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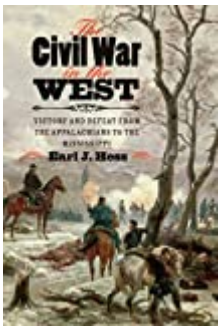

Earl J. Hess. *The Civil War in the West: Victory and Defeat from the Appalachians to the Mississippi.* Littlefield History of the Civil War Era Series. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012. 448 pp. $40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3542-5.

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air War College)

Earl J. Hessâs *The Civil War in the West: Victory and Defeat from the Appalachians to the Mississippi* is a welcome one-volume history of the American Civil War in the western theater. This study is an excellent addition to the University of North Carolina Pressâs Littlefield History of the Civil War Era series. The eastern theater garners the majority of the scholarly attention of the Civil War, but Hess argues that the war was decided in the western theaterâthat expanse of terrain that encompasses the Mississippi River Valley and east of the Appalachians in the final campaigns of the war.

Federal control of the Mississippi River proved to be a key motivation for Northerners in the Upper Mississippi River Valley. The strategically vital waterway was economically important to farmers and merchants throughout the Mississippi River basin. If the lower sections of the Mississippi River came under the control of a foreignâand potentially hostileâgovernment, the economic impact on the Upper Mississippi River Valley could be devastating. In this instance, Hess rightly points out that economic and political interests dovetailed strongly in favor of maintaining the Union. Not surprisingly, federal operations focused on gaining control of the Mississippi River Valley began almost immediately after the start of the conflict.

The Civil War in the West has a chronological structure and begins with the realization by both sides of the vital strategic interest in securing the Mississippi River. Kentuckyâs and Missouriâs futile attempts at neutrality formed the backdrop for the introduction of Ulysses S. Grant into the picture. Neither side wished to antagonize the Kentucky state government, but the Confederates initially broke the informal agreement between the combatants, and the federals rapidly followed suit. With those moves, the campaigns for Americaâs heartland began in earnest. Hess then details early attempts at securing the Upper Mississippi, including the Battle of Belmont, Missouri, on November 7, 1861. The fighting in 1861 proved to be confusing and lacked strategic coherence, but that quickly changed in early 1862. The federals unraveled the Confederatesâ riverine defense system, with Grant taking Forts Henry and Donelson, Tennessee, in February 1862. The loss of those two rebel outposts opened central Tennessee to Union invasion, elevated Grant to the rank of major general, and paved the way for campaigns further south along the east bank of the Mississippi River. Hess handles these campaigns briefly and adeptly.

One area that is puzzling is his lack of discussion of how the campaigns in Missouri, specifically the Pea Ridge campaign in southwest Missouri and northwest

Arkansas, held up Grant after Forts Henry and Donelson. While the battles in Missouri were not in the western theater (they were in the trans-Mississippi theater), they undoubtedly influenced the campaigns on the east bank of the Mississippi River. With Major General Sterling Priceâs force in Missouri as a threat to St. Louis, Grantâs campaigns were held up until the Confederates were evicted from Missouri. Only after the federal victory at Pea Ridge and the rebel abandonment of Arkansas in March 1862 could the campaigns in Tennessee and on the Mississippi resume. Hess is coauthor, with William Shea, of *Pea Ridge: Civil War Campaign in the West* (1992), the best study of that campaign. While an in-depth discussion of Pea Ridge is not warranted in *The Civil War in the West*, a brief description of how that battle and later operations influenced operations east of the Mississippi would have been worthwhile.

This is an indispensable work on the Civil War in the western theater, and Hess makes a strong case that the Civil War was won in the West by the federal governmentâs superior military leadership, ability to take advantage of available resources, technology, and engineering. The leaders in the West, especially William Tecumseh Sherman and Grant, realized that federal soldiers could live off the land and whittle away at the Confederacyâs civilian populationâs will to resist and continue the fight. For these and other reasons, Hessâs work is a valuable contribution to Civil War historiography.

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