

Conclusions

Significance and Legacy

It is commonplace to ascribe victors to battles. However, for Hatcher's Run, as with many battles throughout history, this can be a controversial task. The fact that posterity has not treated the Battle of Hatcher's Run kindly has made such assessments even more challenging. In discussions, I often hear that nothing of consequence (or significance) resulted from the battle. But is this true?

What did the Union Achieve?

The three-day battle arose from Grant's hastily arranged Eighth Petersburg Offensive. The *stated* aim was to disrupt a significant Confederate supply line. However, by noon of day one, this objective had become meaningless as Federal cavalry discovered that the supply route no longer existed to any extent. To endanger the best parts of two infantry corps and a cavalry division on a wild goose chase seems like a failure.

However, a more nuanced evaluation is necessary. During the battle, Union forces once again captured the vital crossings of Hatcher's Run at Armstrong's Mill and Vaughan Road. Unlike earlier occasions, they held and fortified these strategic points despite intense fighting. Although never part of Grant's original plan, permanently capturing these crossings was a significant achievement. It allowed the Union to push its lines three miles further west, bringing them closer to attacking the Southside Railroad, whose capture would spell doom for Richmond. It also meant Lee's shrinking forces had three more miles to defend. After the battle, Lee realized that his right flank was indefensible and made contingency plans for the likely evacuation of Petersburg and Richmond.¹

The success in extending their line was how Union commanders "sold" the mission to US politicians and the public. A more uplifting narrative than an infantry-supported cavalry raid on a largely deserted enemy supply line. Warren claimed that the battle was a draw, and he just lost out on a victory because of the poor performance of the army's new recruits.

¹ The Union had temporarily captured these crossings during the 6th Petersburg Offensive on Oct 27, 1864, and on Dec 9, 1864. Lee's contingency plans are described in: Hess, *In the Trenches at Petersburg*, 234, 246; Calkins, *The Appomattox Campaign*, 10-11.

Evidence suggests that Grant's *real* objective for the mission was to keep the ANV occupied. The previous substantial action around Petersburg had been the Union Applejack Raid on December 7-12, 1864. Grant's memoirs describe his fears that Lee might slip away from the ever-tightening noose around his Petersburg position. In a letter to his wife, 5th Corps commander Warren felt that he'd "accomplished General Grant's objective – to harass Lee and keep him busy here [Petersburg], while Sherman operates in South Carolina." Francis M. Wafer, a 2nd Corps brigade surgeon, shared the same opinion in a letter to his brother. Measured against this objective, the offensive was a success as it certainly kept Lee busy, preventing any rest bite or withdrawal. The Federals inflicted casualties on the Confederates that they could ill afford. They also weakened the resolve of many Rebels to continue fighting, as desertions surged post battle.²

What did the Confederacy Achieve?

The Confederates had successfully repelled yet another Union offensive. Despite losing the important two Hatcher's Run crossings, they maintained control of the vital Boydton Plank Road and the Gravelly Run crossing of Vaughan Road. Although they lost irreplaceable officers and men, the ANV proved it was still a formidable foe. The Southern home front learned how its army had foiled another Yankee attack around Petersburg. A Georgia newspaper reported that the ANV had won "one of the best fought battles of the war."³

Despite their numerical inferiority, the Rebels had chances to achieve more significant successes. Late on the first day, they could have caused severe damage to the Union 2nd Corps. However, outstanding defense from McAllister's brigade and two artillery sections, combined with timid attacks from Evans's division, thwarted that opportunity. Twenty-four hours later, the Confederates routed Warren's Federals, who only avoided disaster because of nightfall and newly created breastworks nearby, providing sanctuary.

While there was no outright victor in the battle, evidence suggests that the Union gained more from the offensive, despite technically not achieving its stated goal. With over 2,500 casualties, 14 Medals of Honor, and the consequences summarized above, it's hard to justify the view that the battle was of little significance.

² Taylor, *Gouverneur Kemble Warren*, 203; Grant, *Personal Memoirs*, 2:439; Wafer, *A Surgeon in the Army*, 133-34; Horn, *The Petersburg Campaign*, 217-18.

³ "Battle of Hatcher's Run," *Atlanta [GA] Weekly Intelligencer*, April 12, 1865.

