

### Receding Tide, Vicksburg and Gettysburg: The Campaigns That Changed the Civil War

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## Review

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**Bearss, Edwin C. and J. Parker Hills.** *Receding Tide, Vicksburg and Gettysburg: The Campaigns that Changed the Civil War.* National Geographic Books, \$28.00 ISBN 978-1-4262-0510-1

### Civil War Watershed

I have had the privilege of tramping the hallowed fields of Gettysburg several times with Ed Bearss, and his energy, passion, and knowledge of the events of the Civil War era are an example that all students of the period should strive to emulate. His story-telling ability holds an audience spellbound with the richness of details, coupled with an entertainment value that is hard to match. His historical accuracy is unrivaled and reflects more than seventy years of study, research, and, most of all, personal observation of the terrain and the critical interpretation of what happened on the sacred soil. He particularly shines in his analysis of the importance of the ground and how commanders reacted to it.

Over the years, Edwin Cole Bearss adapted his considerable skills as a field guide and passionate public speaker to also teach and educate the readers of his many excellent past books. Now, he takes his readers on a journey through the critical summer of 1863, when the twin Union victories at Gettysburg and Vicksburg changed the direction of the war, both for the North and the South. In his latest work, *Receding Tide, Vicksburg and Gettysburg: The Campaigns That Changed the Civil War*, the reader can sense the classic Bearss rapid-fire, no nonsense style that has made him a legend among battlefield trampers and Civil War Round Table attendees for decades. His prose is crisp; his illustrations lively and pointed; and the narrative flows easily and invites the reader to turn the page. Former U.S. Army officer J. Parker Hills of Mississippi deftly augments the book with his leadership lessons learned from a study of the campaigns and command personalities, as well as with several excellent maps he generated with two other talented cartographers. His smooth editing nicely

complements Ed's encyclopedia-like knowledge of the campaigns, and helps the text remain highly readable without bogging down in unnecessary details.

Bearss argues convincingly that neither government could afford to lose what became the Vicksburg and Gettysburg campaigns. He writes that "millions of people have and will visit Gettysburg, and yet so few will ever understand what this battlefield means to America and Americans" (383). He adds, "Soldiers serve and move on, their contributions often remembered by nothing more than a certificate or a mass-produced medal. They move on to other things, some physically scarred and others mentally scarred... All we have to remind us of their nameless sacrifice is the battlefield and the interpretation of it" (384). Bears and Hills have provided us, and future generations, with a succinctly written, fresh story of the twin battles that perhaps changed the very future of what could have been a divided America. Their interpretation of the battlefields, as well as the troop movements and political uncertainty, paint a vivid word picture of the stakes for both the North and South. Neither side dared lose; yet both sides took risks and gambles, both strategically and later tactically, that risked everything.

In the end, "the Vicksburg Campaign didn't cause Gettysburg, but Gettysburg was Lee's and the Confederate government's response to the Vicksburg dilemma" (386). The gamble ultimately failed, and today, as Bearss presciently mentions, in modern times, "less attention is paid to history and its lessons... The Civil War is falling victim to the sheer volume of contemporary history that documents our republic. That is why battlefields are important" (386). The authors have written a book that stands out in the sheer volume for its simplicity, readability, and re-establishing the importance of the military campaigns of the summer of 1863 in shaping the destiny of the United States.

With excellent maps that help place the verbiage in context of Civil War geography, *Receding Tide* should be a mandatory read for any serious military history buff. While more than a thousand books have been written on Gettysburg and Vicksburg, few have succeeded in telling the joint story of the beginning of the end of the Southern Confederacy. Priced reasonably, and printed on archival permanent paper, the book will be a classic that will be handed down and enjoyed by generations yet to come.

Written at the behest of the Blue and Gray Education Society, royalties from the book are being used to further the education of the public on Civil War topics, and to support other worthwhile efforts of the BGES. A companion to

Bearss' well received *Fields of Glory*, this new National Geographic Books title is a worthy addition to the existing compendium of military and contextual information on the Vicksburg, Gettysburg, and the scores of smaller engagements during the campaigns.

As Ed Bearss so aptly states, "The Vicksburg Campaign was a great event in U.S. military history. It marked its victor, Ulysses S. Grant, for the most profound challenges this country would face. As a military man he succeeded; however, as a politician he fumbled—reminding us how elusive true greatness is" (384). For those of us privileged enough to have studied on the battlefield with Ed, we can agree that he epitomizes "true greatness" in Civil War scholarship and knows how to package and relay that knowledge into a format that both entertains and educates at the same time.

*Scott L. Mingus Sr. is a scientist and executive in the global papermaking industry based in historic York, Pennsylvania. He has seven Civil War books in print, including his recent The Louisiana Tigers in the Gettysburg Campaign: June-July 1863 (LSU Press, 2009). He is currently writing a fresh biography of Governor-General William "Extra Billy" Smith of Virginia.*