

The Last Hurrah: Sterling Price's Missouri Expedition of 1864

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Review

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Last Chance for a Confederate Missouri: Sterling Price's 1864 Campaign

In the summer and fall of 1864 Confederate forces launched a final three-pronged invasion of Union held territory. In the East Jubal Early even reached the District of Columbia, attacking Fort Stevens on July 12, before retreating to the Shenandoah Valley. After Early's defeat at Cedar Creek General Phil Sheridan laid waste to the farms and homes of the Valley, cutting off key food supplies for the Army of Northern Virginia. In the West John Bell Hood turned away from General Sherman after the fall of Atlanta and launched a desperate raid on Union supply lines in Middle Tennessee. With catastrophic losses at Franklin and Nashville, the Army of Tennessee limped back into Alabama, no longer an effective fighting force. But what about the Trans-Mississippi Theater, where historians have generally paid little attention? Sterling Price would lead his own invasion from northern Louisiana through Arkansas and into the heart of central Missouri, hoping to take St. Louis and the state capital of Jefferson City, if possible, and to gather recruits and supplies in heavily pro-Confederate Little Dixie. This latter campaign has received the least attention of all from historians, until now.

With *The Last Hurrah: Sterling Price's Missouri Expedition of 1864*, Kyle Sinisi has offered a masterful and definitive study of this long-neglected and critical campaign in the Trans-Mississippi West. Consulting a wide array of military records, memoirs, newspapers and letters, as well as a comprehensive assessment of relevant secondary works, Sinisi has created a more coherent and masterful account of Price's Raid than any other work that precedes it.

As Sinisi reminds readers early in the volume, the strategic objective of the raid – to gather recruits and supplies and, if possible, to redeem Missouri for the Confederacy – met varying degrees of skepticism from rival military

commanders and from erstwhile political leaders. The main strategic goal was to gather recruits trapped behind Union lines and much-needed supplies from the fertile central Missouri bottomland farms of Little Dixie. But Price also wanted to seize St. Louis and Jefferson City, and with those two cities, the ultimate political prize of Missouri as a Confederate state. Coming on the heels of the victorious Red River Campaign of northern Louisiana in Spring 1864, Confederate military leaders around Price made plans to push north through Arkansas and into the heart of Missouri. Missouri-based Confederate generals Jo Shelby, John Marmaduke and, eventually, Jeff Thompson eagerly followed Price, who embodied the Confederate cause for so many Missourians. Major General James Fagan of Arkansas would also serve as a top subordinate during the campaign.

Unfortunately, Thomas Reynolds, who became Confederate Missouri Governor-in-exile after the death of Claiborne Fox Jackson, distrusted Price and envisioned a different strategic approach to the Trans-Mississippi. Whereas Price viewed the capture and “liberation” of Missouri as a key prize in its own right, Reynolds, more the Confederate nationalist, insisted that the strategic needs of the overall Confederacy took precedence over a distracting raid of little military value. Personal distrust and jealousy of Price accentuated Reynolds’s skepticism. Edmund Kirby Smith, who commanded overall Confederate forces west of the Mississippi, generally agreed with Reynolds. Nevertheless, as Sinisi demonstrates, Kirby Smith offered whatever aid to Price that he could provide.

On the Union side, political problems could be found in two places: among the corps of exiled generals and within the delegation of Kansans eager for revenge after the massacre at Lawrence a year before. Generals who fell out of favor in the east, including William Rosecrans and Alfred Pleasanton would lead the hodgepodge of militia and seasoned volunteer cavalry forces tasked with defending Missouri. Key to rounding up Union troops in the west would be Samuel Curtis, the hero of Pea Ridge, then off in western Kansas fighting the Arapahoe and Cheyenne. Along with fellow Kansas radical James G. Blunt, Curtis would bring back east with him various Colorado and Kansas regiments accustomed to fighting Indian and Confederate guerrillas. Kansas Jayhawkers like Doc Jennison would enter the fray as well once the campaign turned toward Missouri’s western border. Unfortunately, a gubernatorial battle in Kansas pitted many of these Union generals against one another, making coordination across such a wide swath of territory that much more difficult. Meanwhile, Union General Frederick Steele helplessly watched from Arkansas as Price’s men

crossed the state, gathered conscripts in northeastern Arkansas and pushed into Missouri. Stretched thin, with most resources dedicated to Sherman's Atlanta campaign, Unionist Missouri would depend on its second and third class generals to defend the state.