An Incomplete Story

Although this source provides the fullest account of the battle to date, crucial gaps remain. This is *not* the definitive narrative of the Battle of Hatcher's Run. Hopefully, it will inspire others to undertake further investigations. In some dusty archive or family loft, new material awaits discovery. Below are some key aspects that require attention.

The Confederate perspective needs greater understanding. The lack of testimony from senior Rebel officers blights our knowledge of their motives and actions. Why was the Rebel response to the Union advances so slow on February 5? What transpired at the meeting between Lee and his generals in the early afternoon of February 5? Why were the Rebel attacks west of Rocky Branch on February 5 so weak? Why did Pegram split his division on the morning of February 6? Finally, more insight is needed regarding the activity of Rooney Lee's cavalry.

The *Official Records* adequately document the Union command narrative. However, knowing what transpired during the meeting between Meade and Warren around noon on February 6 would be invaluable for explaining why they ordered a "reconnaissance in force." The absence of formal reports from Crawford and Bragg, prominent Union officers during the final two days, diminishes our understanding of their roles. For example, whose idea was the suicide assault on the Confederate position late on February 7?

"An Inconspicuous Affair"

As of 2025, there is no book dedicated to the Hatcher's Run battle. How posterity has mistreated the battle is simply a matter of record. Battle accounts filled Northern and Southern newspapers within days of the fighting. Although tailored to partisan home readers, these reports provided rich content. Union-leaning newspapers tended to mask negative aspects of their forces' performance.⁴

In early works describing the war, the Battle of Hatcher's Run featured prominently. Before the end of 1865, Eliot G. Storke and Linus P. Brockett's two-volume work, *A Complete History of the Great Rebellion*, appeared. The battle occupied over three pages, including a map. In Horace Greeley's 1866 two-volume book *The American Conflict: A History of the Great Rebellion in the United States of America, 1860-65*, the battle received two pages. As with the Northern newspaper reports, both these works distorted the mission's

⁴ A typical pro-Union article was: *New York [NY] Herald*, February 11, 1865.

aim and minimized the embarrassing Union rout on February 6 and the disastrous Union frontal attack the following day.⁵



Ann S. Stephens (c1852)
wikipedia.org



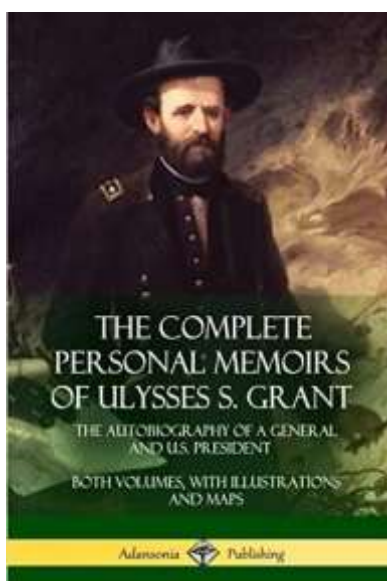
Horace Greeley (c1860s)
wikipedia.org

In 1866, volume two of Ann S. Stephens's work, *Pictorial History of the War for the Union*, appeared. A renowned novelist and publisher, Stephens was a leading light on the New York literary scene. She is credited with creating the "dime novel." Assisted by William Oland Bourne and J. J. Golder, the book proved popular with readers. Today, the book is regarded by scholars as of national importance and is still being published as of 2025. The battle of Hatcher's Run occupied five text-dense pages, being detailed and reasonably accurate. It was portrayed as an important battle, whereas in comparison, the October 27, 1864, battle around Burgess Mill was dismissed as "trivial". The mission's aim was still erroneously portrayed as seizing territory. The Union rout late on February 6 was covered, although there was no mention of any friendly fire. Crawford's hapless assault on the following day was ignored. Surprisingly, there was no mention of Confederate Brig. Gen. John Pegram perishing, nor the death of Col. Mathew Murphy, a senior New Yorker.⁶

