

Lawrence L. Hewitt, Thomas Edwin Schott, eds. *Confederate Generals in the Trans-Mississippi: Volume 3: Essays on America's Civil War*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2019. 374 pp. \$64.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-62190-454-0.

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Confederate Generals in the Trans-Mississippi, Volume 3 constitutes the final volume in a series that has shed tremendous light on Confederate leadership, strategy, and politics west of the Mississippi River. In their preface, editors Lawrence Hewitt and Thomas Schott dispel the notion that the Trans-Mississippi served as “a dumping ground for generals who failed east of the river or whom President Davis want to shield from controversy” (p. xv). Likewise, in his forward, Daniel Sutherland argues that these commanders “acquitted [themselves] as well as most generals on either side. It is also clear that these men were not the ones responsible for the collapse of the Confederacy” (p. xiii). Instead, Sutherland contends that factors unique to the Trans-Mississippi posed difficult problems for Rebel leaders: the distance and apathy from Richmond, the early territorial gains by the United States, and the primacy of guerrilla warfare.

The two essays on Trans-Mississippi department commanders illustrate these problems best. The sheer size and numerous strategic objectives within the theater could easily lead Rebel commanders astray. Joseph Dawson III's essay on Earl Van Dorn depicts a mediocre commander promoted far above his talents, in part due to the patronage of Jefferson Davis. Allured by the desire to

bring Missouri into the Confederacy, Van Dorn instead blundered into disastrous defeat at Pea Ridge, “the most important and consequential battle in the Trans-Mississippi” (p. 17). Further defeat at Corinth only verified Van Dorn's “ineptness as an independent field commander” (p. 25).

Echoing Steven Woodworth's argument in *Jefferson Davis and His Generals* (1990), Dawson contends the Confederate president was partially to blame for Confederate military failures, positing that “Davis too often chose or reappointed high-ranking officers from a limited pool of generals unsuited or unfit for their assignments,” citing Earl Van Dorn and Theophilus Holmes as examples (p. 24).

Though faring better than Van Dorn, Edmund Kirby Smith likewise struggled with the military, political, and administrative headaches of department command. Jeffery Prushankin depicts a general pulled in different directions by strategic and political needs during his first year in command. Richmond wanted Smith to prioritize the defense of Louisiana and the Mississippi River Valley, yet Smith felt local political pressure to defend Arkansas and liberate Missouri. As Prushankin shows, Kirby Smith attempted to accomplish both objectives by adopting a conservative defensive strategy that prioritized interior lines of defense and the

ability to project force either north to Arkansas or south to Louisiana as necessity dictated. Such a strategy created a paradox: “To achieve his military goal of concentration, Kirby Smith had to surrender territory, but his political imperative required holding territory and thus dispersing his forces. It was an impossible dilemma” (p. 115). Feeling pressure to keep a strong Confederate presence everywhere, the result was Kirby Smith’s inability to unleash a coordinated Confederate offensive anywhere. Complementing this view of Kirby Smith is Richard Holloway’s essay on Smith’s chief of staff, William R. Boggs. Boggs proved a competent, if opinionated, staff officer whose experiences offer a window into the administrative and personnel headaches within the department.

Holloway’s examination of Hamilton Bee suggests that capable administrators do not always make capable field commanders. Successful, if not always popular or scrupulous, at managing the local and international politics of command in southern Texas, Bee flunked on the battlefield in 1864 Louisiana. At Yellow Bayou, the overly anxious Bee squandered a rare Confederate opportunity to capture or severely damage a Union army at Yellow Bayou, and “with it the fate of the relevance of the war in the Trans-Mississippi” (p. 52).

If departmental commanders struggled, several essays reveal the Trans-Mississippi Confederacy benefited from several competent, aggressive division commanders. One such commander was James Fagan, who perhaps proved too aggressive at times. Fagan’s troopers always seemed in the thick of the fray, and Fagan himself was involved in the controversial engagements at Helena, Marks’ Mills, Pilot Knob, and elsewhere. “Neither flashy nor particularly dynamic,” Stuart Sanders concludes, “Fagan exhibited a constancy that paid dividends for the Confederacy across the Trans-Mississippi” (p. 61). Curtis Milbourn explores the rise of Louisiana cavalier Tom Green, whose strong battlefield performances in western Louisiana in 1863 “began his ascension to a prominent

role as [Richard] Taylor’s most trusted combat commander” (p. 174). Despite his status as a political general, Paul R. Scott determines that General John Austin Wharton “demonstrated tactical savvy, leadership, and managerial abilities” on both Western and Trans-Mississippi battlefields (p. 183).

In the volume’s final essay, Holloway compares the reality of Richard Taylor’s final year of the war with his famous memoirs, *Destruction and Reconstruction* (1879). Holloway documents Taylor’s “Herculean effort to bring troops across the Mississippi River” in a desperate, failed attempt to alter the calculus of the war (pp. 262-3). He likewise sheds light on the bitter feud between Taylor and Kirby Smith, highlighting Taylor’s repeated insubordination in dealing with his commanding officer. Unsurprisingly, these incidents failed to make it into Taylor’s postwar writings. Holloway argues that Taylor’s skewed mudslinging in 1879 does not reflect the reality of 1864, and indeed, suggests that Taylor became too embroiled in the Kirby Smith feud in his memoirs, to the detriment of his recollection of the Red River Campaign and the strategic situation within the Trans-Mississippi Confederacy.

Bookending the entire series is the inclusion of an invaluable appendix that charts the numerous, byzantine, and ever-changing departments and districts of the Trans-Mississippi, as well as the various men who held those commands. This appendix should be of tremendous assistance to Civil War scholars.

When returning to the overarching arguments of the volume, it seems clear Trans-Mississippi Confederates did indeed face unique obstacles. And while these men are likely not the reason the Confederacy lost the war, perhaps it is better to ask whether they constituted a real asset to the Confederacy’s bid for independence. Neither Van Dorn nor Kirby Smith succeeded in developing or executing a successful strategic vision for defending the Trans-Mississippi Confederacy (an admittedly

difficult task). As in the Western Theater, political infighting (particularly among Kirby Smith and Taylor) proved to be an issue. Many of the brightest commanders discussed in this volume—Green, Fagan, and Wharton—generally operated at a brigade or divisional level; thus, they were rarely positioned to independently influence the war's overall course. And while perhaps Richard Taylor was the best Confederate general west of the Mississippi, his subordination (and insubordination) to Kirby Smith limited his impact. In short, Confederate leadership in the Trans-Mississippi proved a mixed lot.

Moreover, one wonders how Trans-Mississippi Confederate generals might compare to their Federal counterparts, who are (or were, prior to this series) as equally understudied as Rebel commanders. Future scholarship on Union leadership west of the river might help determine whether Union or Confederate generalship, or inherent theater factors, were more important in shaping the war in the Trans-Mississippi. Room also exists for further examination of Confederate generals in Indian Territory, such as Stand Watie, Douglas Cooper, William Steele, and others, who faced unique diplomatic, political, and racial problems yet are largely missing from the series.

However we might categorize Trans-Mississippi Confederate leadership, our knowledge of it is greatly bolstered by the essays in this volume. They shine light on overlooked commanders, advance intriguing new perspectives on western generalship, and represent a significant and much-needed contribution to Trans-Mississippi Civil War scholarship.

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