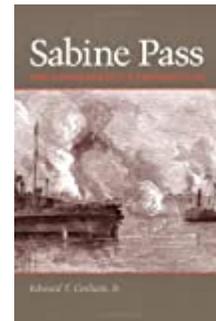


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Edward T. Cotham, Jr. *Sabine Pass: The Confederacy's Thermopylae*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004. x + 274 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-292-70603-3; \$21.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-292-70594-4.



Reviewed by Charles D. Gear (Department of History, Texas A & M University)

Published on H-CivWar (May, 2006)

Edward T. Cotham Jr. provides a fresh new look at a brief battle on the Texas coast, between a small land fort and a large Union flotilla of gunboats and transport ships, that had repercussions on the duration and direction of the Civil War in his book, *Sabine Pass: The Confederacy's Thermopylae*. Most historians, even those that study the Civil War, either pay little attention to the Trans-Mississippi during the war or state that nothing of real significance occurred in the theater. The author dispels this idea through a detailed examination of the battle of Sabine Pass through impeccable research and by placing this event in the context of the entire Civil War. Cotham is the president of the Terry Foundation and is the author of *Battle on the Bay: The Civil War Struggle for Galveston* (1998).

Cotham establishes the background to the battle of Sabine Pass by examining all the activities that occurred on the Texas coast and all the major leaders involved. Some of the activities included minor Union victories at Corpus Christi, Galveston, and Sabine Pass. All these attempts ended in failure because the Union could not hold the territory they captured. By 1863, Texas became even more important to the Union for several reasons, including cutting off Confederate trade across the Mexican border, countering the threat of French control of Mexico, getting votes from Texas Unionists for Abraham Lincoln

in the presidential election of 1864, and considering it as a stepping-stone to the eventual capture of Mobile Bay and the rest of the Gulf of Mexico.

The author examines in depth leaders on both sides throughout the book. Admiral David Glassgow Farragut was the most influential Union commander because he designed the northern strategy that placed importance on the capture of Texas and was the architect of aggressive naval tactics for the Union Navy. The aggressiveness of Farragut's philosophy and the spirited nature of Dowling and his Irishmen clashed at the battle of Sabine Pass. The most influential Confederate involved in Sabine Pass was Richard "Dick" Dowling, an Irish immigrant and owner of a popular bar in Galveston, Texas. During the war, Dowling commanded the Davis Guards, a company in Cook's Heavy Artillery Regiment, composed of fellow Irishmen, notorious for their unruly nature. The aggressiveness of Farragut and the spirited nature of Dowling and his Irishmen clashed at the battle of Sabine Pass.

Sabine Pass tactically was of little importance, but strategically, the author argues, it had an enormous impact on the course of the war. The importance of Sabine Pass to the Union lies with its location and the events unfolding in Mexico. Sabine Pass was a great location for blockade-runners to avoid Union ships, and it had railroads connecting it to Houston. By attacking this loca-

tion, the Union Army would have quick access to Houston and good logistical lines to support any occupation of Texas. The question remains, why Texas and not Mobile Bay, Alabama? Texas, though already cut off from the rest of the Confederacy, still had large reserves of cotton which New England textile mills needed to keep operating. In addition, the French controlled Mexico, through the puppet government under Maximilian, and posed a threat to the United States. To counter this threat, Abraham Lincoln wanted Union soldiers along the Rio Grande River to thwart any attempt by Mexico to recapture Texas or the American southwest. These reasons made Texas a higher priority than other Gulf Coast locations, such as Mobile Bay, by September of 1863.

From the start, the battle looked to be a match between David and Goliath, the Union having superiority in manpower (five thousand men) and boats (p. 11). This large Union force faced fifty Confederates isolated in Fort Griffin, a mud fortification, with only six cannons. On paper, it appears that the Northern attackers would easily overpower their opponent, but this was not the case. A series of unfortunate events for the Union flotilla, along with the courage of Dowling and the Davis Guards, allowed the Confederates to defeat the Goliath within an hour and a half. Afterwards the Confederates celebrated their achievement while the Union Army

and Navy looked to blame each other or someone for the embarrassing defeat. Overall, the victory prevented the North from invading Texas that year, forced Farragut to reconsider his aggressive strategy of using ships to attack land fortifications, delayed his attack on Mobile Bay for almost a year, and propelled Dowling and his Davis Guards to immortality in the lore of Texas History.

Cotham does an excellent job using the story of a handful of Confederate Texans defeating a large Union force to demonstrate the importance of Texas and the Trans-Mississippi to the Civil War. He not only provides a significant amount of background information on Sabine Pass before, during, and after the war, but also the histories of all the leaders involved. The author takes a balanced approach when describing the battle, without focusing too much on one side or one person, or strictly the military aspects. He does incorporate social and cultural history of Sabine Pass, especially the impact of foreign immigrants on the Texas coast. Another strong attribute of this book is that it places this small battle in context with the rest of the war and other events directly affected by Sabine Pass. This book will interest the common reader of Civil War and Texas history, while also providing an interesting story and research of a battle most Americans and Texans have forgotten.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-civwar>

Citation: Charles D. Grear. Review of Cotham, Edward T., Jr., *Sabine Pass: The Confederacy's Thermopylae*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. May, 2006.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11754>

Copyright © 2006 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.