failed intelligence network under Pinkerton. For those who want a concise account of the march to Richmond there is no better than this one and I highly recommend it.

Jeffrey says

Having had a firm memory of the overview Shelby Foote gave of this same campaign, it was interesting to see the differences in their interpretations of the event. For the most part, this book is harsher on the Confederate command and control than Foote was. I would say that Sears is a little bit nicer to Jackson than Foote, but just because Sears tries to give an explanation for Jackson's behavior. It was an enjoyable (well, as enjoyable as the destructions of thousands of lives can be), fast read. I feel I'll need to find yet another book on this topic to get a third watch and not know what time it is at all.

Shelly♥ says

Somehow in all the literature on the Civil War, the 7 Days and Peninsula Campaign gets buried in all the Gettysburg hype. Sears writes a book that needs to be written and read by every Civil War buff. The early days of the war shape and form the ANV and the AoP. Many early war Generals move on or move out, while others prepare for larger roles they will assume. I have always found Sears to have an extreme anti-McClellan bias, and have felt that he was over the top in his analysis of Mac in other book. Gettysburg particularly comes to mind as Sears has to use Mac's failures as a prelude to Gettysburg. But, he does an admirable job of laying out the failures of the Young Napoleon without the antagonizing tone I felt he used in other offerings. While the details of the battle are not deep enough for me, it certainly is a wonderful overview for those just getting started on studying these battles of the early war.

'Aussie Rick' says

This was the very first book I read on the American Civil War. I read this book in 1994 and since then I haven't stopped buying Civil War books. I have read Sears other 2 books, 'Antietam: Landscape Turned Red' and 'Chancellorsville' and enjoyed them both very much. This book covers the Federals Peninsula Campaign of 1862 and the text flows along smoothly, so much so that I found it hard to put down. The author describes the battles and characters so well that you can see them in front of you. I enjoyed this book so much that I have no hesitation in recommending it to anyone who wants to have a good read about the Civil War.

Steven Condon says

[abandonment of seven of his eleven divisions to fight without a commander (hide spoiler)]

Michael says

Man, this is dry stuff. It's like reading a box score from an old-time baseball game — lots of names and lots of stats, but you really have to work hard to get the highlights of the contest. I started this book three years ago in anticipation of a trip to the Richmond peninsula. I'm glad I got some of the background I did, before

the trip. But after the trip, the unfinished book languished on my night stand for months and months. Finally, I decided to muscle my way to the end.

What saddens me most in reading books about the Civil War is how senseless it was. Historians speak of Gettysburg as the high water mark of the Confederacy, but I think the Battle of Glendale was as good as it was going to get for the Rebs. Lee had a real shot at decimating the Army of the Potomac right there and then. There were so many mistakes and miscommunications that the battle ended as a tactical victory. Instead, the war dragged on for three more year with oceans of blood spilled for a lost cause.

I can only recommend this book to the die-hard Civil War historians out there. If you want a better narrative telling, I highly recommend Shelby Foote.

Greg says

Never had connected these series of battles together as "Seven Days Battles" before reading this account. One battle outcome and results, and the positioning of different parts of the armies, definitely influenced other subsequent battles. Liked the perspective of the change of leadership from Joe Johnston to Lee that I don't think I understood before. It wasn't really a "done deal" that Lee would command in the field until he was needed, that I wasn't aware of previously. Hadn't known about Glendale and Gaines Mills battles before this book, and latter is actually a very significant engagement in that it started the beginning of McClellands retreat back down James peninsula, and thus start of the end of his career at head of Army of Potomac.

Jim Netzband says

An excellent account of McClellan's campaign against the Confederate capital of Richmond, from the initial siege of Yorktown to his advance within twenty miles of the city. The action of the Seven Days battles flow smoothly, and maps are provided which clearly show troop dispositions and movements at critical times. I recommend this to anyone looking for a concise (yet sufficiently detailed) account of this particular event. Side note: Although not the goal, this book substantiated two points for me regarding the personalities of two major participants. McClellan is shown to be a timid, delusional, absentee leader who manages to immediately lose momentum and turn an offensive campaign into a largely defensive one, culminating in a practically ineffective campaign. On the other side, Stonewall Jackson's performance lends credence to the assertion that he performed better as the leader of an independent force rather than part of a larger action in concert with others.

