

The Fiery Trail: The Events Of One Year Decided The Nation's Future

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Review

THE FIERY TRAIL

The events of one year decided the nation's future

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Stevens, Joseph E. *1863: The Rebirth of a Nation*. Bantam, ISBN 553103148

The summer of 1863 was a cruel season for the 4,500 starving, beleaguered citizens of Vicksburg, Mississippi. For the Confederacy, the town was the most strategic spot in the West. The fate of Vicksburg -- now surrounded by the 77,000 men commanded by Union general Ulysses S. Grant -- might just determine the fate of the Confederacy.

If the South lost the Mississippi River, it would forfeit the 150-mile-wide corridor south of Vicksburg to Louisiana's Port Hudson through which supplies and men poured east from western Louisiana, Texas, and Arkansas and sustained the Confederate armies. "We may take all the northern ports of the Confederacy and they can still defy us from Vicksburg," Abraham Lincoln observed in early 1862. "It means hog and hominy without limit, fresh troops from all the states of the far South, and a cotton country where they can raise the staple without interference. . . . That war can never be brought to a close until that key is in our pocket."

Seizing Vicksburg would cut the Confederacy in two and re-open the Mississippi to Union boats. And thanks to Grant, Lincoln was about to pocket that key. After six weeks, Grant's army had virtually brought Vicksburg to its knees. The dejected and defeated city lay in ruins, the victim of a relentless artillery barrage that drove many terrified citizens to flee to caves they hastily carved out of the city's loess hills. In the early morning hours of July 4, the siege finally ended when Grant accepted the terms of surrender proffered by the Confederate commander.

Later that morning, a solemn General Robert E. Lee stood in the oppressive summer heat on the outskirts of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, watching his men

load their wounded comrades onto ambulances. Battered and defeated, the Army of Northern Virginia was retreating after three days of the bloodiest conflict ever fought on American soil. Lee's audacious gambit to gain the upper hand by inflicting a decisive, fatal blow to Union forces on their own territory had failed miserably. With his crippled army now limping southward, Lee -- unaware of Vicksburg's fall in the early morning hours -- knew that the Confederacy had suffered a defeat of colossal proportions.

The gripping and compelling stories of these two decisive battles form the pivotal center of Joseph E. Stevens's **1863: The Rebirth of a Nation**, a month-by-month account of the political and military events of a most momentous year.

Every so often, there is a 12-month period around which the future of a nation turns. For the United States, those include 1776, 1787, 1812, 1942, 1954, and 1968. In 1863, Stevens conclusively adds the third year of the Civil War to that list.

Few years were as important to the political and cultural history of the United States. When it began, Union forces were still reeling from their devastating defeat at Fredericksburg. The Confederates were ascendant and a despondent Lincoln desperately prodded his recalcitrant generals to engage the Confederates in battle. By year's end, the tide of war had turned -- this time for good. The Confederate armies were now shells of their former selves.

It was a year that began with Lincoln's signing of the Emancipation Proclamation and closed with the Confederacy's humiliating defeat at Chattanooga. In between were some of the most important battles of the war -- Gettysburg, Chancellorsville, Vicksburg, Chickamauga, and Chattanooga. Perhaps nothing, however, served to elevate the year more than Lincoln himself, when he delivered his Gettysburg Address and interpreted the greatest and most decisive battle of the war for all of history.

A remarkable year like 1863 deserves a historian to make sense of the vast political, military and cultural tides sweeping over the United States, transforming and shaping it forever. In 1863, Stevens more than rises to the occasion. His narrative is magnificently and eloquently written, the result of impressive research and a keen eye for the detail that brings an old story back to life.

Stevens paints vivid portraits of the year's major characters -- Lincoln, Grant, Lee, and Confederate President Jefferson Davis -- while allowing us to see the war through the eyes of politicians, nurses, businessmen, artists, and newspaper editors, as well as common citizens whose lives were destroyed or transformed by the conflict.

1863 will no doubt be remembered as one of the more compelling accounts of a most important and pivotal year in American history.

Robert Mann is author of The Walls of Jericho: Lyndon Johnson, Hubert Humphrey, Richard Russell and the Struggle for Civil Rights. He is currently writing a political history of the Vietnam War.