

Through the Howling Wilderness: The 1864 Red River Campaign and Union Failure in the West

Charles V. Waite

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

Recommended Citation

Waite, Charles V. (2007) "Through the Howling Wilderness: The 1864 Red River Campaign and Union Failure in the West," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 9 : Iss. 3 .
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol9/iss3/19>

Review

Waite, Charles V.

Summer 2007

Joiner, Gary D. *Through the Howling Wilderness: The 1864 Red River Campaign and Union Failure in the West*. University of Tennessee Press, \$39.95 hardcover ISBN 9781572335448

Failure on the Red River

Of all the Civil War campaigns that took place in the Trans-Mississippi Department, historians have appropriately devoted the most attention to the failed Union attempt to occupy western Louisiana and eastern Texas in 1864. Gary D. Joiner's monograph *Through the Howling Wilderness: The 1864 Red River Campaign and Union Failure in the West* represents the latest attempt to explain the strange mixture of politics, economics, and military strategy that doomed the Union effort. Joiner, director of the Red River Regional Studies Center in Shreveport, published another work on the subject, *One Damn Blunder from Beginning to End: The Red River Campaign of 1864*, in 2004. Together, these books constitute the most up to date scholarship on the topic.

Whereas Joiner's earlier work concentrated primarily on the military aspects of the campaign in northwest Louisiana, *Through the Howling Wilderness* gives the reader a much more comprehensive view of the nature of the campaign, from grand strategy to the experiences of ordinary soldiers. The author devotes considerable space to the context of the campaign on both sides. Joiner argues that the real prize for the Union in 1864 was Shreveport, at that time the Confederate capital of Louisiana and the headquarters of the Trans-Mississippi Department, as well as a major naval, military, and industrial target. Far from being a backwater of the war, the author shows that Shreveport was a heavily fortified city that served as the focal point of Confederate industry, such as the arms depot in nearby Tyler, Texas. The city also represented a threat to the Union navy, as the Confederates had an ironclad, the *CSS Missouri*, and several submarines in Shreveport that posed a threat to Union control of the Mississippi.

Joiner assigns primary blame for the Union failure to General Nathaniel P. Banks. A Massachusetts Republican, and possible rival to Abraham Lincoln's reelection campaign, the highly political Banks viewed the advance on Shreveport in political terms. He wanted Union control of the rich cotton-growing districts along the Red River to satisfy textile mill owners in his home state. Banks also wanted to capture Shreveport to depose the Confederate state government and install one loyal to the Union under Lincoln's ten per cent plan.

Banks's lack of military knowledge and political ambition did not constitute the only reasons for the Union disaster. Within the army, Generals Ulysses S. Grant and William T. Sherman distrusted Banks and preferred an attack on Mobile, Alabama, rather than the Louisiana expedition. Inter-service rivalry and competing demands for manpower led to a dangerous situation where the expedition had three elements: Banks's troops from New Orleans, ten thousand men from Sherman's command, and a virtually independent naval contingent under Admiral David Dixon Porter. Joiner does a superb job of explaining how the Confederate naval threat led Porter to use heavy ironclads unsuitable for the Red River above the falls at Alexandria. The admiral's anxiety nearly led to the loss of the fleet in shallow waters, but fortunately engineer Colonel Bailey constructed a dam that enabled the fleet to escape.

Joiner argues that poor planning by Banks ultimately caused the Union defeat at Mansfield and subsequent Battle of Pleasant Hill. As the army marched north of Natchitoches, Banks decided to turn away from the river and forego the support of Porter's gunboats. Even worse, the Union commander concentrated his forces on one road in the Howling Wilderness of northwestern Louisiana instead of advancing on different approaches. Joiner shows that Banks's marching order, with the supply train jammed between the cavalry and advance infantry elements, meant that supporting units could not reach the battlefield quickly. This error and the aggressive tactics of Confederate Major General Richard Taylor led to a humiliating defeat and the abandonment of the entire campaign by Banks.

Joiner concentrates on the fighting in Louisiana, but he does not ignore the other element of the Union campaign, the attempt by Major General Frederick Steele to advance from Little Rock, Arkansas, and help Banks capture Shreveport. The author explains the convoluted nature of the campaign in Arkansas clearly. Steele faced even worse problems of supply and coordination

than had Banks, ultimately leading to a strategic defeat at the hands of a numerically inferior enemy and a retreat to Little Rock.

The author concludes by arguing that the failure of the Red River Campaign represented a huge setback to the Union and delayed the end of the war by squandering two infantry corps that Sherman could have put to better use as part of his Georgia campaign. Instead of capturing Shreveport, Banks' failure had the effect of ending any real effort by the Union in the Trans-Mississippi. *Through the Howling Wilderness* is the best monograph available on a relatively unknown campaign. Thanks to Joiner, historians and Civil War buffs alike can understand the bizarre story of the Red River Campaign.

Charles V. Waite is assistant professor of history at The University of Texas-Pan American.