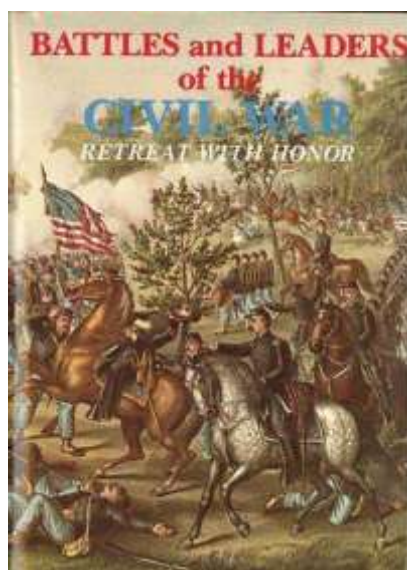
⁵ Eliot G. Storke & Linus P. Brockett *A Complete History of the Great Rebellion*, 2 vols. (Auburn, NY, 1865), 2:1377-81; Horace Greeley *The American Conflict: A History of the Great Rebellion in the United States of America, 1860-65*, 2 vols (New York, 1866), 2:726-27. Greeley was a prominent newspaper editor and publisher. He founded the New York Tribune. Highly active in politics he helped in creating the Republican Party. He stood for president in 1872.

⁶ Ann S. Stephens *Pictorial history of the war for the Union: a complete and reliable history of the war from its commencement to its close...together with a complete chronological analysis of the war*. 2 vols. (New York, 1862, 1866), 2:512-16. No direct sources were provided throughout the account. The overall process of creating the text was explained in the Introduction. It was republished by Anson Street Press in March 2025.

Published between 1880 and 1901, *The Official Records* included over 100 reports and many dispatches linked to the Hatcher's Run battle. These overwhelmingly came from Union personnel, as most of the 1865 Confederate records were lost. This inevitably created a narrative bias. Many seminal Unionist military books appeared around the 1880s. All misrepresented key aspects of the battle, with authors disregarding the Union forces' embarrassments. Thus, in early accounts, the Battle of Hatcher's Run had a distinct presence, albeit significantly biased.⁷



Grant's Memoirs (1885)
Nigel Lambert



Battles and Leaders (1888)
Nigel Lambert

Worse was yet to come. Ex-President Grant's influential two-volume memoir (1885) simply overlooked the action. Grant stated that “the winter ... passed off quietly and uneventfully.” The following year, former Confederate general Armistead L. Long's book *Memoirs of Robert E. Lee* also omitted the battle. In 1888, the totemic *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War* was published. The Hatcher's Run battle received just one sentence in a footnote!

Numerous former combatants published regimental histories and memoirs during the 50 years following the war's end. I have analyzed over 200 such books. Many gloss over the battle. I give three examples. Confederate John B. Gordon's Second Corps played a central

⁷ The 12-volume, multi-author *Campaigns of the Civil War* appeared between 1881 and 1883. The final volume, written by Andrew A. Humphreys (a Union Corps commander at the battle), described the battle. Other seminal Union military books include: Swinton, *Campaigns of the Army of the Potomac*, 547-49; Walker, *History of the Second Army Corps*, 646-50; Powell, *The Fifth Army Corps*, 754-67.

role in the battle, with one of his division commanders dying. Yet his extensive *Reminiscences of the Civil War* (1904) ignored the battle. Similarly, Confederate Clement A. Evans's division fought intensively throughout the battle, but the event went unmentioned in his memoirs. Charles A. Frey's regiment (150th Pennsylvania) saw heavy fighting around Dabney's Mill during the battle's last two days, yet his lengthy 1886 *Recollections of Army Life* recorded little about the fighting.⁸



Douglas S. Freeman
wikipedia.org



Bruce Catton
wikipedia.org

As the war generation passed, telling the Hatcher's Run story fell to academic historians. Published between 1942 and 1944, the three-volume *Lee's Lieutenants: A Study in Command* established Douglas S. Freeman as the preeminent US military historian of the age. This landmark book ignored the battle. Similarly, Bruce Catton, another Pulitzer Prize-winning Civil War titan, overlooked Hatcher's Run in his 1953 work, *A Stillness at Appomattox*, a book focused on the war's final months.

The centenary crop of books in the 1960s generally forgot or trivialized the fight. In his 1960 biography of Meade, acclaimed historian Freeman Cleaves fleetingly mentioned Hatcher's Run. He concluded, "This battle ... finds no conspicuous place in the chronicles of

⁸ Robert U. Johnson & Clarence C. Buel, eds., *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, 4 vols. (New York, 1888), 4:578; Grant, *Personal Memoirs*, 2:439; Robert G. Stephens, *Intrepid Warrior: Clement Anselm Evans, Life, Letters, And Diaries of the War Years* (Dayton, OH, 1992).

