



# BLUE AND GRAY DISPATCH

## Myths of Cold Harbor

Bert Dunkerly, September 25, 2020  
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Battle of Cold Harbor by Kurz & Allison | Library of Congress

There are certain battles which have a lot of misconceptions attached to them. Perhaps one of the most myth-shrouded battles is the 1864 Cold Harbor engagement near Richmond.

Part of the Overland Campaign, it was at the tail end of Grant's grueling drive across central Virginia. Many readers likely know that one of the biggest myths of Cold Harbor is the estimate of 6,000 (or whatever high number you insert here) killed and wounded in just 30 minutes on June 3. Just not true. Writers like Gordon Rhea have compellingly dealt with that misconception, so I will focus on several others.

First, to many of us Cold Harbor seems like a nameless, senseless battle, lacking maneuver and without key landmarks. Gettysburg has its Wheatfield, Peach Orchard, and High Water Mark. Antietam has the Cornfield and Sunken Road. Shiloh has the Hornet's Nest and Bloody Pond. I could go on. What does Cold Harbor have?

In fact, in the first few days, there was open field fighting and maneuver at Cold Harbor. And there were landmarks on the battlefield named by the soldiers: Bloody Run, the Allison Farm, the Crossroads, Fletcher's Redoubt, and more. This battle simply has not been studied in the same detail as many others, thus the lack of familiarity with these landmarks.



Fletcher's Redoubt | courtesy of the author

Another misconception is that it was a lopsided Union defeat. It was, in the end. But for the first few days it was touch and go, and in fact it was not such a neat, clean, and easy Confederate victory when you dissect it. On May 31, Union cavalry wrestled the vital Cold Harbor crossroads from Confederate troopers. Then on June 1, a Confederate infantry counterattack failed miserably. That evening Union troops arrived and successfully drove their adversaries back. That makes three Confederate failures within two days. No wonder Grant wanted to escalate the battle here.

Once the main battle began, a Confederate counterattack on June 3 led by Floridians failed disastrously, as did smaller attacks against Union troops on June 6 and 7. One Union observer wrote of the June 6 attack against Fletcher's Redoubt that, "beyond making a great noise resulted in very little damage."

So why do we look at Cold Harbor as a Union disaster? These Confederate missteps were overshadowed by the scope and scale of the Union failed assaults. Yet we should not forget that they occurred.

This brings me to another point: To really appreciate Cold Harbor, we must recognize that it was more than June 1 and 3. Much more! The battle lasted from May 31 to June 12—two weeks. Name another engagement that lasted that long, with the armies in constant contact. There aren't many. Perhaps that's why the one- or two- day battles are easier to study; they are easier to grasp.



