

The Battle of Cold Harbor – II

Lead: In the spring of 1864 the Federal Army of the Potomac sped across the Virginia heartland in a series of battles followed by flanking maneuvers designed to envelop the rebel army and capture Richmond. Robert E. Lee stopped it at Cold Harbor.

Intro.: *A Moment in Time* with Dan Roberts.

Content: Abraham Lincoln believed he had at last found a general would fight in Ulysses S. Grant. Lincoln made him the top commander of the Federal armies, and in 1864 he set out to do what none of his predecessors had been able to do. In the Overland Campaign he pressed the northern army south ever closer to Richmond. All during May and June, at the Wilderness, Spotsylvania Courthouse, Yellow Tavern, North Anna and Haw's Shop, Grant and Lee dueled for advantage in the race for the Confederate Capital, both sides enduring heavy casualties.

On June 1st the Federals secured Cold Harbor, a cross roads about 10 miles northeast of Richmond just short of the Chickahominy River. Lee was trapped with his back on the capital's defense system. Grant and the official commander of the Army, George Meade decided that this was the place to end it. Instead of pressing the attack, however, they waited a day and in that brief respite Lee secured re-enforcements and drove his men to create a masterful series of breastworks.

At 4:30 just before a sweltering Virginia dawn on June 3rd, the Union army attacked across open ground into the face of withering fire from well-entrenched Confederate forces. Cold Harbor was a slaughter with 7600 Union casualties which, Grant admitted later accomplished nothing.

Grant had not learned the lesson of Gettysburg: that exposed troops charging into the face of technologically improved rifles and artillery were doomed. That reality would govern the modern battlefield until deep into World War I when the advent of the tank and later armored personnel carriers would restore a measure of mobility and protection to maneuvering armies. Having failed to capture Richmond, Grant crossed the James and laid siege to Petersburg.

The war in Virginia deteriorated into a slow grinding drift, which locked up Robert E. Lee, the brilliant tactician, and the hopes of the Confederacy inside a steadily tightening choke-hold of Federal power.

Research assistance by Mary Jane Long, at the University of Richmond, this is Dan Roberts.

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