VICKSBURG

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THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE FALL OF VICKSBURG. Vicksburg, and the simultaneous repulse of Lee's invasion at the battle of Gettysburg, marked the beginning of the end for the Confederacy. Previously, there had been confidence that victory, although demanding desperate measures, could yet be achieved. Afterward, there was only the hope that the North might sicken of the frightful cost of continuing the war and terminate hostilities. The great objective of the war in the West—the opening of the Mississippi River and the severing of the Confederacy—had been realized with the fall of Vicksburg. While in the East the Union armies battled on in bloody stalemate before Richmond, the armies of the West would now launch their columns deep into the vitals of the Confederacy.

Grant emerged from the Vicksburg campaign with a hard-won reputation as a master strategist, which prompted President Lincoln to place him in supreme command of all the armies of the United States. From this position he was destined to direct the final campaigns of the Civil War and to receive Lee's surrender at Appomattox. As for Pemberton, the fall of Vicksburg subjected him to painful criticism from those who held that a more resourceful defense might have saved the city, or his army, or both. Essentially, both commanders had disobeyed orders in like manner—Grant in striking behind Vicksburg alone rather than waiting to combine forces with Banks; Pemberton in deciding to protect Vicksburg at all cost rather than joining Johnston and risking loss of the city. But Grant's gamble had succeeded and Pemberton's had failed; and in war, as a leading Confederate commander had soberly remarked, the people measure a general's merit by his success. "I thought and still think that you did right to risk an army for the purpose of keeping command of even a section of the Mississippi River," President Davis wrote to General Pemberton after the fall of Vicksburg. "Had you succeeded none would have blamed, had you not made the attempt few if any would have defended your course."

In the Confederate capital, Gen. Josiah Gorgas, one of the most able of Southern leaders, confided to his diary the implications of the calamitous change in fortune to the South attending the twin disasters of Gettysburg and Vicksburg:

> Events have succeeded one another with disastrous rapidity. One brief month ago we were apparently at the point of success. Lee was in Pennsylvania threatening Harrisburgh, and even Philadelphia. Vicksburgh seemed to laugh all Grant's efforts to scorn. . . . All looked bright. Now the picture is just as somber as it was bright then. Lee failed

> at Gettysburgh. . . . Vicksburgh and Port Hudson capitulated, surrendering thirty-five thousand men and forty-five thousand arms. It seems incredible that human power could effect such a change in so brief a space. Yesterday we rode on the pinnacle of success—today absolute ruin seems to be our portion. The Confederacy totters to its destruction.

In Washington, a grateful President sat at his desk seeking words to express appreciation to Grant "for the almost inestimable service you have done the country." Explaining the fear he had entertained that the Union Army might be destroyed during its daring thrust in the rear of Vicksburg, which he believed at the time to be "a mistake," Lincoln wrote to Grant, "I wish now to make the personal acknowledgement that you were right and I was wrong."

On July 9, the Confederate commander at Port Hudson, upon learning of the fall of Vicksburg, surrendered his garrison of 6,000 men. One week later the merchant steamboat *Imperial* tied up at the wharf at New Orleans, completing the 1,000-mile passage from St. Louis undisturbed by hostile guns. After 2 years of land and naval warfare, the Mississippi River was open, the grip of the South had been broken, and merchant and military traffic had now a safe avenue to the gulf. In the words of Lincoln, "The Father of Waters again goes unvexed to the sea."

The Union Army passing the courthouse as it took possession of Vicksburg on July 4, 1863. From a wartime sketch.