

This Great Struggle: America's Civil War

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Review

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Woodworth, Steven E. *This Great Struggle: America's Civil War*. Rowan & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., \$29.95 ISBN 978-0-7425-5184-8

A Civil War Overview

The long and enviable publication record of Steven Woodworth, Professor of History at Texas Christian University, is well-known among specialists in the Civil War era. *This Great Struggle: America's Civil War* enables readers seeking the highlights of Woodworth's oeuvre to find them in one volume. Well-written and incisive, *This Great Struggle* is the perfect book for those general readers interested in a one-volume survey of the Civil War that remains focused upon the military narrative. Even specialists familiar with the scholarship will be surprised at times by this book, as Woodworth's trenchant observations and judgments, which often follow concise summaries of the "state of the field" for individual topics, provide ample food for thought. Those teaching surveys of the Civil War that only cover the war years—or the war years and Reconstruction—should consider adopting this book for their courses, as it covers well-trod ground in a deft and original manner.

This conclusion, however, does not indicate this reviewer's endorsement of every position taken by Woodworth in *This Great Struggle*. While he does a good job of introducing readers interested in Civil War military operations to such topics as gender on the home front, antebellum slavery, and both belligerents' diplomacy with Great Britain, at a few points Woodworth's judgments seem odd. To attribute, as Woodworth does, the revolution of American settlers in Texas to "Mexican misrule" during the 1830s strongly misreads the intent and behavior of those settlers, and to describe the Whigs as a party that "played fast and loose with the Constitution and advocated government intervention in the economy in hopes of boosting prosperity, at least for some people" says more, perhaps, about the author's personal philosophy than the consensus of the field (10). (Those interested in exploring this latter

point should take up Brian Balogh's recent survey *A Government Out of Sight*.) Other sections suffer from truncation: I was particularly anxious to see Woodworth's take on the spate of recent studies of women during the Civil War, but was disappointed that the author failed to pursue this subject at greater length. Similarly, I would have been just as happy had this book ended, as so many do, with the Grand Review in Washington. Woodworth's eighteen-page discussion of Reconstruction fails to maintain the standard of excellence so evident elsewhere in the book, a tendency first apparent in his exclusion of Sherman's Field Order 15 from the larger discussion of that general's 1864 campaigns.

That said, throughout the vast majority of the book, *This Great Struggle* excels at telling a lively story while upholding the analytical standards of the historical profession. Woodworth's extensive study of certain topics comes through loud and clear—the best sections of the book are those devoted to expository writing on topics familiar to the author. In this category, I would include two of the main themes that hold the study together, namely, the significance of the petty jealousies and rivalries that beset the Confederate high command, and the relative insignificance of the eastern theater in comparison to the western theater, a position explicated with particular verve. Gettysburg, he writes, “was not even a turning point within the indecisive eastern theater of the war. Militarily it was just one more bloody and inconclusive clash of the armies, full of sound and fury and acts of sublime heroism on both sides but bringing the end of the war not one day closer” (218). That Woodworth chooses to enliven his narrative with brief discussions of topics well-known to historians, but perhaps not as familiar to the general public, is especially praiseworthy. I found his discussion of the Union blockade of the southern coastline, the role of the soldier vote in the 1864 election, and his quick survey of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War particularly strong. And, for those interested in the marching armies, Woodworth can be relied upon to succinctly survey and assess the relevant commanders—for but one example of this, see his handling of George McClellan on pages 113 and 116.

The third theme that holds together the book warrants special mention. From the first pages of *This Great Struggle*, it is clear that Woodworth is dedicated to the proposition that the Civil War was about slavery. His brief overview of antebellum slavery makes this quite clear, as does his critique of ostensibly states' rights southerners deploying the full weight of federal power to defend the institution when they were in a position to do so. (On this point, see his

forceful analysis of the Fugitive Slave Act on pages 16 and 17.) To this reader, what Woodworth has produced serves as an implicit rebuke to Gary Gallagher's *The Union War*. Woodworth certainly credits devotion to Union as an important factor in the northern decision to fight, but he also makes clear, from the first page practically, that slavery was the root cause of the war, and that many northerners, most notably those fighting the war, came to the early conclusion that emancipation provided the surest path to victory. "Yet, while many may have enlisted in 1861 bent on nothing but preserving the Union," Woodworth writes, "those reenlisting in 1863 and 1864 knew that they were fighting for the cause of emancipation" (249). In the eyes of this author, Woodworth's considered judgments on the centrality of slavery—and African Americans—to the Civil War stand as the most important aspect of an outstanding book.

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