

Lay Of The Land: Knowing The Terrain Aided Grant's Capture Of Vicksburg

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Review

LAY OF THE LAND

Knowing the terrain aided Grant's capture of Vicksburg

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Grabau, Warren E. *Ninety-Eight Days: A Geographer's View of the Vicksburg Campaign*. University of Tennessee Press, 2000-05-01. ISBN 1572330686

For those Civil War historians who read Ed Bearss's superb works on the Vicksburg campaign and thought that no important details of this watershed action remained to be discovered, Warren Grabau's **Ninety-Eight Days: A Geographer's View of the Vicksburg Campaign** will provide a delightful surprise.

A colleague of Bearss who collaborated with him on much of his Vicksburg writing, Grabau steps out of the shadow to deliver a thorough and important book that stands on its own. It will appeal to historians, geographers, and practitioners of the military art for its engaging style and the degree to which it emphasizes the salient role of geography in the strategic decisions of military commanders.

Grabau does a masterful job of articulating how geography influences strategy, logistics, and tactics. He makes the significant distinction that geography does not determine the outcome of war; rather it "influences the ways in which the campaigns and battles are waged; the Army which exploits the landscape most cleverly is most likely to win." The author uses Vicksburg to demonstrate that pragmatic commanders like Grant enjoy a distinct advantage if their decisions are underpinned by a full understanding of demographics, topography, hydrology, culture, and other geographic variables. Nevertheless, it is his fine grasp of the military details of the campaign that most intrigues the reader.

Military leaders and historians will be fascinated by Grabau's insight into three key areas: the role that personalities and military relationships played on

each side, a terrain analysis that explains how geography influenced the Union and Confederate decision-making processes, and the remarkably close cooperation between the Federal army and navy. His description of how Porter anticipated Grant's logistical needs upon his arrival in front of the Vicksburg defenses is but one example of the navy's important role in Grant's overall success.

Although the extensive collection of detailed maps in **Ninety-Eight Days** is both exceptional and fully supportive of the analysis, our single criticism of the work involves map location. Instead of grouping all 68 maps at the end of the book, near an informative endnotes section, it would have benefited readers more to place each map closer to the related text.

Warren Grabau is a talented author whose detailed terrain analysis and insight into the major commanders constitute a significant contribution to the study of the Vicksburg campaign. His work illustrates the essential role geography has in the military decision-making process as few books ever do. It is a must read for Civil War historians, military geographers, and military officers of all levels.

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