

Where the South Lost the War: An Analysis of the Fort Henry-Fort Donelson Campaign, February 1862

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Review

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Gott, Kendall D. *Where the South Lost the War: An Analysis of the Fort Henry-Fort Donelson Campaign, February 1862.* Stackpole Books, \$29.95
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River Sentinels

Fall of Confederate strongholds recounted

On Sunday, February 16, 1862, jubilant Federal forces under the command of General Ulysses S. Grant captured Fort Donelson, along with more than 12,000 Confederate prisoners and a mountain of weapons and supplies. The fall of this Confederate bastion on the Cumberland River, coupled with the earlier capture of Fort Henry guarding the Tennessee River, shattered the fragile Confederate defensive line in the Western Theater and opened the heartland of the Confederacy to subsequent Union penetration. Beyond question, the campaign for Henry and Donelson ranks as one of the most significant events of the Civil War.

This campaign is the subject of Kendall D. Gott's **Where the South Lost the War**. Gott, a military historian for the Combat Studies Institute at the U. S. Army Command and General Staff College, infuses a traditional martial flavor into his writing and analysis of the struggle for the forts. The study is based on a variant of the campaign analysis model used by the military to examine the command decisions of various leaders. For those accustomed to the new military history, with its strong social influence, the volume will seem antiquated. Absent are the accounts of individual common soldiers or civilians caught in the maelstrom of war. However, readers longing for the old-fashioned battle accounts told from the top down will find the book informative, detailed, and well organized. Gott recounts the story of the campaign for the forts in a clear narrative with periodic looks at the commanders and evaluations of their strategic and tactical thinking and ability. Moreover, Gott views the loss of the river forts by the Confederates as more significant to the outcome of the war than

most historians. Instead of simply leading to Johnston's retreat from Kentucky, Union occupation of most of Tennessee, and the rise of Ulysses S. Grant to higher command, Gott views Henry and Donelson as the place where the South lost the war.

The book jacket declares that **Where the South Lost the War** is a major contribution to Civil War literature, [s]hedding light on an overlooked campaign and revising conventional judgments on key players and events. . . . Two noted Civil War historians also praise the book for focusing on an overlooked, yet vitally important campaign. In one respect, these accolades are justified. The struggle for the forts was a decisive event in the war. However, the assertions that the campaign has been overlooked are incorrect. In fact, despite the claims on the jacket, Gott's book offers little that is new or unknown to Civil War scholars. The campaign has been covered with more insightful analysis by Stephen Engle's *Struggle for the Heartland: The Campaigns From Forts Henry to Corinth* (2001) and Benjamin Franklin Cooling's *Fort Henry and Donelson: The Key to the Confederate Heartland* (1987). Engle examines the ramifications of the Union victory, while Cooling provides a detailed account of the campaign and its significance to the war and the veterans. A glance at the bibliographies of **Where the South Lost the War** and *Forts Henry and Donelson* reveals that Cooling used far more sources, allowing him to generate a more comprehensive analysis of the events and their implications.

Gott borrows heavily from Cooling's book. Indeed, he borrows too heavily in terms of organization, content, and conclusions. Some chapter titles are virtually identical and, more disturbingly, so are many sentences. For example, on page xvi, Gott states that the story of Henry and Donelson Ashatters the contemporary myth of Gen. Albert Sidney Johnston as the preeminent military leader at the beginning of the war. Cooling, on page p. xii of his book, writes that A[t]he shattered myth of Albert Sidney Johnston's invincibility as the preeminent military man of the age stands in stark relief. Again, Gott writes on page xvi that A[i]n so many ways, Fort Donelson was a brilliantly missed opportunity for the Confederacy to smash an uncertain Union strategic thrust by an untested Union commander, Ulysses S. Grant. Cooling, on page xii of his work, states that A[i]n so many ways, Henry-Donelson was a brilliantly missed opportunity for the Confederacy to smash an uncertain Union strategic thrust by an untested Yankee general. Cooling's second chapter is titled Changing Plowshares into Swords, while Gott's first chapter is From Plowshares to Swords: March-August 1861. Cooling's chapter eleven on the surrender of the Donelson garrison is entitled A

Surrender Most Disgraceful, while Gott's chapter thirteen covering the surrender is entitled A Disgraceful Surrender: Sunday, February 16, 1862. Although Gott cites Cooling, he should have developed unique chapter titles and either placed Cooling's exact textual words in quotes or completely rephrased the passages. Simply citing a source and then using the author's words is unacceptable.

Gott continues to borrow the phrasing of other sources throughout the text. For example, on page 36, he writes that Johnston's renown soared to great heights, and many considered him the army's best general and the likely heir to the aging General in Chief Winfield Scott. Steven E. Woodward, whom Gott cites as his source, writes in *Jefferson Davis and His Generals* on page 49 that Ahis renown had soared to even greater heights. Many considered him the army's best general and a likely heir to the aging general in chief Winfield Scott. Worse still, on page 64, Gott states that [a]s tactically complete as the Confederate defeat had been, it did not turn out to be strategically disastrous. Crossing the Cumberland, Thomas entered a region more barren of provisions than the one he left. Shelby Foote, Gott's stated source, wrote on page 179 of *The Civil War: A Narrative* (Volume One) that [t]actically complete as the Confederate defeat had been, it did not turn out to be strategically disastrous. Crossing the Cumberland, Thomas entered a region even more barren than the one he left... The work contains numerous other instances of improper citation. This is surprising considering Gott's training as a historian.

Beyond these problems, Gott also fails to provide evidence to support his contention that the Confederacy lost the war at Henry and Donelson. The feeble Rebel defenses had been broken, and the Confederacy had lost the initiative, along with invaluable resources. However, despite the defeat at Henry and Donelson, Albert Sidney Johnston and P. G. T. Beauregard launched a surprise attack against Grant at Shiloh that, had it not been for the timely arrival of Buell, would have crushed a Federal army and given the Confederates an opportunity to change the direction and momentum of the war. In fact, the Confederates would have other opportunities in 1863 and as late as 1864 to defeat the Union. For example, most historians acknowledge that if Johnston or Hood could have kept Sherman out of Atlanta while Lee stalled Grant's advance on Richmond, Lincoln may have lost the 1864 election, and the South conceivably could have negotiated a peace.

In sum, those interested in a single volume analysis of the Henry-Donelson campaign and its ultimate significance to the outcome of the Civil War would be

better served by Cooling's book. Even those interested in a detailed, blow-by-blow discussion of the fighting and leadership would find Cooling's book indispensable. **Where the South Lost the War** does have merit. It is a good military study of the struggle for the forts. The last chapter (the book's most original) on the failure of the Confederate commanders is insightful if not ground breaking. However, these achievements are far from the lofty ambitions the title and book jacket promise.

John D. Fowler is an Assistant Professor of History at Kennesaw State University. His first book, Mountaineers in Gray: The Story of the Nineteenth Tennessee Volunteer Infantry Regiment, C.S.A., will be published by the University of Tennessee Press next summer.