

### The Civil War in the West: Victory and Defeat From the Appalachians to the Mississippi

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## Review

**Ballard, Michael B.**

**Summer 2012**

**Hess, Earl J.** *The Civil War in the West: Victory and Defeat From the Appalachians to the Mississippi.* University of North Carolina Press, \$40.00  
ISBN : 978-0-8078-3542-5

### A Grand Narrative of the Western War

Earl Hess has produced another fine study, this one long needed and much anticipated. An overview of the Civil War in the Western Theater had been needed for many years, especially since more historians are agreeing that the war was decided in the West. This volume, as the title indicates, stops at the Mississippi River, and it would have been even better had it included the so-called Trans-Mississippi. Perhaps the author will produce such a companion volume; certainly he is more than qualified to do so.

This history is very much an overview of the significant campaigns and battles in the west, beginning with the evolution of events in 1861 and ending with a delightful portrait of William T. Sherman's feud with Edwin Stanton following the end of the western war in North Carolina. Hess notes in a well-reasoned conclusion that had Robert E. Lee not surrendered when he did, Sherman's successes could have led to an appropriate conclusion: "the West would have won the war in the East and the Western Federals would have had even more reason to brag about the decisive role they played in saving the Union" (319).

Hess's study is primarily focused on military affairs and closely related political issues, both within the armies and beyond. For those who support more inclusion of the social and economic dynamics, Hess has not provided a broad discussion of these aspects of the western war, though they are represented from time to time. A larger inclusion would have doubled the size of the book. The major strength of the book is his bringing together primary and printed sources that paint a portrait of the inner-activities of both armies, personality issues

among officers and politicians, the impact of freed slaves on army operations, and occasional local political overtones. This volume is much more than a blow-by-blow military narrative; it includes why things happened, how they happened, and the ramifications, and he does not hesitate to challenge ideas long imbedded in the historiography of the West.

Some of his conclusions are arguable to be sure, but that makes reading the book that much more enjoyable. One example is Hess's well-reasoned argument that Henry Halleck could not have taken his large army southwest to take Vicksburg after he had captured Corinth. Logistical and political concerns regarding the need for troops elsewhere certainly played a role in his decision. Nevertheless, given the poor leadership qualities of Confederate officers in Mississippi, it is certainly possible that Halleck could have overwhelmed resistance and Vicksburg defenses. We shall never know what might have happened, but the issue is compelling.

Hess also lets at least one general off of the hook. His discussion of John Bell Hood's campaign is well-written and to the point, but he never takes Hood to task for destroying his army. Of course, Hess's critique of Hood may not be as severe as this reviewer's.

Overall, this is the latest in a long line of outstanding works by Earl Hess. His grasp of the many complex issues of the Western Theater is masterful, and certainly he has produced a work that will stand the test of time as the volume to turn to for an understanding of, and more importantly, the significance of, the Western Theater in determining the outcome of the Civil War.

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