

## Vicksburg, 1863

David Slay

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### Recommended Citation

Slay, David (2010) "Vicksburg, 1863," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 12 : Iss. 1 .  
Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol12/iss1/15>

## Review

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Winter 2010

**Groom. Winston** *Vicksburg, 1863*. Alfred A. Knopf, \$30.00 ISBN 9780307264251

### The Vicksburg Campaign Revisited

Over the years the Vicksburg campaign has received little attention in the popular media in comparison with some of the great battles of the East, especially the other one that concluded in July 1863, which I, being a devotee of the supremacy of the Western Theater, shall not mention. In 1910, the Kalem Company filmed the silent short, *The Girl Spy of Vicksburg* and keeping with the still popular theme of gender in the Civil War followed up with, "The Drummer Girl of Vicksburg" (Fans of Albert Cashier would be proud). Then, in 1916, the Selig Polyscope Company filmed the epic battle scenes of *The Crisis* in Vicksburg National Military Park using 500 Mississippi National Guardsmen as extras—and the curtain went down on Vicksburg for the next 42 years until John Ford released *The Horse Soldiers* in 1959, a retelling of Grierson's April 1863 raid through Mississippi, with no less than the Duke himself playing Colonel Benjamin Grierson.

This past year, the silver screen and Vicksburg crossed paths again with the release of Winston Groom's history of the campaign and siege. Groom, of course, is best known for creating Forrest Gump, and his subsequent difficulties with the studio after it claimed to have lost money on the film. He (Groom not Gump) later changed the focus of his writing to nonfiction stories of great men and great battles—and as it turns out, he is pretty good at it.

In his retelling of the campaign and siege of Vicksburg, Groom captures the essence of the men who led the armies and recreates the drama of General Ulysses S. Grant's great gamble of marching into the interior of Mississippi in order to gain that high and dry ground east of Vicksburg that had eluded him for so long. The major problem with Groom's work, however, is that it is not a

scholarly history; it is instead a story told by a great storyteller. His command of the facts surrounding events are accurate enough, but without any footnotes there is no way to check, unless you are already an expert on the campaign. He breaks no new ground and contributes nothing meaningful to the historiography. But, in his defense, I have not seen any statements by him where he claims any such mission.

Yet this is a very important book despite the fact that it does not approach the detailed analysis presented by such experts as Warren Grabau, Ed Bearss, and Terry Winschel. What Groom brings to the table is very simple and yet so very elusive: a wide audience. Having achieved fame and a devoted readership through *Forrest Gump* and later historical works, Groom, by writing on Vicksburg, opens up the events of the Western Theater to a new set of recreational readers and buffs. Having discovered the importance of the West and its crop of intriguing personalities this wider audience may want to dig deeper.

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