



Decision in the Heartland: The Civil War in the West (Reflections on the Civil War Era)

Steven E. Woodworth

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The verdict is in: the Civil War was won in the West—that is, in the nation's heartland, between the Appalachian Mountains and the Mississippi River. Yet, a person who follows the literature on the war might still think that it was the conflict in Virginia that ultimately decided the outcome. Each year sees the appearance of new books aimed at the popular market that simply assume that it was in the East, often at Gettysburg, that the decisive clashes of the war took place. For decades, serious historians of the Civil War have completed one careful study after another, nearly all tending to indicate the pivotal importance of what people during the war referred to as the West. In this fast paced overview, Woodworth presents his case for the decisiveness of the theater.

Overwhelming evidence now indicates that it was battles like Fort Donelson, Shiloh, Chattanooga, and Atlanta that sealed the fate of the Confederacy—not the nearly legendary clashes at Bull Run or Chancellorsville or the mythical high-water mark at Gettysburg. The western campaigns cost the Confederacy vast territories, the manufacturing center of Nashville, the financial center of New Orleans, communications hubs such as Corinth, Chattanooga, and Atlanta, along with the agricultural produce of the breadbasket of the Confederacy. They sapped the morale of Confederates and buoyed the spirits of Unionists, ultimately sealing the northern electorate's decision to return Lincoln to the presidency for a second term and thus to see the war through to final victory. Detailing the Western clashes that proved so significant, Woodworth contends that it was there alone that the Civil War could be—and was—decided.

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