the war." Regarded by many as the best one-volume account of the war, James M. McPherson's 1988 Pulitzer Prize-winning *Battle Cry of Freedom* disregarded the battle.⁹

Since the 1990s, a new narrative of Hatcher's Run has emerged through landmark books by noted historians describing the Petersburg Campaign. For example: N. Andre Trudeau (1991), *The Last Citadel*, A. Wilson Greene (2008), *The Final Battles of the Petersburg Campaign*, Earl J. Hess (2009), *In the Trenches at Petersburg*, and Chris M. Calkins (2003), *History and Tour Guide of Five Forks, Hatcher's Run and Namozine Church*. At over 70 pages, the Hatcher's Run chapter in Bearss & Suderow's 2014 *The Petersburg Campaign* (volume 2) is the longest battle account. Mainly based on the *OR*, the book supplied a level of detail missing from the other Petersburg texts. The book's co-author, Bryce A. Suderow, described the battle as "one of the most fascinating battles of the Petersburg Campaign," while highlighting significant gaps in the narrative.¹⁰

Despite the appearance of other Petersburg books, the status of the above authors has resulted in their accounts of Hatcher's Run echoing down the years. They are less biased and describe some of the Union's failures. However, they are only summary chapters, and many details in these works are contradictory, incomplete, and inaccurate. In particular, the problematic report from Maj. Gen. Gordon, has caused much confusion.¹¹

Numerous modern books describe individuals or regiments prominent at the battle. For example: James Robertson's 1987 *General A.P. Hill: The Story of a Confederate Warrior*, Richard Wagner's 2006 biography of General Samuel W. Crawford, *For Honor, Flag, and Family*, and Jay C. Martin's (2016) *General Henry Baxter, 7th Michigan Volunteer Infantry*. Unfortunately, these works hold few details about the battle.

By contrast, some books held valuable information from rare Confederate primary sources, which have augmented the Hatcher's Run narrative. Good examples include Robert J. Driver's (2003) *First and Second Maryland Infantry, CSA*, and John Horn's (2019) *The Petersburg Regiment in the Civil War*. The Hatcher's Run chapter in Lee W. Sherrill's (2014) *The 21st North Carolina Infantry: A Civil War History* was exceptional and challenged many

⁹ The battle received over two pages in Shelby D. Foote's 1974, *The Civil War: A Narrative*. In the 28-volume *Time Life Civil War Series*, (Alexandria, VA, 1987), five illustrated pages on the battle appear in volume 25, which unfortunately included major errors. Cleaves, *Meade of Gettysburg* (Norman, OK, 1960), 306.

¹⁰ In the vast number of Civil War magazines, prior to my recent contribution, Hatcher's Run headlined in only two articles. These recycled Trudeau's and Greene's narratives. Arthur W. Bergeron, "Three-day Tussle at Hatcher's Run," *America's Civil War Magazine* (March 2003) Vol 16, No. 1, 30-37.

¹¹ These inconsistencies were addressed in Lambert & Suderow, "The Battle of Hatcher's Run," 35-46; *OR* 46/1:390.

aspects of the established battle narrative. Yet, somehow, Sherrill’s research did not gain mainstream acceptance. One resource Sherrill exploited was the 100-volume *Supplement to the Official Records*. Created between 1994 and 2001 by Janet B. Hewett, N. Andre Trudeau, Bryce A. Suderow, and others, volume seven included valuable Confederate reports about the Hatcher’s Run battle.

The internet has spawned countless online accounts, blogs, and videos featuring the Hatcher's Run battle. Most of these “posts” recycle narratives from one of the established Petersburg historians highlighted above. Before I updated the Wikipedia page (November 2024), it was a derisory two pages of incomplete and misleading information.

On the influential online forum, “Civil War Talk,” for its 160th anniversary, the battle didn’t merit inclusion on its 2025 “Calendar of Events.” Ironically, the calendar recognizes John Brown Gordon’s birthday; Corps commander Gordon was at the heart of all Confederate actions at the battle.

