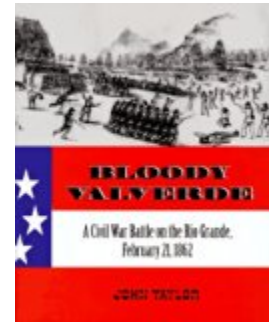


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

John Taylor. *Bloody Valverde: A Civil War Battle on the Rio Grande, February 21, 1862*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995. xii + 185 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8263-1632-5.

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In the winter of 1861-1862, the Confederacy launched an invasion of the New Mexico Territory. This invasion, according to one historian, was but the beginning of a Confederate attempt to carve out an empire in the Southwest that stretched all the way to the Pacific Ocean. Along the road of conquest, the Confederate army traveled hundreds of miles and fought numerous engagements, both large and small. John Taylor's *Bloody Valverde* is an examination of one of the more pivotal battles of this dramatic, and oft-ignored, campaign.

Taylor, a nuclear engineer, is the first author to try a book-length description of a battle that historians have long understood as a tactical victory yet strategic blunder for the Confederacy. Some historians have covered the battle as part of either larger studies of the war in the West or biographies of major participants. A still smaller number of scholars have looked at the battle in regional journals and United States Army publications. Given this state of the scholarship, John Taylor has made a valuable, if flawed, contribution to the literature by weaving together most of the known information on the battle of Valverde.

Taylor's book is fast-paced and informative. The narrative crackles with battle detail that leaves no command decision or troop movement uncovered. Imaginative and comprehensible maps accompany the author's description of each phase of the battle. Information on climate and topography, topics that military historians frequently ignore, appear throughout the text. Anecdotes fill the pages as Taylor misses few opportunities to enliven a story already made dramatic by the presence of an inebriated Confederate commander, a charge of lancers against rifled weapons, and Confederate soldiers armed

with shotguns.

These merits aside, *Bloody Valverde* suffers from some major limitations. First, Taylor allows little to get in the way of his chronological exposition. He writes for a general audience and buries most analysis, or discussion of broader events, in the notes. When Taylor does venture to analyze the battle at the conclusion of his text, it is a mixed bag of observations. While he correctly emphasizes the impact of terrain and logistics on the course of the battle, he exaggerates the importance of personalities. Moreover, Taylor is not persuasive when he argues that the victorious Confederates were a more experienced and better motivated army. He forgets the high concentration of regular troops that Union commander Edward R. S. Canby had at his disposal to defend against an ill-trained host of Confederates, virtually all of whom were fighting in their first engagement.

A second problem is that Taylor simply overstates the importance of Valverde, the entire Confederate invasion of 1861-1862, and, by extension, the book itself. Here, Valverde appears as a battle in a campaign that could have changed U.S. history and "drastically altered" the course of the war (p. 121). According to Taylor, had the Confederates achieved a decisive victory at Valverde and other engagements of the campaign, they would have caused a major diversion of Union troops from other theaters of operation and forced a weakened U.S. Navy to blockade the Pacific coast. He also forecasts an economic apocalypse in the wake of a complete Confederate triumph, asserting boldly that "since Lincoln financed his war effort, in large part, from the gold fields of California and Colorado, a cutoff of those bullion supplies would have been disastrous for the Union..." (p. 120). As North-

ern banks and the Federal treasury stopped specie payments early in the war and Abraham Lincoln generally turned to bonds, "Greenbacks," and a national banking system not tied to specie reserves to pay for the war, it is highly doubtful that a complete Confederate triumph in the Southwest would have spelled financial doom for the North. Similarly, it is improbable that a Confederate army that numbered no more than 2,590 men could have controlled so much territory and thus forced Lincoln to divert significant land and naval elements to the Southwest. Had the Confederacy annihilated Canby's army at either Valverde or the subsequent battle of Glorieta, the course of American history would not have changed as much as Taylor believes.

Such criticisms of *Bloody Valverde* should not obscure its value. John Taylor has crafted a well-written narrative of events that a general audience would enjoy. The book can also serve as a valuable compendium of battle-related facts. The appendix contains an order of battle and an itemized listing of casualties that, alone, make this a worthy resource for the military historian of the Civil War in the Trans-Mississippi.

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