

Kennesaw Mountain: Sherman, Johnston, and the Atlanta Campaign

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Recommended Citation

Kreiser, Lawrence (2013) "Kennesaw Mountain: Sherman, Johnston, and the Atlanta Campaign," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 15 : Iss. 3 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.15.3.17

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol15/iss3/16>

Review

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Summer 2013

Hess, Earl *Kennesaw Mountain: Sherman, Johnston, and the Atlanta Campaign*.
University of North Carolina Press, \$35.00 ISBN 978-1-4696-0211-0

A Needed New Look at an Important Battle

The battle at Kennesaw Mountain in northern Georgia during late June 1864 often is overshadowed in the historical scholarship by the momentous events that occurred in the East that same summer. Prior to settling into a siege around the Confederate-defended city of Petersburg, Virginia, Grant and Lee had badly bloodied the other's army in a series of nearly continuous maneuvers and battles. Dozens of books are devoted to the Overland Campaign. The fighting at Kennesaw Mountain, however, is probably best known until now as a single chapter in Charles Royster's *The Destructive War: William Tecumseh Sherman, Stonewall Jackson, and the Americans*, now twenty years old.

Earl Hess, an associate professor of history at Lincoln Memorial University and a nationally recognized Civil War scholar, provides a needed corrective. He declares that the aim of his book "is not only to describe the actions along the Kennesaw Line but to explain the significance of the Kennesaw phase of the Atlanta campaign and understand the outcome of operations along the line." (xiv) Four of the book's nine chapters provide a blow-by-blow account of the Union attack on June 27 and its immediate aftermath. The other chapters cover the maneuvers before and after the battle, as well as the little-known fighting at Kolb's Farm on June 22, where Union defenders repulsed a poorly coordinated Confederate assault. An appendix details the preservation of the Kennesaw battlefield after the war, particularly focusing on the fieldworks that visitors might still see. "Remnants of military features as well as the lay of the land constitute a precious resource not duplicated in official reports or personal accounts," Hess reminds his readers. Americans interested in the Civil War "owe a huge debt" to Union and Confederate veterans and government officials who labored "to bequeath the landscape of battle on and around Kennesaw to future

generations." (240)

The pivotal nature of fighting at Kennesaw Mountain is one of Hess's many contributions to the understanding of the battle and campaign. Too often, the failed Union attack on strong Confederate defensive lines appears as only a bit of a bump on Major General William T. Sherman's inexorable campaign toward the major Confederate transportation and supply hub of Atlanta. Sherman contributed to such a perception. Only days after the battle—which resulted in 3,000 Union casualties—he wrote to his wife that he had ordered the attack as much for its morale effects as for any hopes of battlefield victory. Too much maneuvering, Sherman reasoned, and his men would lose their battlefield sharpness. Too much Union "strategy" and not enough muscle, and Confederate General Joseph E. Johnston and his soldiers might believe the Yankees scared and hesitant.

Rather than a relatively meaningless Union stumble, the fighting at Kennesaw Mountain had much larger strategic implications. For Sherman and Johnston, there was "much to be gained or lost . . . Depending on how this phase of the struggle for Atlanta came out." (xv) By mid-June, Sherman appeared stalled in his drive toward Atlanta. Unusually rainy weather and a series of strong Confederate defensive lines had slowed the Union offensive to a crawl. Sherman worried that, if his advance bogged down, Johnston might send reinforcements to allow Lee to break the siege of Petersburg. Like Sherman, Johnston also fretted. Outflanked from several defensive lines prior to Kennesaw Mountain, Johnston still believed that the best Confederate strategy to defend Atlanta traded space for time. As the armies moved closer to the city, however, Johnston felt increasing pressure from President Jefferson Davis to take more dramatic measures. A Union attack at Kennesaw Mounted offered Johnston the opportunity to demonstrate that a stout defense that inflicted high casualties and gave little ground might wear down Union morale prior to the presidential election of 1864.

Neither Sherman nor Johnston gained entirely what they wanted on June 27. Although some Union observers later claimed that only the death of two Federal brigade commanders at critical moments during the fighting caused the attack to falter, Hess ably demonstrates otherwise. The men of the attacking columns fought bravely, but the Confederate defensive fire, when combined with the rugged terrain and strong fieldworks, made any hope for a Union breakthrough highly unlikely. If Sherman simply wanted to keep his men sharp, he learned a

painful lesson otherwise. When the Union general asked if another attack might succeed, one of his corps commanders pointedly responded, ““one or two more such assaults would use up this army.”” (145) If Sherman wanted to keep Johnston from reinforcing Lee, a lopsided battlefield defeat hurt more than helped.

Confederate morale was high in the aftermath of the battle, but Johnston let the advantage slip away by again allowing the Federals to move around his left flank and closer to Atlanta. The turn of events infuriated Davis. Despairing that Johnston would ever successfully defend Atlanta, Davis replaced him with General John Bell Hood in mid-July. Johnston continued to advocate for his defensive strategy during the postwar, when he repeatedly inflated the magnitude and losses of the Union assault. With little more than conjecture to go upon, Johnston’s arguments that he could have saved Atlanta and, by extension, helped the Confederacy to win the war, gained little traction.

Detailed maps and numerous images round out Hess’s crisp writing style and extensive research. *Kennesaw Mountain* is an exceptionally strong book for all of those readers interested in the Atlanta Campaign, the western theater, and the Civil War in general.

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