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
Albert Sidney Johnston's Birthday	Dr. Elizaeth Blackwell's Birthday Joseph E. Johnston's Birthday			1862 Battle of Fort Henry James Earl Brown "Jeb" Stuart's Birthday John Brown Gordon's Birthday		Richard Ewell's Birthday William Tecumseh Sherman's Birthday
1861 Confederate States of America		1862 Battle of Fort Donelson - Starts	Abraham Lincoln's Birthday		Valentine's Day Winfield Scott	

2025 CivilWarTalk Calendar of Events Covering February 5-7

Nigel Lambert

The Civil War Trust and its partners acquired nearly 400 acres of the battlefield. However, little is showcased. The Pamplin Center and Petersburg National Park Service are literally down the road from the battlefield. The two site boards at the main location next to

Pegram's memorial are virtually illegible. There are no markers at Monk's Neck Bridge, where two Union soldiers gained Medals of Honor.¹²

That history has misrepresented, and in several influential works completely ignored, the battle is indisputable. It is shocking how posterity has treated the travails of nearly 60,000 soldiers during those three dramatic wintery days in February 1865. The question is "why."

The study of how societies create historical narratives (historiography) is a substantial academic field. The Civil War story is keenly debated to this day. Postwar, combatants, often with scores to settle, sought to promote their version of the truth and contest rival narratives. In the process of creating the "established" history, there are winners and losers. As the combatant generation passed, telling the Civil War story fell to historians with their own biases and social constructs. Which battles became prominent, and which generals were deemed great or hapless?



A Worn Site Board at Pegram's Marker on the Preserved Battlefield

Nigel Lambert, October 2024.

Academics have identified various factors that influence why events vanish from the historical narrative. Can these help in understanding the Hatcher's Run narrative?¹³

¹² The site-boards omit Confederate brigade commanders Col. John Baker and Col. John Lea. Brig. Gen. William MacRae and Brig. Gen. Robert Johnston are credited as participating when, in truth, they were absent. Some acknowledgment of the 14 Union Medal Of Honor recipients would also be helpful.

¹³ What-Is, *Why Do Some Historical Events Get Remembered While Others Are Forgotten*, Sept 9, 2024. [Why Do Some Historical Events Get Remembered While Others Are Forgotten - YouTube](#); Christopher Klein, *Eight Reasons Why We Forget Some Historical Events*, Boston Globe, Apr 26, 2015.

Neglect is fostered if an event is absent from influential texts. Events well documented by historians, journalists, or artists are more likely to be remembered by future generations. As demonstrated above, the Hatcher's Run battle suffers in these regards.

Throughout history, preserving personal or institutional reputations has been a powerful force in creating narratives. With the Hatcher's Run battle, both sides had cause to subvert or bury embarrassing events. This applied to protecting the reputations of influential individuals and the honor of army units, such as regiments and brigades.

For the Union, the offensive was predicated on outdated intelligence and endangered over 34,000 troops on a mission to disrupt an enemy supply line that was largely abandoned. On day two, the Rebels routed a large Union force, leading to a massive breakdown in discipline and a shambolic stampede to the rear. Many panicked Union troops fired into their own men. This, in turn, exposed how Union commanders had sent many of their soldiers into combat without adequate training. On the following day, around dusk, a Union division launched a suicidal attack on a strong Rebel position with predictable consequences.

None of the above realities placed the Union command in a favorable light, and significant "reputational management" took place. Officers promoted more positive narratives. Artillery chief Col. Charles S. Wainwright accused Grant of concealing the poor performance from the public.¹⁴ As commander-in-chief, Grant's reputation was particularly at stake. An effective way of managing negative events is to ignore them, which is what Grant did in his memoir regarding his offensive. As the former US president, Grant's account carried substantial weight in creating the accepted wisdom.

The 20th Maine found themselves caught up in the embarrassing rout on day two. The regiment had a stellar reputation, and its exploits at many battles (particularly Gettysburg) remain woven into Civil War folklore. However, by February 1865, the regiment was in poor condition, having suffered years of combat. Private Theodore Gerrish recounted in his 1882 memoir:¹⁵

I think that I will not attempt to describe that affair [fighting around Dabney's Mill]; the boys will all remember it, and there are some facts connected with that battle which we would not want everyone to know. . . We recollect it all, but for the reputation of the regiment we will not speak minutely of those things here.

¹⁴ Nevins, ed. *A Diary of Battle*, 497-98.

¹⁵ Gerrish, *Army Life; a Private's Reminiscences*, 223-24.

This honest example of reputational management is rare but indicative of a broader trend.



