

The Mississippi River Campaign, 1861-1863: The Struggle for Control of the Western Waters

Thomas A. DeBlack

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

DeBlack, Thomas A. (2011) "The Mississippi River Campaign, 1861-1863: The Struggle for Control of the Western Waters," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 13 : Iss. 1 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.13.1.10

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol13/iss1/9>

Review

DeBlack, Thomas A.

Winter 2011

Patterson, Benton Rain *The Mississippi River Campaign, 1861-1863: The Struggle for Control of the Western Waters*. McFarland & Company, Inc., \$38.00 ISBN 978-0-7864-5900-1

Navigating the Mississippi River Campaign

A recent documentary on the Civil War noted that the first two years of the war were a virtual stalemate. That was true only in regard to events in the Eastern Theater. As Benton Rain Patterson makes clear in *The Mississippi River Campaign, 1861-1863*, west of the Appalachians the war was characterized by a series of Federal successes and Confederate disasters. Nowhere was this more true than in the struggle for control of the Mississippi River. Patterson, an emeritus associate professor of journalism at the University of Florida who formerly worked at the *New York Times* and the *Saturday Evening Post*, documents the movement of what he calls "the receding gray line" of Confederate defenses in the Western Theater. In early 1862 that line began with a heavily-fortified position on the bluffs above the Mississippi River at Columbus, Kentucky, stretching eastward through Bowling Green and on to Mill Springs. It was bolstered by Fort Henry at the mouth of the Tennessee River and Fort Donelson at the mouth of the Cumberland. General Ulysses Grant correctly saw the significance of the latter two forts. The capture of Fort Henry would open up the Tennessee River all the way to Muscle Shoals, Alabama and render the Memphis and Charleston Railroad useless to the Rebels. Fort Donelson, Grant noted, was "the gate to Nashville--a place of great military and political importance--and to a rich country extending far east into Kentucky" (35).

By the end of February, Grant, acting in conjunction with a Federal flotilla under the command of Flag Officer Andrew Foote, had captured both forts and forced the Confederates to establish a new defensive line farther south, anchored by Island No. 10 and New Madrid on the Mississippi, stretching eastward to Corinth, Mississippi. Then, in a three day period in the spring of 1862, that line

was breached with the Confederate defeat at the battle of Shiloh on April 6-7, which rendered Corinth untenable; the next day the Federals captured Island No. 10. Before the month was out, another Federal fleet under the command of David Glasgow Farragut had steamed up the Mississippi from the Gulf of Mexico and compelled the surrender of New Orleans, the South's largest and most strategic city.

In early June the Confederates abandoned Fort Pillow, and all eyes turned toward Memphis. Captain James E. Montgomery, commander of the Confederates' River Defense Fleet, told jittery Memphis residents, "I have no intention of retreating any farther. . . . I have come here that you may see Lincoln's gunboats sent to the bottom by the fleet which you built and manned" (155). The following day, June 6, the eight remaining Confederate ironclads confronted the Federal fleet as Memphis residents watched from the bluffs. In the ensuing battle the Federals crushed the Rebel flotilla, destroying seven of the eight vessels and compelling the surrender of the city.

In the southern part of the river, Farragut quickly seized Baton Rouge and Natchez, but he realized that Vicksburg would be a tougher nut to crack. This was a fact that apparently was lost on his superiors in Washington, who expected him to continue his ascent, meet the other Federal fleet coming downriver, and seize Vicksburg. Several of Farragut's ships had been battered in the run past the forts guarding New Orleans, and many were deep-draft ocean-going vessels that he feared would not be able to operate in the Mississippi above Natchez. Despite his misgivings he got underway as soon as possible, but his reservations were well-founded. It would take more than a year, thousands of Union casualties, and the greatest amphibious operation in the nation's history to that time in order to secure the surrender of Vicksburg on July 4, 1863. Port Hudson, the last remaining Confederate stronghold on the Mississippi, surrendered three days later.

Patterson chronicles these events in twenty-six short, crisply-written chapters and also provides brief sketches of some of the major players involved in this drama. Andrew Hull Foote went to sea as a midshipman at age sixteen but had a life-changing spiritual experience five years later that caused him to question whether he should "remain in an occupation that could place him in war and cause him to kill his fellow man" (27). Henry Halleck "had ability as an administrator, but as a commander of troops, he proved to be overcautious and indecisive, better at evading responsibility than at commanding an army or

understanding strategy" (36). One of P. G. T. Beauregard's worst faults was "his lack of careful attention to vital details" and another was "his predilection for judging the actions of his superiors and putting his criticisms into writing" (66). John Pope was "aggressive, impatient, boastful, and self-assured to the point of being obnoxious" (71). David Dixon Porter, the son of a former admiral, was "full of ideas, the sort of energetic person who habitually strives for recognition" (100). These insights add the all-important human element to the story.

The book is not, however, without flaws. Chapter five begins with Grant studying his maps prior to moving on Forts Henry and Donelson. Sadly, it is an opportunity that the reader does not have. The entire volume contains not one map. In a campaign in which geography played such a large role, this is a serious failing. The book also would have benefitted from a stronger conclusion in which the author provided some summation and analysis of the facts that he has laid out, such as the chronic incompetence and bungling that plagued Confederate operations along the river (nowhere more evident than in the failure to adequately defend New Orleans), the futility of the Confederate reliance on fortified positions, and the overconfidence that the Rebels placed on the ability of their River Defense Fleet to successfully oppose the Federal flotillas.

These misgivings notwithstanding, *The Mississippi River Campaign* is a lively, readable, and concise account of this important aspect of the war. Patterson avoids the overly-detailed and overly-technical prose that burdens too much writing on the Civil War. While the book breaks no new ground, it does provide a good synthesis that adds to the growing literature on the war in the West. It should appeal to both serious and casual students of the war.

Thomas A. DeBlack is a professor of history at Arkansas Tech University. He is the author of With Fire and Sword: Arkansas, 1861-1874 and co-author of Arkansas: A Narrative History.