Chris says

A thorough telling of George McClellan's failed attempt to capture the city of Richmond in 1862 in order to quickly put an end to the Southern rebellion. Steven Sears did an excellent job of introducing the major players on both sides of the conflict and of laying out each of their motivations and strategies during the 5 month long campaign. After reading this book, I have a much better understanding of George McClellan's character and why the Peninsula Campaign ultimately failed.

I recommend this book to anyone who has a fairly good understanding of the events of the Civil War. If you

want a broader overview of the Civil War, this book is probably too detailed. It spends quite a bit of time on troop movements at each of the battles. I found this aspect of the book somewhat difficult to follow, and also a bit dry, as I am not familiar with many of the names of the commanders. I ended up referring to maps frequently while I was listening to the audiobook to help me visualize the battle. It also helped me immensely to visit the Seven Days battlefield sites before I listened to the book. If you live in the Richmond area, I highly recommend driving the Battlefield Tour and visiting some of the battlefield sites before you read the book.

Matt says

It really isn't fair that I read this book – and am now rating it – after having read Allen Guelzo's *Gettysburg: The Last Invasion*. Stephen Sears' *To the Gates of Richmond*, about George McClellan's failed Peninsula Campaign of 1862, is not a bad book. To the contrary, it is sturdy and dependable, just like the Honda Civic you drove back in high school. But when compared with Guelzo's bracing new history (and yes, I know, the books were written at different times, about different battles), it's hopelessly old fashioned.

So no, it's not fair at all. But life is not fair. If it were, I would be living in a lighthouse and would spend my days on the beach being handfed éclairs by tuxedo-clad monkeys while reading Civil War books. My wife, meanwhile, would be painting this scene in watercolors.

But enough about me and my totally normal conception of fairness.

The Peninsula Campaign was General George McClellan's ill-fated and tragicomic attempt to seize the Confederate capital of Richmond, Virginia. It was the largest campaign of the war, and comprised some of the bloodiest fighting. (Nearly a quarter of the men involved were killed, wounded or missing).

In his ponderous, plodding style, McClellan was able to get his Army of the Potomac to within sight of the church spires of Richmond. (No mean feat, since McClellan – ignoring basic demographic information – was absolutely convinced that the Confederates had hundreds of thousands of men at their disposal). At the battle of Seven Pines, Confederate General Joseph Johnson was wounded, and in a stroke of fortune, Robert E. Lee took command. During the subsequent Seven Days battle, Lee hammered McClellan's men (and more importantly, McClellan's fragile psyche), forcing the Army of the Potomac to retreat.

This is a fascinating and often overlooked story of the Civil War. I'll admit, I often gloss over the Peninsula Campaign in favor of more famous engagements, such as Shiloh, Antietam, or Gettysburg. Thus, I picked up this book with some anticipation. I'd already read three of Sears' other Civil War titles – *Landscape Turned Red*, *Chancellorsville*, and *Gettysburg* – so I was looking forward to tweaks to the conventional wisdom, along with precise insights into the major players.

To the Gates of Richmond falls short of those other works, and was to me a mild disappointment. That is not to say it's a bad book. Indeed, I don't think I could actually define a complaint that anyone else would notice. But I know what excites me, and this isn't it.

Sears' account of the Peninsula Campaign is sturdily constructed, chronologically straightforward, and utterly unadorned. It tells a methodical tale: a plan is created; a plan is put in motion; some battles take place; the plan goes to hell. Intermixed with the marching and the maps are the usual (and often nondescript) first-person reminiscences of the men involved.

It was all frankly underwhelming.

I'm not asking for a reinvention of the wheel. I do not base my enjoyment of Civil War literature on whether or not the author was able to uncover the Templar plot that I *know* was actually behind everything.

What I wanted, though, was for Sears to be as good as Sears can be.

In *Chancellorsville*, for instance, Sears has a fantastically nuanced take on General Joseph Hooker. Rather than reflexively damning the man for being at the butt-end of Lee's greatest victory, Sears takes the time to discuss the man's positive attributes, his organizational flair, and his strategic concepts. But he's also able to take Hooker to task for his glaring failures, both broad-based and tactical.

There is nothing resembling that in *To the Gates of Richmond*. Most of the major actors in the drama are persons in name only. We do not get to know any of them to any degree. This is especially frustrating since the Peninsula Campaign took place early in the war; accordingly, many of the familiar corps and division commanders were then leading brigades or even regiments.

