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Winston Groom, *Vicksburg, 1863*. New York: Knopf, 2009. Pp. x, 482. ISBN: 978-0-307-26425-1.

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Fiction writer and historian, Winston Groom, best known for his novel *Forrest Gump*,<sup>1</sup> returns to writing about the Civil War in his latest book, *Vicksburg, 1863*, a study of the campaign that doomed the Confederacy's bid for independence.<sup>2</sup> He provides much more than just a bullets and bugles account culminating in the Confederate surrender of the Mississippi River bastion on 4 July 1863. Rather, Groom offers a nearly overwhelming breadth of analysis. Not content to focus only on battles, he examines the factors that led to the outbreak of war, including abolitionism, technology, and the economy, devoting five full chapters to the background of the conflict and its key participants before addressing directly the struggle for Vicksburg.

Accordingly, Groom examines the entire Mississippi River Valley campaign, from the war's onset in 1861 to the crescendo of its pivotal year, 1863. In the process, he argues that the loss of Vicksburg was more damaging to Confederate hopes than the more celebrated Battle of Gettysburg, because it "concluded the final chapter of Rebel domination" and with it "any realistic chance of a separate southern nation" (420).

One of the strengths of Groom's work is his extraordinary ability to interweave the opposing personalities that waged war for control of the Mississippi River. Generals Ulysses S. Grant, William T. Sherman, Joseph E. Johnston, and John C. Pemberton, to name a few, all receive thoughtful portrayals, a remarkable achievement in a book of less than 500 pages.

For instance, when discussing the tenacity of Jefferson Davis, Groom vividly describes how, as Secretary of War, he implemented the purchase and use of camels from the Middle East for surveying duties in the American Southwest. Even though this plan had originally been rebuffed while Davis served as a U.S. senator on the Military Affairs committee, he later actually acquired about 100 of the animals and had them sent to the Lone Star State. "This episode demonstrates two things about Davis's personality: that once he decided on something, no matter how large or small, he was tenacious in seeing it through and, second, he invariably took a direct hand in its implementation. These traits, admirable enough in most people, were to cause trouble when, as president of the Confederacy, he often injected himself directly into the military decision making as the war in the West heated up" (69).

Groom does not neglect the military events surrounding the battles for Vicksburg. He covers all of the campaign's major turning points, from the harrowing episode of the Union gunships running the gauntlet of Confederate batteries on the night of 16 April 1863, to the pivotal Battle of Champion Hill. The emphasis is on operational and strategic matters rather than tactical-level details of the military actions. For instance, the author's presentation of the Battle of the Big Black River takes less than five pages. And in the midst of his description of Pemberton's last attempt to fight Grant's forces before they laid siege to the city, he probes facets such as the personalities and infighting that marked the Rebel efforts to hold off the Federal advance.

Besides military and political events surrounding the campaign, Groom touches on the human element, aptly describing the trials and tribulations of the civilian population in Vicksburg. He poignantly notes how the townspeople, burned out of their homes, ate draft animals to stay alive and resorted to living in caves to avoid the constant barrage from Union guns. "The bombardment put a terrific strain on the citizenry, now

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1. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1986.

2. While Groom has recently written about other wars in *1942: The Year That Tried Men's Souls* (NY: Atlantic Monthly Pr, 2005) and *Patriotic Fire: Andrew Jackson and Jean Laffite at the Battle of New Orleans* (NY: Knopf, 2006), his *Shrouds of Glory: Atlanta to Nashville, The Last Great Campaign of the Civil War* (NY: Atlantic Monthly Pr, 1995) launched his venture into the genre of American military history.

reduced to the bare, anxious life of some long-forgotten tribe of cliff dwellers” (365). In sum, Groom clearly conveys how a “taste of hard war” came to southerners living in the Mississippi River Valley in 1863 (363).

*Vicksburg, 1863* indicts both the Union and Confederate high commands for their too frequent propensity to work at cross purposes. Particularly cumbersome, the author argues, was Confederate incompetence at the highest echelons: he cites Johnston’s inclination to hesitate, Pemberton’s lack of resolve, and Davis’s ignorance of the gravity of the situation in the Mississippi River Valley. Groom also criticizes the Washington authorities for lacking faith in Grant, who plays a central role throughout the narrative, asserting that his book is “also the story of Ulysses S. Grant,” whose rise from antebellum obscurity secured the critical victory at Vicksburg “that should have ended the Civil War” (4).

Groom’s high regard for Grant goes beyond simply describing the Union general’s “magnificent campaign” (420). He dedicates more than a chapter to the impact of Vicksburg, stressing, like other historians, the significance of gaining control of the Mississippi River to the Union war effort. He duly notes that even though the fall of Vicksburg, with Lee’s defeat at Gettysburg on 3 July 1863, revealed that the “handwriting was on the wall” for the Confederacy, the authorities in Richmond could not recognize their fate.

The book also explores the postwar lives and careers of the principal players in the campaign. He discusses the battle of the memoirs, as leading Confederates blamed one another for the fall of the river bastion. He also gives a friendly nod toward the modern scholarship of historical memory by recounting the postwar efforts of politicians and veterans’ groups to control the remembrance of Vicksburg through monuments commemorating the battle.

Readers will not find here any groundbreaking interpretations or new direction in the historiography of the campaign. Groom relies heavily upon existing scholarship. Those familiar with the Civil War’s Western Theater will undoubtedly recognize many familiar arguments and interpretations. After all, how many times have students of American military history read about Grant’s purported predilection for alcohol? Groom includes no citations; scholars interested in pursuing additional research will find only a few sources listed in a short section along with the Acknowledgements. Also, some readers might be troubled by the extensive background on the Civil War’s first two years or the central role given to Grant.

Nonetheless Groom’s solid, engagingly well-written, and fast-paced historical study of a critical campaign and of the generals and the politicians who dictated events during it will surely please general readers and Civil War buffs alike, if not serious scholars. These qualities make *Vicksburg, 1863* a book to be recommended highly.