



Defending the Arteries of Rebellion: Confederate Naval Operations in the Mississippi River Valley, 1861–1865 by Neil P. Chatelain.

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Abraham Lincoln recognized the strategic importance of the Mississippi River early in the Civil War. “The Mississippi is the backbone of the Rebellion,” he told David D. Porter in November 1861, “it is the key to the whole situation. While the Confederates hold it they can obtain supplies of all kinds, and it is a barrier against our forces.” Lincoln’s rebel counterpart, Jefferson Davis, understandably agreed. Speaking before the Mississippi legislature roughly a year later, the Confederate president implored “all who have at heart the safety of the country” to fight to “assist in preserving the Mississippi river, that great artery of the country, and thus conduce more than in any other way to the perpetuation of the Confederacy and the success of the cause.”¹

Given the Mississippi’s significance during the Civil War, it is no wonder that scholars have devoted so much attention to both the Confederacy’s defense of the river and the United States’ efforts to capture it. While most have focused on the latter, Neil Chatelain’s *Defending the Arteries of Rebellion* joins a comparatively smaller historiography² on the Confederate perspective of the war on the western waterways. Indeed, Chatelain wrote his book to counter Union-centered naval histories he believes “downplay” Confederate actions on the Mississippi and its tributaries as “reactionary and unorganized” (3). Although he falls short of elevating the Confederates’ riverine reputation, Chatelain has written a detailed, useful synthesis of the naval war in the Mississippi Valley.

Defending the Arteries of Rebellion is a fast-paced, traditional military history of the Confederate war on the western waters. It ranges from Naval Secretary Stephen Mallory’s initial planning in February 1861 to the surrender of the CSS *Missouri* in June 1865. The book concentrates on the actions of the CS Navy and its affiliate fleets, but also analyzes other parts of the rebel defense, such as the mobile armies that operated near the Mississippi and the fortifications they erected at strategic points. Chatelain (Lone Star College) is a former US Navy Surface Warfare Officer and the author of a previous book on the CSS *McRae*. He writes with a depth of detail one expects of

1. David D. Porter, “The Opening of the Lower Mississippi,” in Robert Johnson and Clarence Buel, eds., *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War* (NY, 1884–88) vol. 2.1; “Jefferson Davis’ Speech at Jackson, Miss., House Chamber, Mississippi Capitol, December 26, 1862,” *The Papers of Jefferson Davis*, vol. 8, 565–84—available online.

2. E.g., John D. Milligan, *Gunboats Down the Mississippi* (Annapolis, MD: US Naval Inst Pr, 1965); Spencer Tucker, *Blue & Gray Navies: The Civil War Afloat* (id., 2006); Gary D. Joiner, *Mr. Lincoln’s Brown Water Navy: The Mississippi Squadron* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007); Craig L. Symonds, *Lincoln and His Admirals* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2008); James M. McPherson, *War on the Waters: The Union and Confederate Navies, 1861–865* (Chapel Hill: U North Carolina Pr, 2012); and Barbara Brooks Tomblin, *The Civil War on the Mississippi: Union Sailors, Gunboat Captains, and the Campaign to Control the River* (Lexington: U Pr of Kentucky, 2016). On the Confederate defense, see Raimondo Luraghi, *A History of the Confederate Navy* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Inst Pr, 1996) and R. Thomas Campbell, *Confederate Naval Forces on Western Waters: The Defense of the Mississippi River and Its Tributaries* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2005). A key difference between Campbell’s and Chatelain’s books is the latter’s investigation of the rebel defense of the Mississippi Sound and Lake Pontchartrain, as well as Confederate operations in the upper Mississippi Valley in 1864–65.

someone with such a background. And for readers less familiar with the vocabulary of naval warfare, the volume includes a useful glossary of common terms.³ While Chatelain consulted a number of manuscript collections, most of his narrative is based on contemporary newspaper reports, retrospective accounts of key individuals, and the *Official Records* of the armies and navies. Because it relies principally on conventional sources and engages only minimally with existing scholarship, the book's chief strengths are its succinct synthesis of the naval war in the Mississippi River Valley and its clarification of why that war ended so definitively with a United States victory.