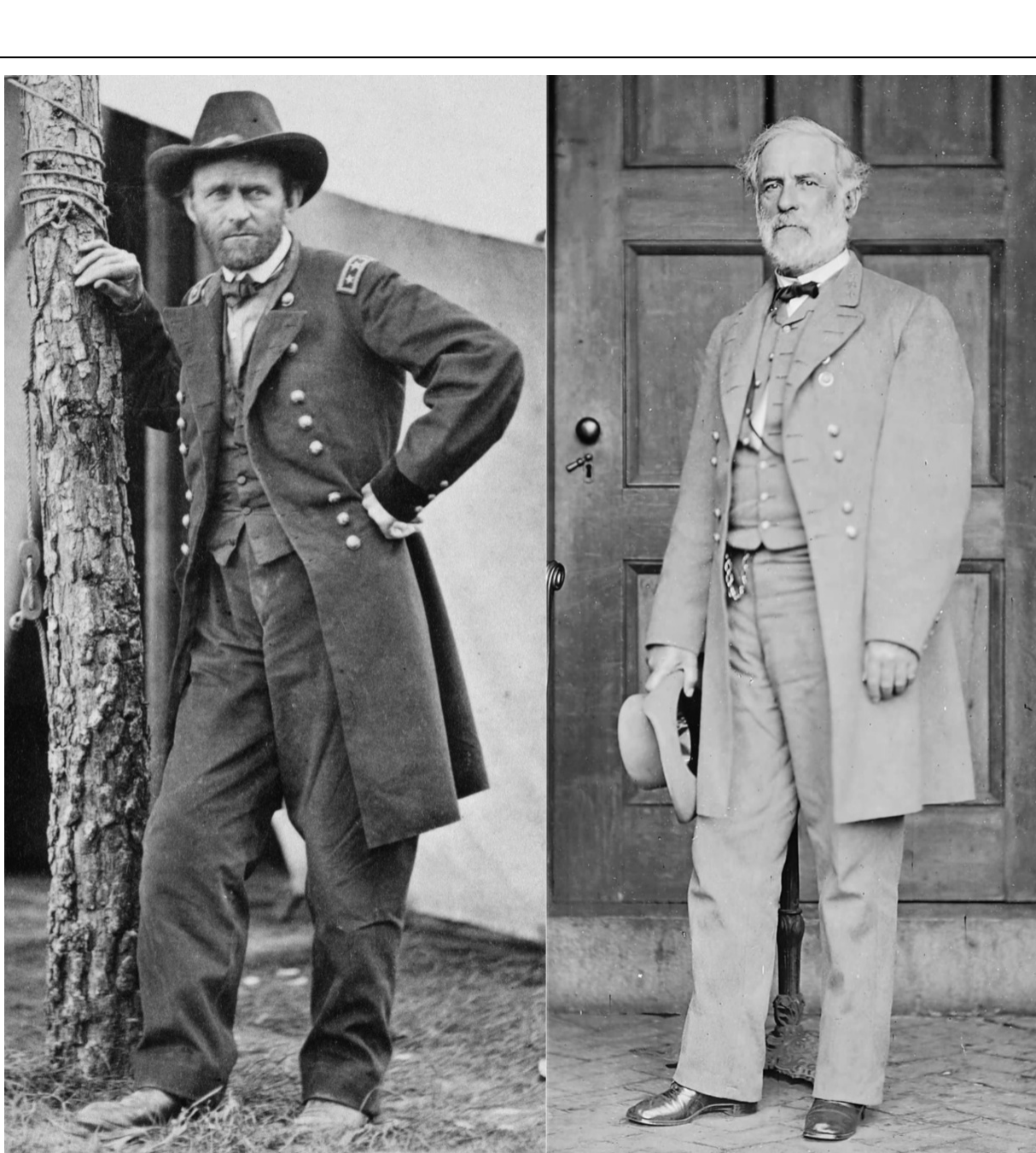
Interpretive marker | courtesy of the author

Those who study the Civil War recognize that Cold Harbor showcased the inefficient system of replacing troops in the Union army. A number of Heavy Artillery regiments joined the Army of the Potomac recently, and fought their first battle here. Converted to infantry and marching and fighting in the field for the first time, they often suffered terribly. Examples include the 300 men lost by the 2nd Connecticut Heavy Artillery and the over 500 lost by the 8th New York Heavy Artillery.

Yet the Confederates were bringing in rookies too, and they suffered just as badly. Both armies needed fresh manpower by late May, and as the Union was stripping its garrisons in Washington and Baltimore, the Confederacy was doing the same thing. New troops joined the Army of Northern Virginia from Florida and South Carolina.

In the days preceding Cold Harbor, South Carolina cavalry suffered terribly at Haw's Shop and Matadequin Creek, giving ground both times. The 20th South Carolina infantry, larger than the rest of its parent brigade, failed in their June 1 attack. Florida troops suffered terribly in their failed counterattack on June 3. Again, the magnitude of the Union losses overshadow these shortcomings.

It's not only the troops we tend to focus on. We often compare generalship in the two armies. Sure, Grant and Meade had to deal with a cautious Burnside and prickly Warren as corps commanders. But let's not forget that Lee's corps leadership was suffering by the summer of 1864. Longstreet, his most experienced and trusted commander, was badly wounded in the Wilderness and out recuperating. In his place was Richard Anderson, who continually came up short. Richard Ewell led the Second Corps and was not aggressive enough at times. General A.P. Hill commanded the Third Corps, also with mixed results. And JEB Stuart was dead. Lee was desperate for good leadership, and wasn't getting it.



Opposing commanders at Cold Harbor: Grant (by Edgar Guy Fawx in 1864) and Lee, (by Mathew Brady in 1865) | National Archives

Finally, I want to point out that Cold Harbor was not simply a trench warfare engagement, with one side charging senselessly and the other blazing away from cover. Both sides tried innovation. Union troops attempted different attacking formations. They brought in mortars to shell inside Confederate works. They responded by digging out holes behind the trail of their cannon to elevate them, turning them into mortars, to return fire behind Union trenches. The men of the 148th Pennsylvania began a tunnel, which they planned to pack with explosives to blow a hole in the Confederate lines. Sound familiar? The Crater almost happened here. But the army pulled out before it was completed.

I hope that readers are inspired to learn more about this long, intense, and complicated engagement. Pick up a book or better yet, visit the site.



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