The Bonfire: The Siege and Burning of Atlanta. By Marc Wortman. New York: Public Affairs, 2009. 430 pages. $28.95. **Reviewed by Dr. Kevin J. Weddle**, Professor of Military Theory and Strategy, US Army War College.

One of the most misleading book titles of 2009 may be Marc Wortman's *The Bonfire: The Siege and Burning of Atlanta*. One-third of the 361 pages of text go by before the reader even gets to the Civil War. After another 80 pages, the siege of Atlanta finally begins. But this is not to say that this popular history is not excellent, because it is. Wortman has given us not a comprehensive history of the siege and burning of Atlanta, but a more wide-ranging look at the city from its founding, through its development as one of the most important economic centers in the South, to its traumatic experience at war, and finally its resurrection in the post-war years.

Wortman leads his readers on this journey through the eyes of a cast of fascinating individuals. They include Bob Yancey, an African-American slave who through his drive and entrepreneurial talent prospered and became wealthy in the oddly permissive (in some ways) racial atmosphere of pre-war Atlanta, and who may or may not have been the illegitimate son of the great northern Senator Daniel Webster. Bob's white master, Ben Yancey, "lawyer, politician, and plantation owner," plays an important role. Cyrena Stone, a Vermont native married to a prominent Atlanta attorney, was an unabashed Unionist, as were a surprising number of her southern neighbors. William Tecumseh Sherman, who spent part of his early days as a young Army officer in Georgia, is introduced early in the narrative. All of these individuals and many more add to the author's colorful narrative, but Wortman's muse for the story of Atlanta's rise, fall, and ultimate rebirth is James M. Calhoun, wartime mayor and cousin of the fiery defender of southern rights, John C. Calhoun.

Calhoun's journey from his humble roots in Virginia to one of the earliest residents of what Wortman calls "an instant city, one modern in character and mores, unlike anything the South had known," sets the stage for the rest of the book. Atlanta's enviable location as a major railroad junction led to its rapid growth into one of the South's most important cities, perhaps only second in importance to Richmond. The economic opportunities helped fuel a unique social structure between whites and slaves that was very rare in the South during the antebellum period. Slaves like Bob Yancey were able to mingle freely with whites and even run lucrative businesses catering to all races. Yancey, taking advantage of the entrepreneurial opportunities, became a successful barber and money lender and was one of the wealthiest men in Atlanta, white or black. Still, despite the generally more favorable circumstances enjoyed by Yancey and his fellow Atlanta slaves (at least compared to the plight of other southern slaves), they were most definitely still slaves. Racial enlightenment went only so far.

Once the war came, Atlanta prospered even more with lucrative government war contracts and the constant shuttling of troops through the vital rail junction. Its economy and population boomed, causing challenges to the town's leaders, but especially for Mayor Calhoun. Increased crime arrived along with the Confederate soldiers charged with defending the city. Wortman does an excellent job describing the changes in relationships between the races and the panic that seized the population as Union forces began their inevitable advance toward the city in 1864. Slaves were used to prepare extensive fortifications, and many citizens fled from the advancing enemy. Once Sherman's army laid siege to Atlanta, the situation grew increasingly grim, but despite indiscriminate shelling, civilian casualties were light. The inevitable fall of Atlanta was a key Union victory and set the stage for Sherman's March to the Sea, which was

instrumental in bringing the war to a close. Finally, Wortman does a nice job describing the aftermath of the war in Atlanta and the city's phoenix-like rise from the ashes of the most destructive war in US history. He wraps up the story by recounting the post-war lives of the key characters.

Wortman's rendering of this important story from the Confederate perspective is admirable. He is an excellent writer and storyteller. His accounts of the battles and military decisions are solid. *Parameters* readers, however, will certainly note that the author uses the terms strategy and tactics interchangeably. At one point he claims that "[Union Lieutenant General Ulysses S.] Grant was not a particularly imaginative strategist." He means, of course, that Grant was not a creative tactician. He also frequently imagines what his characters were thinking at critical times. Some of this conjecture is understandable, but Wortman's repeated application of the device is overused. His assessment of Grant as a commander is also questionable; to describe Grant as an uninspired plodder is simplistic and wide of the mark.

These minor quibbles aside, *The Bonfire* is a superb popular history that will appeal to specialists and buffs alike. The siege and burning of Atlanta was one of the pivotal events of the Civil War. If you want to read a purely military history of the city's destruction, this book is not for you. But *The Bonfire* is a worthy account that puts the military events in a larger social and political context, and it has the added virtue of being an exciting and engaging read.