

*The Civil War in the West**Victory and Defeat from the Appalachians to the Mississippi*

By Earl J. Hess

(Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012. Pp. xv, 392. Illustrations, maps, notes, bibliography, index. \$40.00.)

The Civil War in the West is a first-rate account of the struggle in the Western Theater. Earl J. Hess's monograph concisely and judiciously examines the military campaigns and battles and weaves them into a seamless narrative accessible to both novice and expert. The book's user-friendly organization and Hess's ability to condense the myriad decisions, movements, actions, and personalities of the Civil War's western campaigns into brief yet informative nuggets make the book worth the price of admission.

Truly compelling, however, is Hess's central thesis that the Union won the war—and the Confederacy lost it—in the West. Though not the first to make this claim, he adds to the debate by arguing that the North prevailed due to “the ability of Federal armies to conquer space and time while bringing the war to an end in a wide swath of the Confederacy earlier than anywhere else” (p. 319). Because of its sheer vastness, difficult terrain, and challenging communication networks, the region between the Appalachians and the Mississippi River offered numerous weak points for Union armies to exploit. But the Mississippi River valley—the place where better resourced and more mobile Union forces drove a fatal

“opening wedge in Rebel defenses” (p. 319)—proved to be the main site of Confederate vulnerability in the West. And just as losing the battle for the Mississippi irreparably fractured the Confederacy, winning it eased lingering Union concerns in Indiana, Ohio, and Illinois about the inability to transport goods on the river system. Allowing Northern commerce to once again run unvexed to the sea calmed northwestern farmers and helped neutralize advocates of a so-called “Northwest Confederacy.” These factors and more, Hess asserts, ensured that “Union victory in the Civil War began in the Mississippi Valley” (p. 318).

Beyond campaigns, battles, and high-level decision making, Hess examines other key factors behind the outcome, including the interplay between operations and logistics in the vastness of the West. He also considers guerrilla warfare, which profoundly influenced military operations and the Union occupation in the West. Most interestingly, he challenges recent arguments that the increasingly harsh Union policy toward Southern civilians and their property stemmed mostly from a desire for retribution for guerrilla depredations. Instead, Hess counters, “many factors contributed to the

growth of a destructive policy of taking or destroying Southern resources” (p. 311). Chronic shortages (a result of Union logistical difficulties which he details throughout), the soldiers’ natural desire to supplement inferior army rations by foraging, and the fact that these same men held power over unarmed Southern civilians—whom they blamed for the war—and could take what they wanted with little consequence, also contributed to the escalating severity of Union policy toward Southern civilians.

The author also examines another important, and oft-neglected, feature of the war: Union occupation policy. In the West, Union armies quickly gained control of large chunks of Confederate territory and then had to govern them. This responsibility meant formulating an occupation policy to secure Union rear areas and communication lines, restore the loyalty of bitter and recalcitrant inhabitants, protect Union occupation troops from guerrillas, impose law and order, reestablish commerce

and eventually civil government, and, after 1863, enforce emancipation. These difficult and sometimes mutually exclusive tasks not only bedeviled Washington officials but forced upon Union soldiers the task of weighing the needs of force protection with the requirements of reconciliation and reconstruction, an intractable yet familiar position faced by most occupying forces throughout the history of warfare.

A thought-provoking, well-argued, engagingly written, and thoroughly enjoyable narrative, Hess’s *The Civil War in the West* is by far one of the best general accounts of the war in the West and will serve as a point of departure for future debate on how and where the war was won and lost.

WILLIAM B. FEIS is Professor of History at Buena Vista University. He has written extensively on Civil War military intelligence, including *Grant’s Secret Service: The Intelligence War from Belmont to Appomattox* (2002).