Although brief analyses are scattered throughout the narrative, Chatelain saves most of his conclusions for the final two chapters. There he contends that, while the Confederates scored tactical victories on the Mississippi and its tributaries throughout the war—most notably, at the Battle of the Head of Passes (1861) and the Battle of Plum Point Bend (1862)—they managed no significant squadron victories. Chatelain argues that this is because they were, quite simply, outmanned and outgunned, despite Stephen Mallory's valiant efforts. Unlike the Union, they lacked the skilled laborers and industrial capacity to build a formidable fleet of ironclads. They were also short of experienced sailors, aggressive officers, and army-navy coordination to operate them properly. Moreover, they wasted time, money, and resources on converting civilian steamers into "dubious warships" early on, when, Chatelain writes, they should have committed to building more ironclads (303). Meantime, "overwhelming Federal numbers on the waterways, well led by aggressive officers," destroyed the rebels' conventional naval forces in the spring 1862 campaigns (298). The most important Confederate shipyards in the Mississippi Valley were located at New Orleans and Memphis. When both cities fell to US forces in early 1862, "the fate of the Mississippi River was sealed, and with it the end of the Confederacy's hope for large-scale naval riverine operations" (302). Though he does not say so explicitly, Chatelain agrees with historians like Gary Gallagher⁴ who contend the Confederates lost control of the Mississippi well before the fall of Vicksburg in July 1863.

Even though the rebels were defeated decisively in the Mississippi River Valley, Chatelain takes great pains to prove they performed admirably in spite of their disadvantages:

Ultimately, lack of resources, time, and trained personnel resulted in a Confederate Navy too weak to do anything but play a supporting role to the static fortifications and mobile armies protecting the western waterways. However, its doomed efforts were daring and inventive, and hopefully this book provides the Confederacy's riverine forces with a better epitaph. (304)

That epitaph should reflect "an amazing amount of inventive and improvised activities while under wartime stress and confusing and sometimes egotistical military and civilian leadership." Most impressive was the Confederates' extensive use of "irregular exploits" (5), especially rams and torpedoes—a greater devotion to which, Chatelain hypothesizes, might have thwarted the Union advance at critical moments.⁵ That advance was not stopped, of course, but the rebel navy "fought bravely" anyway, "even as its number of warships steadily sank" (300). In the end, howev-

3. The book's index, on the other hand, is less useful. Because its page numbers do not line up with those in the main text, finding specific topics requires adding six pages to the numbers listed in the index.

4. In, e.g., "Did the Fall of Vicksburg Really Matter?" in *The Enduring Civil War: Reflections on the Great American Crisis* (Baton Rouge: LSU Pr, 2020) 123–26.

5. Unfortunately, Chatelain's discussion of the Confederates' "irregular exploits" does not include riverine guerrillas, on which, see Laura June Davis, "Irregular Naval Warfare along the Lower Mississippi," in Brian McKnight and Barton Myers, eds., *The Guerrilla Hunters: Irregular Conflicts during the Civil War* (Baton Rouge: LSU Pr, 2017) 213–35.

er, such “Confederate heroics” were no match for the United States’ superiority in manpower and materiel (298).

No historian would deny the significance of those Union advantages, but the story Chatelain tells suggests that Confederate disorganization played an equally important role in the outcome on the Mississippi. The “impromptu” (5), “ad hoc” (5), “improvised and makeshift” (91) rebel defense was plagued by poor army-navy coordination, an “inefficient and dysfunctional chain of command” (300), and a decentralized structure that failed to guarantee cooperation between the CS Navy, the Louisiana State Navy, Confederate Revenue Service ships, rebel privateers, and the River Defense Fleet, which was organized by the army but crewed by civilian contractors. Simply put, the Confederate defense in the Mississippi Valley was often a mess—much as it appears in those US-centered naval histories that Chatelain hopes to correct.

Defending the Arteries of Rebellion is a welcome study of the key actions taken by Confederates charged with guarding the Mississippi and its tributaries. Unlike previous works on the subject, it assesses the rebel defense of Lake Pontchartrain and the Mississippi Sound, as well as Confederate operations in the upper Mississippi Valley in the war’s final year. Historians interested in the Confederate perspective of the war on the western rivers should read this book, ideally in tandem with one on the United States’ brown-water navy.