

Leadership Lessons: The Campaigns for Vicksburg, 1862-1863

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Review

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Doughert, Kevin J. *Leadership Lessons: The Campaigns for Vicksburg, 1862-1863*. Casemate, \$32.95 ISBN 978-1-61200-003-9

Taking Civil War Leaders to Task

Kevin Dougherty's *Leadership Lessons: The Campaigns for Vicksburg, 1862-1863* offers a concise summary of the events that led to the city's capture in July, 1863, but focuses on the campaign's utility as a primer for modern leaders in "war, business, politics, communities, families and schools" (201). The book has some value for historians interested in a brief synopsis of the campaign itself but would more readily find an audience among students of military and strategic studies and even non-military readers searching for leadership "lessons" from the past that they could apply in current and future endeavors. As such, it is unlikely to replace recent authoritative accounts of the campaigns (such as Michael Ballard's magisterial *Vicksburg*) but may make the events of the campaign known to a wider audience outside of military and Civil War circles.

The work is divided into two sections: a brief (40 pp.) summary of events entitled "Understanding Vicksburg" that places the events in context and far exceeds any other summary of similar length. But the bulk of the book (160 pp.) is in the second section, "Leadership Vignettes," which provides thirty separate short, (typically five page) synopses of how either decisive leadership or leadership failures influenced some important aspect of the campaign, ending with several bullet-point "takeaways" for the reader to apply in their own situations. As each vignette is designed to stand alone, this leads to some repetition, both in the second part of the book with the first, and throughout the second, as essential elements often have to be repeated to set up each vignette. In addition, the accounts feel somewhat formulaic and reveal the U.S. Army's penchant (Dougherty is a retired U.S. Army officer) for concise 'lessons learned,' that can sometimes rob a topic of its essential complexity and the

important mental exercise of allowing a reader (and leader) to draw their own conclusions rather than having a formulaic answer provided for them.

The summary seeks to place the campaign in the context of the war and further demonstrates the western theater's importance to the eventual Confederate defeat. For example, Dougherty notes that Vicksburg is "considered by many historians to be the Civil War's decisive action," and suggests that the capture of Vicksburg was "more decisive" than Gettysburg (24, 37). But, if anything, Dougherty overemphasizes the river's importance to the Union. He argues that the Mississippi was the "single most important economic feature of the North American continent" and its closure "threatened to strangle northern commercial interests" (25). While this might have been true prior to the spread of the railroad, by 1860, water navigation had been largely supplanted by the iron rails that bound the East to the Midwest, leading eventually to Chicago replacing New Orleans as the most important commercial center between the Appalachians and the Rockies. The river was certainly important to the Confederate cause, especially in providing access to resources from the Trans-Mississippi region, but it had grown comparatively less so for the North.

The vignettes concentrate disproportionately on both senior leaders (only one enlisted man is featured) and on successful rather than unsuccessful examples, testing the adage that we learn more from our failures than successes. Ulysses S. Grant is featured eight times, all in laudatory accounts, while John C. Pemberton is the subject of four largely, and correctly, critical examinations. The only other figure featured more than once is William T. Sherman (three times). Dougherty's vignettes do much to further explode the myth of southern superiority in military leadership and demonstrate that the campaign's outcome was as much as anything else the product of "superior Federal leadership," but avoid boiling the campaign down into a rather simplistic binary of good and bad (197). While Union commanders made critical decisions that led to success and Confederate strategists (Jefferson Davis and Joe Johnston are featured once each) led directly to the defeat, solid Confederate field leadership (in the persons of John Bowen and Lloyd Tilghman) and Union missteps (exemplified by John McClelland) are also featured, providing essential balance to the work.

Dougherty is at his best when tying leadership development to earlier events, further demonstrating the importance of historical context. As an example, vignettes Fifteen and Sixteen demonstrate that Grant's famous decision to "cut loose" from his supply lines actually emulated his mentor, Winfield

Scott's decision during the Mexico City campaign of 1847. Likewise, Pemberton mislearned a number of leadership lessons in Mexico while serving as an aide to the autocratic and inflexible William Worth. These examples demonstrate, as Dougherty has in an excellent earlier work, *Civil War Leadership and Mexican War Experience*, the importance of prior experiences in leadership development, but also serve to emphasize that both men's most formative influences came from practical experience and not, presumably, from reading leadership primers.

The book suffers from minor omissions in copy editing (p. 27, McClelland's XVII Corps should be XIII Corps, p. 180 where the "blame must wrest (sic) with Davis," p. 189 Meridien should be Meridian, Mississippi) but is generally well-written and useful to a wide variety of readers. It suffers from the lack of an Index yet curiously includes an otherwise excellent thirty page "Order of Battle" that is useful but not particularly relevant. The bibliography combines works directly related to the campaign and other leadership texts but omits Timothy Smith's *Champion Hill*, which is surprising given that Dougherty acknowledges that the engagement was the "decisive battle of the Vicksburg Campaign" (149). The slim volume is slightly overpriced, but historians not familiar with the specific military aspects of the campaign will find the summary far more useful than an Osprey book or wikipedia article, while cadets and midshipmen will garner a number of ideas and techniques to add to their own leadership toolboxes. His history is generally quite solid, but Dougherty reveals early on his primary purpose in writing the book: (he currently serves as a Tactical Officer at the Citadel in Charleston) to "crystallize the lessons for the reader," relieving them of the burden but also denying them both the benefits and the joys of the exercise (9).

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