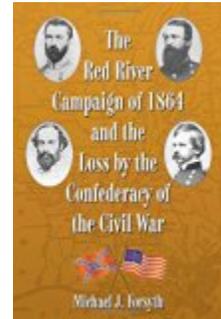Michael J. Forsyth. *The Red River Campaign of 1864 and the Loss by the Confederacy of the Civil War.* Jefferson: Mcfarland, 2009. 192 pp. $35.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7864-4499-1.

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Lost Opportunity on the Red River?

The theme of the text is suggested by the title. The author is a currently serving army officer who brings a range of background information and training that contributes to his study. The author proposes that Confederate commanders in the Trans-Mississippi West missed an incredible opportunity to prolong the war and perhaps even obtain a truce due to Northern war weariness. Inept Union commanders played a role by offering the Confederates several opportunities to crush a Union force.

The Red River Campaign (March 12 - May 22, 1864) was a Federal attempt to capture Shreveport, Louisiana and divide the Confederacy's Transmississippi West. The campaign was not part of the coordinated U.S. offensive orchestrated by General Ulysses S. Grant in the spring of 1864. Grant allowed it to proceed even though he wanted participating troops utilized elsewhere and set deadlines for the campaign to end. As it worked out, one detachment made it to Washington DC, in time to help protect the capital from General Jubal Early's 1864 raid. Another detachment was back with General William T. Sherman's armies threatening Atlanta. A third, eventually, participated in taking Mobile, Alabama. Thus, it is hard to support the author's notion that Federal resources were adversely affected by the campaign, especially given their numerical superiority in both the Virginia and Tennessee/Georgia theaters.

Bickering amongst the leadership occurred on both sides. In part, it was conflicting egos, but professional officers versus political appointees played a role as well.

For the Confederates, General Edmund Kirby Smith was in constant conflict with General Richard Taylor. Kirby Smith was a professional officer; Taylor was a political general who had extensive combat experience under General Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson. Taylor was compromised by focusing on the importance of protecting Louisiana property and fighting the Federals at every opportunity. Smith was far more cautious and felt that shifting troops on interior lines would defeat more Union forces than simply fighting Yankees advancing up the Red River. In the end, they missed several good chances to crush the Federal Red River forces, even after the Red River waters fell and nearly trapped Union navy vessels.

At the same time, General Nathaniel P. Banks was supposed to operate in concert with Admiral David D. Porter. Combined arms were the essential component of the Union's Red River Campaign but the effort was marred by a lack of mutual respect between the two Union leaders. Porter was an adept, professional commander who had worked well with Grant and Sherman in the combined army/navy campaign against Vicksburg. He tried, to some extent, to work with Banks, a man whose military ego certainly rated far above his abilities as a commander. Probably the most important problem for the Federals was that Banks did not have a clue about the potential entrapment of the Union Navy vessels if the river dropped. Ultimately, the escape of most vessels became the only real success of the expedition, and that was thanks to lower-level commanders working well together.

In retrospect, Taylor was probably the best man on the spot. He had fought against Banks while under Jackson in Virginia and knew what it would take to win against superior numbers. Taylor was not supported by his superiors, but still managed to repel the Federal advance.

This study of "what ifs" is intriguing because it is set in a backwater theater that is not well studied. The key question–would crushing a Union force have caused a shift in the 1864 election? –is still problematic. A democracy seemingly has trouble conducting a long war, especially when an election occurs during the conflict. In 1864, were Northern voters so disenchanted with prospects of victory and high casualties that they would elect General George B. McClellan to seek a peace? Given the overall results, it is doubtful, in part, because the Lincoln government allowed absentee voting by soldiers who overwhelming opted to "see it through."

That vote came after Atlanta had been taken, the Richmond/Petersburg fortress was under siege, and Early's men had been driven way from Washington.

Thus, the thematic question comes to be an assessment of how important the additional Red River Campaign's manpower really was. It is the author's contention that it increased Sherman's force to above a three-to-one ratio and in Virginia replaced nearly all casualties suffered during Grant's Overland Virginia Campaign. Without the additional manpower, Union forces would still have won, but it would have taken longer because, with Lincoln still in charge, there would be no peace.

It would have helped to have the maps in the text where engagements are discussed but they are still useful. More important is that the author used maps from the Official Records and then supplemented them with his own abstracted cartography. The abstracts are much more easily understood than the originals. The text flows well and is easily understood. The bibliography is useful and draws from original papers that are not usually cited. Even though this campaign occurred in a remote theater, the thought-provoking premise is worth considering. More importantly, for students of the military art, the text is an example of how not to conduct a campaign when leaders do not get along.

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