

H-Net Reviews

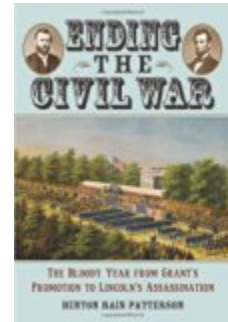
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Benton Rain Patterson. *Ending the Civil War: The Bloody Year from Grant's Promotion to Lincoln's Assassination.* Jefferson: McFarland & Co., 2012. 332 pp. \$38.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7864-6964-2.

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey



This work provides a volume-length synthesis of the political and military developments of the Civil War's final year. Given this period's complexity and lengthy bibliography, any author taking on such an ambitious project must possess the skill necessary to balance the events in question in a manner that displays rigorous analysis, cogency, and some sense of originality. Unfortunately, author Benton Rain Patterson, an emeritus professor of journalism at the University of Florida and popular historian, has constructed a work that rarely exhibits any of these traits. Due to poor organization, a dearth of original analysis, and a paucity of archival material, Patterson's monograph is something less than useful to students of the Civil War era.

A number of scholarly pieces penned in the last twenty years have come to represent significant historiographical contributions to the period in question. Albert Castel's *Decision in the West: The Atlanta Campaign of 1864* (1995), Gary Gallagher's edited volumes on the Shenandoah Valley and Overland campaigns, and Mark Grimsley and Brooks Simpson's co-edited *The Collapse of the Confederacy* (2002) all explore, with admirable skill, a key military event of the final year of the war and its sociopolitical context. Regrettably, the present monograph's relationship—or rather, non-relationship—with these preceding analyses represents one of its salient deficiencies; specifically, Patterson fails to mention, build upon, or engage with any of the aforementioned historians' findings. Patterson's work exists in something of a historiographical vacuum, with the author neglecting to provide anything bordering on substantive engagement with the myriad works examining a similar subject matter. By ostracizing itself from other relevant studies, this

study limits itself to constituting a mere synthesis of veterans' memoirs and the Official Records rather than an independent piece of scholarship that provides anything new, revisionist, or interesting.

Patterson commences his narrative with Grant's ascension to the rank of General-in-Chief of the Union army. Patterson places Grant at the center of the Northern war effort, and given Grant's contribution to Union victory, this is hardly unreasonable. However, in describing Union military strategy, Patterson quite wrongly dismisses Lincoln's role as an architect of Union military policy and his crucial role in bringing the war to termination. To support this contention, Patterson cites Grant's postwar memoir and its denigration of Lincoln's efficacy as Commander-in-Chief (p. 6). Given that most scholars would recognize the problematic nature of utilizing officers' memoirs, which often speak more to the time period in which they were written than to their subject matter, the haphazard use of such evidence erodes Patterson's credibility from the outset. Moreover, Patterson unquestioningly carries forward the assumption that Grant was the chief architect of Union strategy while failing to provide in subsequent chapters a significant discussion of Federal strategy, much less its implementation or evolution. This establishes a pattern for much of the book, as Patterson continually relies on questionable evidence while positing arguments that are either antiquated with respect to the existing historiography or lacking in supporting evidence.

Patterson's narrative then plods forward with a description of the various campaigns of 1864. Here, Patterson attempts to organize his narrative both chronolog-

ically and geographically, offering the reader an alternating narrative that primarily addresses events in Virginia and Georgia. Drawing predominately on officers' memoirs and the Official Records, Patterson provides a command-level view of the Overland Campaign. Meanwhile, the author intermittently shifts his focus west of the Appalachians, describing Joseph Johnston's attempts to parry William Tecumseh Sherman's advance towards Atlanta. In his retelling of the events in both theaters, Patterson's relies extensively on the use of elongated quotations, utilized in copy-and-paste fashion, which impede the flow of his narrative and substitute the participants own words in place of the historian's analysis.

