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Terrence J. Winschel. *Vicksburg Is the Key: The Struggle for the Mississippi River (Great Campaigns of the Civil War).* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003. xii + 232 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8032-4254-8; $16.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8032-9344-1.

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Pocketing the Key

Taking their cue from a statement by President Abraham Lincoln that "Vicksburg is the keyâ?¦. The war can never be brought to a close until that key is in our pocket," authors William L. Shea and Terrence J. Winschel view the capture of Vicksburg as the critical juncture in the Civil War because it was the successful culmination of the Union campaign to open the Mississippi River from its source to its mouth (p. v). They see the Union effort that began as part of Lt. Gen. Winfield Scott's "Anaconda" plan as "the longest and most complex campaign, or series of campaigns, of the Civil War â?¦ marked by an extraordinary diversity of military operations â?¦ every existing type of naval vessel â?¦ and military engineers [who] practiced their art on a scale never before witnessed in modern warfare." When Vicksburg and Port Hudson surrendered in July 1863, "the Confederacy suffered a blow from which it would not, could not, recover. The hard-won Union triumph did not mean that the end of the war was at hand, but without the trans-Mississippi there was little realistic hope of an independent Southern nation" (p. 205).

Countless Civil War scholars have debated the relative importance of eastern and western theaters in deciding the Civil War's ultimate outcome. With *Vicksburg is the Key*, Shea and Winschel place themselves firmly in the camp of historians such as Thomas Connelly, Edwin C. Bearss, and James Lee McDonough who hold that gaining control of the Mississippi and the western theatre were the keys to Union victory. Shea, who is a professor of history at the University of Arkansas at Monticello, and Winschel, a historian at Vicksburg National Military Park, have also made earlier contributions to this debate. Shea, together with Earl Hess, published *Pea Ridge: Civil War Campaign in the West* in 1992, and Winschel produced a collection of essays titled *Triumph and Defeat: The Vicksburg Campaign*, in 1998.

Shea and Winschel begin *Vicksburg is the Key* by laying out the Mississippi River's importance to the Confederacy, including the access it provided to resource-rich states west of the river. They also explain that with only a small Navy, the Confederacy had to rely upon fortifications to maintain its hold on the "Father of Waters." The authors describe the early Union successes at Forts Henry and Donelson, Island No. 10, and Memphis, which then focused attention on Vicksburg and Port Hudson, the last Confederate strongholds on the river. Thereafter, their narrative leads readers through the sequence of troop movements and battles that led ultimately to Maj. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant's successful siege of Vicksburg.

Shea and Winschel contend that the struggle for the Mississippi was a "defining experience" for several Union and Confederate leaders. The Vicksburg campaign marked a critical point in Grant's development as a general. Demonstrating his characteristic determination and aggressiveness from the beginning, he learned to anticipate difficulties and adjust his plans as circumstances dictated. Citing Grant's "decidedly mixed" record and "persistent reports of alcoholism" as late as March 1863, they see him demonstrating a "growing mastery of mobile warfare" during the march to Vicksburg after the stand off at Grand Gulf less than two months later (p. 61). After Vicksburg's capitulation, Grant was ready for new challenges. The "plain, unassuming man of impeccable honesty" had developed the skills necessary to lead the Union to total victory. Perhaps equally important, he had shown himself to be an able combatant in the nasty business of political infighting. He bested Maj. Gen. John A. McClernand, who sought to raise and command his own force in late 1862 (pp. 39-41), and successfully charmed Charles A. Dana, who was sent west by Edwin Stanton to investigate Grant in early 1863 (p. 61).

On the other hand, the authors contend key Confederate leaders failed to grow to meet the enormity of their task. President Jefferson Davis was "a poor judge of

character and ability who showered choice assignments on his friends," including the impetuous Van Dorn, who "lacked administrative skills," and "tended to ignore inconvenient facts and rush ahead" (pp. 20, 30). John C. Pemberton showed "signs of strain," by the spring of 1863. Unable to comprehend Grant's shifting strategy, he "immersed himself in paperwork," and was "slow to sense" that Grant was moving through Louisiana toward his left flank (p. 94). He also struggled to control, much less lead, his staff. Originally from Pennsylvania, Pemberton was "disliked and distrusted," and "hampered by serious discord among his principal lieutenants" (p. 127). "Overwhelmed by despair," he had, by mid-May, lost his heart for fighting (p. 139). Pemberton's mood was due, in no small part, to the lack of support from General Joseph E. Johnston. Several of Pemberton's subordinates, including Bowen, Maj. Gen. Richard L. Taylor, and engineer Maj. Samuel H. Lockett, whose earthworks "wrung every possible tactical advantage out of the dizzying landscape" (p. 37), unlike their commander, emerged with their reputations intact and continued to serve with distinction.

As a group, Union officers fare better under Shea's and Winschel's scrutiny. In addition to Grant's emergence as a fighting general with an appreciation for using all the forces and weapons at his disposal, Maj. Gen. William T. Sherman adopted a similar view. Appreciating the importance of defeating the citizenry as well as their armies, he let his troops forage for what they needed from the countryside when out of touch with their supply wagons. Col. Benjamin H. Grierson and Col. Abel D. Streight demonstrated that Union cavalry and mounted infantry were the fighting equals of their much more heralded Confederate counterparts. Cmdr. David D. Porter and Flag Officer David G. Farragut proved themselves able commanders both at New Orleans and around Vicksburg, willing to fight when called upon and steady under the pressure of combat.

Well written and tightly edited, *Vicksburg is the Key* keeps readers apace of developments in- and outside Vicksburg throughout the campaign, providing sufficient detail to understand tactics and strategy without yielding to the temptation of troop movement minutia. Readers receive sufficient information to appreciate the decisions of those in charge as well as understand the experiences of the men in the ranks.

The eighth volume in the University of Nebraska Press's Great Campaigns of the Civil War series, *Vicksburg is the Key* fulfills the series' goal of offering readers a concise synthesis that reflects the findings of recent scholarship. William Shea and Terrence Winschel have combined published information with source material from the *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies and Navies* to produce a fast-moving narrative that argues forcefully for the importance of the capture of the Mississippi River to the Union triumph in the Civil War. Historians will continue to dispute the relative importance of the war's eastern and western theaters, but few will deny the value of *Vicksburg is the Key*, the first single-volume account of the campaign to appear in over a century.

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