Surprisingly, Sears devotes precious little time to the ~~vain~~ ~~glorious~~ ~~oaf~~ man at the center of the whirlwind: George Brinton McClellan. To be sure, McClellan is an enigma: supremely talented and confident, yet also debilitated by command decisions. However, Sears wrote a biography on Little Mac, so I expected much more analysis of his psychological makeup.

To the Gates of Richmond satisfies at the most basic level. It is easy to follow. It is well researched. It is plainly written. A newcomer to the Civil War certainly will not get lost in the thickets of company-level minutiae.

It is a good book. Unfortunately, I was looking for a great one.

Josh Liller says

In 1862, George McClellan was finally persuaded to move on Richmond with the Army of the Potomac. Beloved by his troops, his campaign would be largely undone by his fears and overcautious decisions, which bordered on paranoia and cowardice.

Meanwhile, Robert E. Lee would assume command of the Army of Northern Virginia. His grand schemes for the destruction of the Union army would be undone by fatigued and otherwise ineffective lieutenants, poor communication, and worse maps.

It was the largest campaign of the war in terms of combined number of soldiers involved from both sides, won by the Confederates despite suffering nearly twice as many casualties and losing nearly all the battles. From its initial stages till the final withdrawal, Sears covers the campaign with great depth.

This book was published a decade before his stellar book about Gettysburg which I read previous to this one.

Jim Pfluecke says

The start of the book is its weakest part. Rather than give some background on the armies, their organization, etc., as Sears did in his Chancellorsville book, he jumps right into the campaign.

From there, it is excellent. Sears weaves the politics, personalities, operations, and strategy seamlessly into a narrative. The descriptions of the battles are rich in quotes from participants. In fact, a strength of the book is its use of letters and diaries of the participants, especially the privates, NCO's, and regiment officers. He also uses McClellan's writings to shed light on his decision making process.

Highly recommend to anyone interested in the American Civil War.

Michael Kleen says

In *To the Gates of Richmond: The Peninsula Campaign*, Stephen W. Sears charts the Peninsula Campaign of 1862, Union General George McClellan's grand plan to march up the Virginia Peninsula and capture the Confederate capital. More men and weapons of war were assembled for this campaign than for any other operation of the American Civil War. For three months, McClellan crawled toward Richmond. When Robert E. Lee took command of Confederate forces, he drove McClellan back to his ships in seven bloody days. How did this happen? Sears examines the men (from lowly privates to generals) and the politics that changed the course of history.

Major General George B. McClellan was a complex figure. He was an outspoken Democrat who expressly fought only to preserve the Union. He was supremely confident in his own abilities and loved the Army of the Potomac. It loved him back. How then, with over 100,000 men under his command, did he not only fail to capture the Confederate capital, but fail spectacularly?

Sears' narrative is unparalleled. His writing is clear, concise, and informative. He portrays a McClellan broken by Robert E. Lee's aggressiveness—his only thought was to preserve his beloved army from what he believed was a vastly superior rebel force. He gave up strategic ground and countless supplies just to escape. The Union Army's loss of war material in the campaign was "beyond calculation."

To the Gates of Richmond highlights many surprising details about this early chapter of the war. Not only did the Union Army employ hot air balloons and ironclad ships for the first time, but some soldiers purchased iron plates to use as body armor (soon discarded for being too heavy). The Confederates had tricks up their sleeves as well. General Gabriel J. Rains utilized improvised explosive devices (land "torpedoes") to harass the advancing Yankees. The Confederate high command frowned on this tactic, however, and transferred him to apply his particular set of skills against enemy ships in the James River.

Sears makes a compelling case that George McClellan, though young, was a general whose mind was trapped in another era. He sought a decisive battle outside Richmond, one that would force the warring parties to the peace table. There he would negotiate concessions and save the Union, as happened in the past. But this was a new kind of war, and after the Peninsula Campaign there was no going back. What began as a war to preserve the Union became a revolution to remake America.

Stephen Ward Sears (born July 27, 1932), of Norwalk, Connecticut, is a graduate of Lakewood High School

and Oberlin College. He began his writing career in the 1960s as a World War 2 historian but later found a niche writing about the Army of the Potomac in the American Civil War, and particularly its most famous commander, General George B. McClellan. His other books include Gettysburg (2003) and George B. McClellan: The Young Napoleon (1988).