Compounding these chapters' difficulties is the reality that in one of Patterson's few attempts to sketch out an argument, he falls regrettably flat. Patterson suggests that both Robert E. Lee and Joseph Johnston adhered to a Fabian strategy, albeit with widely discrepant degrees of support from Confederate president Jefferson Davis (pp. 84-85). Yet, while Johnston's actions fit such a description, Patterson provides no credible evidence to convince the reader that this type of warfare characterized Lee's thinking or actions. Indeed, a number of historians have instead suggested that Lee most often subscribed to the offensive mode of warfare and possessed an affinity for pitched battles.[1] Patterson, however, fails to challenge these historians' interpretations and relies more on flimsy assertions rather than evidence, with the result being an argument that lacks the substance to revise any current interpretations of either Confederate strategy or Lee's generalship.

The author also turns an eye towards the campaigns occurring beyond Virginia and Georgia. Patterson provides chapters detailing the Fort Pillow Massacre, the Red River Campaign, the sinking of the CSS Alabama, the fall of Mobile, and the Battle of Fort Fisher. As with the chapters dealing with Virginia and Atlanta, Patterson's source base is limited, his analysis wanting, and his prose mundane. Furthermore, while each of these events were important to the overall arc of the war, the author's communication of their importance is often vague, with the possible exception being his retelling of the war's final months in the Trans-Mississippi theater. Largely, however, Patterson fails to integrate their significance into the termination of the war, the titular focus of his work. Their inclusion serves no real purpose in terms of advancing either Patterson's narrative or argument, other than to state that these events happened at all.

Patterson's account ends with an examination of the

capitulations of the Confederacy's principal field armies, followed by a retelling of Lincoln's assassination and the grand review of the Union forces in Washington. Each is governed by the same formula Patterson establishes throughout the preceding chapters, relying heavily on the Official Records and memoirs to construct a cursory narration of the events in question. These retellings are to the point, unremarkable, and unlikely to arouse the interest of Civil War historians or Lincoln assassination buffs. Further, and equally as problematic, a triumphalist tone that seems to discount the impending difficulties related to Reconstruction marks Patterson's final chapters. Compounding these problems, and providing a challenge to a key assumption of Patterson's entire study, is that Patterson discounts to what extent Reconstruction represented a phase of the war in its own right. Given the importance of the Federal occupation of the South and the role of violence in the politics of Reconstruction, one might reasonably argue that the time frame Patterson covers did not "end" the Civil War at all, only the phase which was marked by organized military conflict.

Overall, this work accomplishes the unremarkable task of providing a cursory retelling of the Civil War's final thirteen months. Lost in the process of synthesizing the political and military happenings of this time period is an explanation of why this specific period proved decisive in ending organized conflict between the Union and Confederacy. Patterson alludes to Grant's contributions in terminating the war, but never revisits this point with either consistency or forcefulness. Likewise, other than his brief allusion to a comprehensive Fabian strategy on the part of the Confederacy, Patterson makes no serious attempt to describe and assess Confederate strategy and its implementation. To his credit, Patterson makes a connection between the importance of the happenings of the battlefield and their impact on the presidential election, and specifically the Union army's timely ability to persuade the Northern electorate to reaffirm its commitment to the Lincoln administration. Largely, however, Patterson otherwise neglects to apply analytical rigor to the events falling within his work's stated purview, thereby failing to state precisely why these thirteen months proved critical. .

Due to the significant problems relating to its paltry archival research, choppy narration, clumsy organization, and feeble analysis, serious scholars of both the Civil War and general military history will find little in *Ending the Civil War* that is of use. Even the novice who enjoys "popular" but still well-researched and fluidly written history ought to look elsewhere. Ultimately,

Patterson describes the process of the Civil War coming to termination rather than providing a rich discussion of why. For this reason, his study is forgettable.

Note

[1]. A number of important works have argued that Lee primarily relied on the offensive. Moreover, historians have posited this idea to argue in favor of Lee's efficacy as a general, while other historians have cited it as a deficiency in Confederate military thought writ large. Joseph L. Harsh's *Confederate Tide Rising: Robert E. Lee*

and the Making of Southern Strategy, 1861-1862 (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1998) and *Taken at the Flood: Robert E. Lee and Confederate Strategy in the Maryland Campaign of 1862* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1999), along with Gary W. Gallagher's *The Confederate War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), demonstrate aspects of the former school of thought. Conversely, Grady McWhiney and Perry D. Jamieson demonstrate the latter with *Attack and Die: Civil War Military Tactics and the Southern Heritage* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1984).

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