



# Not War but Murder: Cold Harbor 1864

*Ernest B. Furgurson*

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On the morning of Friday, June 3, 1864, Generals Ulysses S. Grant and George G. Meade brought their overland campaign against Richmond to its climax in an all-out assault on Robert E. Lee's entrenched Rebels at Cold Harbor, less than ten miles outside the Confederate capital. The result was outright slaughter--Grant's worst defeat, and Lee's last great victory. Though Grant tried afterward to forget the battle, and historians have often misunderstood its importance, Cold Harbor remains what Bruce Catton called "one of the hard and terrible names of the Civil War, perhaps the most terrible one of all."

Now Ernest Furgurson, an eloquent narrator and analyst of the war, tells the harrowing story of this pivotal conflict. Like his earlier account of the Battle of Chancellorsville, his latest work is rich in detail and revealing anecdotes: Federal generals consume a champagne lunch while more than a thousand of their wounded lie untended on the field. The Confederate Congress votes itself a 100 percent pay raise while bread prices skyrocket in the South. An angry Union surgeon saws off the leg of a malingerer. Yankee and Rebel soldiers, slipping between the lines after dark to rescue the wounded, find themselves in the same hole and negotiate a private truce.

Furgurson explores the minds of both privates and commanders, showing how friction between the overconfident Grant and the irascible Meade proved disastrous; how Lee, with fewer than half as many troops as Meade, repeatedly outmaneuvered Union forces; and how Northern election-year politics influenced Grant's strategy, pressing him to try to win the war with one final head-on attack.

Cold Harbor was a watershed moment of the Civil War. After Grant's defeat, the struggle dragged on; the war of maneuver became a war of siege, and stand-up attack gave way to trench warfare--tactics that would become familiar in France half a century later. Above all, Cold Harbor was the most uselessly bloody, one-sided battle of the war, whose terrible human cost is captured in one chilling diary entry, scrawled by a mortally wounded soldier: "June 3, Cold Harbor. I was killed."

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