Sinisi vividly describes the rugged topography of the Ozark Plateau and the logistical challenges faced on both sides of coordinating movement and battle plans. The many detailed maps show the paths Price and his brigadier generals took to marshal resources for battle, first at Pilot Grove in southeastern Missouri and then toward Jefferson City. By eastern standards, the battles were of small scale, with combined casualties rarely exceeding 1,500 men. But small Union victories changed Price's course of invasion early on, steering him away from St. Louis and toward the central Missouri Confederate hotbed of Little Dixie.

From this point the book delves deeply into the operational details within both Confederate and Union commands, as well as the myriad guerrilla forces that begin to attach themselves to Price's Army of Missouri. After Price failed to break the defensive lines surrounding Jefferson City, his men followed the river to the west and into the communities that lent so much support to Missouri's Confederate cause from the beginning of the war. Sinisi notes Price's disappointment at failing to capture the state capital, but rightly emphasizes the larger mission, which was to gather supplies and recruits from Confederate sympathizers chafing under Unionist rule since 1861. With minor victories over still-scattered Union forces at Glasgow and Lafayette Price gave his men time to visit family and friends and gather support for the Southern cause. Guerrillas exploited the dearth of Union authority, with Bloody Bill Anderson's campaign reaching its climax during the months of Price's raid. However, Sinisi insists that the guerrillas operated independently and often at cross purposes with Price, Shelby, Marmaduke and Fagan, all of whom were committed to treating captured prisoners humanely. Still, the men under Confederate command were not always well-disciplined, and the distinction between official cavalymen and bushwhacker occasionally blurred. Regardless, civilians of either loyalty suffered as conventional and guerrilla forces desperately sought food and supplies from the beleaguered populace.

Union forces finally caught up with Price as he pushed west toward the Big Blue River at Independence and headed for the Kansas line. Key to eventual Union victory here was the arrival of Alfred Pleasanton from the east. A haughty disciplinarian, Pleasanton readied his men to smash Price's rearguard as Curtis

and the Kansas militiamen awaited Price's arrival around Westport, just south of Kansas City. By October 22 and 23, Price's good fortune ran out. His forces were smashed at Byram's Ford near Westport and forced south in disorganized fashion. A long pursuit from Curtis led to another catastrophic defeat for Price at Mine Creek, where General Marmaduke was captured. Pleasanton declared the mission accomplished and left Curtis and various cavalry regiments to pursue Price out of Kansas and Missouri and toward the Arkansas River. Battered by the elements, lacking food and water, and chased by Curtis's men, the remnants of Price's army ventured west into Indian Territory, crossed the Arkansas River, and then returned east near the Texas-Arkansas border. This long march from August 28 to December 2 and covering over 1,400 miles left Price's once-proud Army of Missouri a shell of its former self, especially as so many of its new recruits deserted and headed back home. Like Hood's Army of Tennessee after the Battle of Nashville, Price's Army of Missouri had essentially disintegrated as a fighting force, though its surviving men, still committed to the Confederate cause, would remain under Kirby Smith's command until late May 1865. Price and a few diehards would go into exile in Mexico before returning home.

Maintaining a tight focus on the operational challenges of the campaign, Sinisi nevertheless incorporates into the narrative the political machinations, guerrilla depredations and civilian privations along Price's path. Sinisi is particularly adept at clearing through the sniping self-justifications offered on both sides following the war. Jealousies between Price and Reynolds bore ugly fruit in post-battle accounts, leading many historians to blame defeat on Price's own sluggishness. Sinisi concedes Price's flaws as a commander but rightly insists that the larger logistical challenges of the expedition rendered it a lost cause from the beginning.

The strategic failure of the Price campaign requires more explanation beyond military failure. As Sinisi concludes, a fair assessment of Price's leadership must account for both his poorly equipped army and his failure to "liberate a state that ultimately did not want to be liberated (364)." That of course begs the question of why Missouri did not want to be liberated in 1864, a question that could not possibly be answered in this book. As Robert E. Lee discovered in western Maryland 1862 and Braxton Bragg learned in Kentucky that same year, campaigns for liberation often produce negligible or even counterproductive results. In many ways, then, Sinisi's splendid military history of the campaign highlights the need for a new, comprehensive study of changing statewide loyalties in Missouri from 1862 onward.

Aaron Astor, Associate Professor of History at Maryville College in Maryville, Tennessee, is author of Rebels on the Border: Civil War, Emancipation, and the Reconstruction of Kentucky and Missouri, 1860-1872 (LSU Press: 2012) and The Civil War Along Tennessee's Cumberland Plateau (History Press: 2015). He is currently writing a book on the 1860 Presidential election as a grassroots phenomenon in four distinct American communities.