

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jack H. Lepa. *Vicksburg and Chattanooga: The Battles that Doomed the Confederacy.* Jefferson: McFarland, 2014. 228 pp. \$39.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7864-9412-5.

Reviewed by Eric Dudley (Kansas State University)

Published on H-War (December, 2015)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air War College)

In *Vicksburg and Chattanooga: The Battles that Doomed the Confederacy*, Jack H. Lepa examines two battles fought in the western theater in 1863 that he believes acted as the turning point in the Civil War. To the author's credit, he recognizes the significance of the West to the conflict's outcome. Eastern battles such as Antietam and Gettysburg frequently draw the attention of historians, often to the neglect of the West where the war was truly won and lost.

Even prior to his discussion of Grant's campaign in Mississippi, Lepa explains the significance of Vicksburg and the Mississippi River to the Union cause. He notes the river's importance for commerce, communication, and transport, as well as its role as the effective lifeline to the Trans-Mississippi states Louisiana, Texas, and Arkansas, without which needed supplies and manpower could not reach the eastern Confederacy. As for the Confederate fortifications on the Mississippi, as President Lincoln noted, "Vicksburg is the key." Lepa describes Vicksburg as the most important point in the Confederacy at the time (p. 16). He further claims that "Vicksburg was as vital to the Confederacy's war effort, and its very survival, as any other place in the South" (p. 17).

The majority of the book narrates the two campaigns, starting with Grant's movements against Vicksburg. Throughout the work, the author provides descriptive commentary and engages the reader with stimulating narrative. For example, Lepa describes the running of the guns at Vicksburg in a very dramatic fashion.

The author devotes much of his analysis to generalship and certain individuals who most affected the outcome of the two campaigns. Chief among these is Ulysses

S. Grant, the man most responsible for the Union victories at both Vicksburg and Chattanooga. In general, Lepa offers a balanced, yet very favorable, evaluation of Grant's decision making and overall strategic thinking. He describes Grant as "possibly the only man who could have overcome the many challenges that had to be faced on the difficult road to victory" (p. 1). Although perhaps an exaggerated claim, there is certainly no denying how vital a role Grant filled throughout the two decisive battles. The author maintains an impartial approach in his evaluation of Grant, such as his criticism of Grant's decision to attack Vicksburg on May 22, while still recognizing his excellent strategic thinking not only in the short term, but also in his long-term vision (pp. 99, 49).

The author's evaluation of John A. McClernand is more perplexing. Lepa appears very sympathetic to McClernand's case, going so far as describing him as a general who "displayed generally sound judgment on the battlefield" (p. 18). The author also seems to forgive McClernand for his inexcusable blunder on May 22, writing that it would be unfair "to lay all the blame for the failed attacks only on McClernand" (p. 99). Lepa offers a much more favorable analysis of McClernand's generalship than most Civil War historians. McClernand's acts of incompetence and insubordination prior to and during the Vicksburg Campaign are well documented, and the general displayed a degree of poor judgment and self-aggrandizement as early in the war as the Battle of Belmont.

Following his description of the Vicksburg Campaign, which constitutes roughly two-thirds of the book, the author turns to the second decisive campaign that

doomed the Confederacy: the Battle of Chattanooga. Similar to his evaluation of the strategic importance of the Mississippi River and Vicksburg, Lepa fully details the significance of Chattanooga, Tennessee. The author notes that Chattanooga was strategically important primarily because of its role as a railroad hub. He writes that after Richmond and Atlanta, Chattanooga was the most important rail center the Confederacy still controlled (p. 135). Lepa further explains that Chattanooga connected almost all the strategically vital points in the Confederacy east of the Mississippi, and its importance was obvious to anyone who could read a map (p. 135).

As with the Vicksburg Campaign, the author details the movements and early clashes including most importantly the Battle of Chickamauga that led both Union and Confederate armies to eventually settle in for the looming Battle of Chattanooga. Lepa describes the Union attacks on Lookout Mountain, and William T. Sherman's assault on the Confederate left, but as expected, the climax of his narrative examines the Union Army's legendary assault up Missionary Ridge. Originally ordered as more of a diversionary demonstration against the Confederate strongly fortified center, the successful Union attack is eventually what carried the day for Grant at Chattanooga. Lepa describes the legend of Missionary Ridge which claims the Union troops, determined to avenge Chickamauga, made the determined charge to the top of the ridge on their own but ultimately concludes that the charge was more of a haphazard and spontaneous action based on being exposed to Confederate rifle pits. The result was a disorganized assault, caused more by the Union soldiers' concern for their own safety and recognition that taking the ridge was their only real hope for protection against enemy fire (pp. 189-190). Surprisingly, the author neglects to mention Braxton Bragg's blunder of fortifying his third line of defensive works on Missionary Ridge on the topographical crest, as opposed to the military crest, which perhaps more than any other single factor is what led to the Confederate defeat. The error did not allow the Confederate defenders the ideal line of fire on the advancing Union troops, and numerous historians have recognized this mistake as a decisive factor in the battle for Missionary Ridge.[1]

Although at times the author relies heavily on secondary sources such as Bruce Catton's *Grant Moves South* (1960), he also utilizes solid primary sources, including the *Official Records* (1881-1901) and Grant's *Personal Memoirs* (1885-86). The most surprising oversight is the absence of *The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant* (1967-85), which may have helped provide useful additional perspective to the author's research.

Ultimately, *Vicksburg and Chattanooga: The Battles that Doomed the Confederacy*, offers little in terms of new original research or field-altering additions to the historiography of the Civil War. Although Lepa correctly highlights the decisive nature of the western theater of the war over the often more popularized eastern, he has not claimed anything not previously asserted by other historians, including most recently of note Steven E. Woodworth and Albert Castel.

Additionally, Lepa's book could have been improved by an extended introduction and conclusion for the author to further justify his thesis, and explain in more detail why Vicksburg and Chattanooga and the West in general were so decisive to the outcome of the war. The book also suffers from numerous typographical errors and could have benefited from more extensive editing. Despite these shortcomings, Lepa still provides an engaging narrative account of two of the Civil War's most significant battles. The target audience for *Vicksburg and Chattanooga* is Civil War academics as well as the general public of popular readers who are interested in the generalship of Ulysses S. Grant or the western campaigns of the Civil War. The book could also be assigned to an undergraduate level college class on the Civil War. Despite the fact that Lepa does not add anything shockingly new to the historiography of the Civil War, his book remains useful for emphasizing the significance of two decisive battles that doomed the Confederacy.

Note

[1]. James McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 680-681.

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

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

Citation: Eric Dudley. Review of Lepa, Jack H., *Vicksburg and Chattanooga: The Battles that Doomed the Confederacy*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. December, 2015.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=44232>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.