Col. Charles S. Wainwright
Alchetron.com



Pvt. Theodore Gerrish
findagrave.com

For the Confederates, morale in many regiments was low, with desertions a huge problem. This was particularly true of Gordon's Second Corps, which had recently arrived at Petersburg from the Valley. The Rebels were ill-prepared for the Union offensive, and they failed to defend key crossings of Hatcher's Run. When the Rebels eventually threatened the Federals on day one, many of their attacks were timid and lacked proper support. As witnessed, "Lee wept like a child" at his troop's behavior.¹⁶ It's easy to understand why combatants like Gordon and Lee preferred to forget the battle.

One way historical events become "forgotten" is when larger dramas of greater public interest occur around the same time. Several Civil War events suffered this fate. The victories at Gettysburg and Vicksburg overshadowed the successful Tullahoma Campaign. On April 27, 1865, the shamefully overloaded steamship *Sultana* exploded and sank, killing 1,164 mostly paroled prisoners. It remains the worst maritime disaster in US history. The tragedy was overshadowed by events surrounding the end of the Civil War, particularly the killing of John Wilkes Booth (President Abraham Lincoln's assassin) the day before. It's only in recent years that the *Sultana* incident has attracted detailed historical attention.¹⁷

For Hatcher's Run, although occurring in the main military sector and involving the top commanders, it too was overshadowed. In early 1865, Northern interest lay with Maj.

¹⁶ OR 46/2:499.

¹⁷ Iwan Ross, *The Sultana Disaster: America's Forgotten Maritime Tragedy and Its Haunting Legacy*, Aug 16, 2024, [The Sultana Disaster: America's Forgotten Maritime Tragedy and Its Haunting Legacy | by Iwan Ross | Medium](#).

Gen. William T. Sherman's army marching up through South Carolina and Maj. Gen. Philip H. Sheridan's exploits in the Shenandoah Valley. Both had recently won stunning victories that captured the public and politicians' imagination. There were no such glorious victories around Petersburg. Southern public interest also focused on Sherman's Army and the safety of Charleston.



Sultana Steamboat, Helena (AK), April 26, 1865, the day before her sinking
wikipedia.org

Some events simply don't capture the public's interest. Until recently, this was true of the Petersburg Campaign. In the mid-1970s, renowned Petersburg historian Wilson Greene described how "Petersburg had indisputably failed to capture the imagination of Americans to the degree enjoyed by Gettysburg, Antietam, Shiloh, or other major Civil War battlegrounds." Greene noted that "there existed a pervasive perception that the Petersburg "siege" was devoid of contingency, marked by endless days of stagnant, uninteresting trench warfare at the end of which Lee's demise would be inevitable." Only relatively recently have books dedicated to Petersburg appeared.¹⁸ Within this unpopular campaign sits the Hatcher's Run battle, the least researched of the Petersburg battles.

Once an event falls from the established narrative, it can be difficult to resurrect. It largely depends on a given society's openness to change and to break with the psychological comfort of the familiar. Finite attention and resources typically focus on the well-known.

¹⁸ A. Wilson Greene, *Petersburg's Emergence from the Shadows*, June 21, 2018. UNC Press Blog, [A. Wilson Greene: Petersburg's Emergence from the Shadows - UNC Press Blog](#).

The above factors help explain the troubled legacy of Hatcher's Run. The arrival of two multi-volume works covering Petersburg might hopefully fan interest in this neglected battle. It's time that the exploits of nearly 60,000 soldiers received the attention and respect they deserve.¹⁹

A Final Thought

On cold, wintery days, I frequently walk in my local countryside. With sturdy boots, a modern thick coat, a woolen hat, and gloves, I can reflect on the experience of the Hatcher's Run combatants. I am humbled and astonished at the young men's tribulations, enduring those harsh wintery conditions while wearing only threadbare, wet clothes and shoes with holes and no protection from the bitterly cold weather. To have eaten or slept little for 48 hours while surrounded by death and destruction and facing one's death or maiming remains a sobering and disturbing thought.

One might have thought humanity would have discovered more enlightened ways to resolve conflicts. The following 160 years sadly suggest not.

"All war is a symptom of man's failure as a thinking animal."

John Steinbeck, *"Once there was a War,"* 1958.²⁰

¹⁹ A. Wilson Greene, *A Campaign of Giants* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2025); Sean M. Chick, *The Battle for Petersburg* (El Dorado Hills, CA, 2025).

²⁰ John Steinbeck, *Once There Was a War* (New York, 1958), 15.