

### Key Command: Ulysses S. Grant's District of Cairo

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## Review

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**Kionka, T.K.** *Key Command: Ulysses S. Grant's District of Cairo*. University of Missouri Press, \$39.95 hardcover ISBN 9780826216557

### Grant's Strategic Command

#### The General as Administrator

Cairo, Illinois, is the southernmost northern city of the Civil War. It is farther south than Richmond in a state that extends farther north than Cape Cod. The city's location at the confluence of the Mississippi and Ohio rivers made it of prime strategic importance to the Union, and T.K. Kionka's *Key Command: Ulysses S. Grant's District of Cairo* is the first book-length study devoted to the military district located in Cairo. Sharing center stage is the tenure of its commander, an up-and-coming general named Ulysses S. Grant.

While other Civil War studies tend to focus on battles, this one gives more weight to the often underemphasized issues of military administration. (Two of the fifteen chapters center on battles.) The book starts with the story of Cairo itself. Its promising geographical location lured several visionaries to the area during the first half of the nineteenth century, but real prosperity would await the emergence of a river and rail transshipment business following Cairo's designation as the terminus of the Illinois Central Railroad in 1851. This did not prevent the town from being hampered by the presence of vigilante violence and justice during the 1850s. In 1860, Cairo had a population of 2,000, many of whom felt a kinship with the South and had ties to the institution of slavery.

In the first few chapters, Kionka provides the background for the challenges the soon-to-arrive Union commander would face. The people of Cairo reached no consensus on secession as that crisis hit, and there were even some early efforts to get southern Illinois to secede. In the days following the firing on Fort Sumter, Governor Richard Yates ended the prospect of secession by sending four regiments down to Cairo from Chicago. Illinoisans approved the move, but that

did not end fears that a location of such military significance would be attacked. The town became the base of Union operations on the Mississippi River, and federal troops blockaded the river's mouth. Cairo was fortified, and the author provides details of the installation's layout and life for the occupants. Illness ran rampant in Cairo's camps, and poor hospital conditions presented challenges of their own in a war that saw the greatest loss of life off the battlefield.

Grant, holding his first district command of the District of Southeast Missouri, formally took command at Cairo on September 4, 1861. Two days later, he occupied Paducah, Kentucky, with troops from Cairo — a move that helped thwart a Confederate advance and bolstered the Union's defensive position. Kentucky's neutrality had been violated by Confederate occupation days earlier, and Grant's cool-headed, decisive move in the absence of directives from superiors presaged his generalship throughout the war.

Before Grant would lead his first Civil War battle two months later, the author lays out the system he created to prepare his troops — a lesson in the little-practiced military arts of administration and organization. Discipline was a tremendous problem among the troops in Cairo, with fights and even murders becoming frequent occurrences. Many soldiers reverted to alcohol, gambling, and prostitutes, and Grant would eventually order drinking and prostitution houses shut down along with other stringent measures to impose discipline. As for the deplorable health conditions, the new commander worked with medical directors and gave wide latitude to newly emerging sanitary commissions to clean up camps and arrest the spread of disease. On the naval side, authorities in the area were procuring gunboats for Union shipping, and Grant developed a new vision in which the navy's contribution would integrate its offensive capacity into land campaigns. He also envisioned a new medical role for naval vessels and ordered perhaps the first hospital ship in the western theater.

Grant's early experience would serve him well when it was time for combat. In November, he advanced his troops to prevent Confederate reinforcement of Gen. Sterling Price but ended up overrunning a Confederate camp in Belmont, Missouri, across the Mississippi River from Columbus, Kentucky. His soldiers broke into premature celebration, then demoralization in the face of oncoming rebel reinforcements. Applying an insight that would serve him well in the future, Grant averted disaster by taking the initiative and rallying an effective withdrawal. Once the skirmish was over, it was time to put the non-recognition of the Confederacy aside and negotiate recovery of the wounded with the enemy.

Even with the improvement of medical facilities in recent months, the wounded overflowed from Cairo to neighboring Mound City, Illinois.

Perhaps the most distinctive value of this study is Kionka's constant reminder of how many critical events unfolded during the periods between battles. Besides issues facing the wounded, the army had to worry about murderous raids in border states by armed secessionists and somewhat less terrifying raids by the Confederate army. Union officers also had the burden of meting out stringent punishments to their own soldiers who engaged in theft, rape, and vigilantism.

Grant inherited considerable corruption that surrounded greedy sutlers who cheated soldiers with inflated prices and substandard goods. Even greater was the damage done by the abuse of army supply contracts by influential citizens who attained a near-monopoly on the provision of particular goods to the Union. Grant branded a local group of these wealthy monopolists the Cairo Ring. The corruption reached the upper levels of the War Department, even tarnishing the reputation of Secretary of War Simon Cameron, and drew the attention of Congress. Grant worked on his part to banish dishonest sutlers, void scam contracts, and testify to the House committee that was investigating the misconduct. Even this corruption was less sinister than the menace of traitors who were attempting to smuggle goods into the Confederacy through the district—a problem Grant would counter through the use of spies, raids of illegitimate boats, and increases in river patrols.

On top of everything else, Grant had reason to feel his position as commander of the district was not secure. The author introduces the reader to several generals who would make their mark later in the war, discussing John A. McClernand and John A. Logan at greatest length. The reader is reminded of Logan's early sympathies for regional secessionists, often overlooked amid the turn his career later would take. The scheming McClernand provides a bit of drama as he tries—with Logan's help—to obtain a reorganized district command for himself. Although his ambitions were modest, Grant would retain command and even gain jurisdiction as his District of Southeast Missouri gave way to a new District of Cairo.

Equipped with the insights and tools he had been acquiring throughout the narrative, Grant embarked from Cairo in February 1862 on the first major victories for him and for the Union at Forts Henry and Donelson, on the

Tennessee and Cumberland Rivers, respectively. Kionka's description of the battles adeptly integrates the earlier themes of the book, with gunboats reducing Fort Henry even before the bulk of the army arrived, Grant's initiative and calm in the face of a setback at Fort Donelson, and the operation of hospital transports taking the wounded back to Cairo.

Grant would remain in the field for most of 1862 and beyond, with soldiers and supplies following him from Cairo and runaway slaves flocking north as refugees while the Union armies advanced. Grant was more sympathetic to their plight than other Union officers in the area, and he came to develop a system by which these refugees could be put to work. Due to an influx of blacks who worked as laborers and servants, Cairo's black population increased from 7 in 1860 to 2,083 out of 8,569 in 1865. These figures, like the quadrupling of the overall population, marked how dramatically the presence of a military base had transformed Cairo into a community with the business opportunities and the cosmopolitan society of a metropolis.

*Key Command* is well researched with only rare, minor errors, but several characters in the narrative are given inadequate introductions — most conspicuously Generals Charles F. Smith and Henry W. Halleck, who make their first appearances by last name only. The author seems to feel some ambivalence toward the character of the city that ultimately emerged, but not so with her protagonist. Contrary to much of the innuendo that used to surround him, the Grant of this book possesses astuteness, good judgment, fortitude, honesty, amiability, compassion for the wounded, and competence in droves. (A reference to the sobering experience of campaigning with Ulysses S. Grant may indicate how far we have come from earlier myth.) Readers will recognize this figure from Bruce Catton's *Grant Moves South* and more recent Grant biographies. What distinguishes this book is the interwoven story of Cairo during the Civil War — a welcome addition to a body of literature that too often underemphasizes the demands of military administration during America's greatest conflict.

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