

Jump TO Article



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Jump TO Article

The Mississippi Valley in the Civil War

by John Fiske

Houghton, Mifflin and Company:

Boston, 1900, 368 pp.

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In this small volume, John Fiske, a noted 19th century American historian, succinctly outlines the strategy and tactics of the major western battles during the American Civil War. Supported by clear maps showing the topography and the positions of the various combatants, the reader emerges with a clear understanding of the naval and land campaign that led the collapse of the Confederacy's western flank with the destruction of Hood's army at Nashville in December 1864.

The western campaign also led to the emergence of Grant. Initially overlooked for a Union commission, Grant was appointed to command a regiment of Illinois volunteers, but an appointment soon followed as a brigadier under General Fremont (commanding the West).

While the Confederates held Vicksburg on the Mississippi, the Northern Army could not be supplied from New Orleans and vast numbers of Northern troops were tied up protecting rail supply lines. Grant took his men below Vicksburg in small boats and captured the fort from the land while the American Navy, under Admiral Farragut, captured the port of New Orleans.

The key western land battles of Chickamauga, Chattanooga, and Nashville followed. At Chickamauga, a staff failure enabled the Confederates to pour through the hole in the Union line.

The Northern Army then retired to Chattanooga, Tennessee, an important railway site, but failed to occupy the nearby Lookout Mountain. Grant was then placed in command of Northern forces between the Mississippi and the Alleghany Mountains. Grant changed commanders at Chattanooga and adopted a brilliant plan developed by the chief engineer. By moonlight, the Confederates attacked, but by 4 a.m. the Northerners had mastered the field and now controlled a bridge by which they could be reinforced.

The Western victories led to Grant's appointment as general-in-chief of all Northern Armies pitting him against Lee, but the replacement of the Confederate Joseph Johnston by Hood aided the Northern cause. Despite the Cumberland River providing a natural barrier to the rear of Nashville, there was a large gap in the Confederate lines and the Confederate cavalry and infantry were separated. The Northerners exploited the gap and encircled the Confederates, trapping them against the hills outside the city. At least 13,000 Confederate prisoners were taken and the Confederate Army in the West virtually disappeared.

As one born on an American Naval based named for Admiral Farragut and the great-granddaughter of a Confederate infantryman who fought in the West, I found this small book the most succinct overview of the Civil War I've ever read.

Priscilla Leece