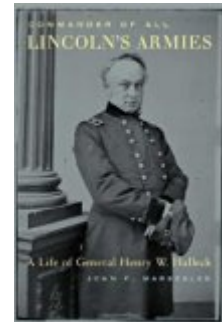


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John F. Marszalek. *Commander of All Lincoln's Armies: A Life of General Henry W. Halleck*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004. x + 324 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-01493-0.

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An Honest Examination of

If one were asked to list the most important generals of the Civil War, Henry Wager Halleck would probably not come to mind. Despite having been one of the highest ranking officers in U.S. military history, Halleck is usually dismissed as an inflexible, overly conservative general who failed to grasp the complexities of high command. In his latest biography, John Marszalek does not entirely dispute the prevailing opinion of Halleck, but he does present a more sympathetic appraisal of this much maligned general, urging readers to take the man more seriously. Halleck was a brilliant thinker who excelled in situations where rules and regulations held sway, but under circumstances where the outcome was unpredictable, such as the cauldron of war, his highly structured mind collapsed under the pressure. Thus, Marszalek asserts that Halleck's true talents lay in the realm of modern military bureaucracy, though it took three years of battlefield frustration for him to find his niche.

Unlike previous Halleck biographers, Marszalek provides extensive coverage of the general's antebellum life. In doing so, the author identifies the character flaws that plagued Halleck later on as "commander of all Lincoln's armies." The man's youth was shaped by rebellion against a father who insisted his oldest child take up the life of a New York commercial farmer. In 1831, Halleck ran away from home, though he enjoyed the patronage of certain relatives who financed an excellent education. Where his academic record revealed a genius, his social interactions betrayed an irascible personality intolerant of any form of disorder. Halleck was basically a perfec-

tionist for whom the military seemed to offer the ideal career path. He finished third in his class at West Point, where he embraced the rigid professionalism of Dennis Hart Mahan.

As an army officer, Halleck performed well at the technical craft of engineering and displayed a talent for writing doctrinaire military history. He also fought well in the Mexican-American War, though his service was limited to a few inconsequential skirmishes in California (it was combat action that in no way threatened his sense of order, but rather provided a rare moment of excitement). Settling on the West Coast, Halleck essentially taught himself law and made a fortune arbitrating land claims in the territory of California. He also served as a delegate for California statehood, his parliamentary acumen contributing greatly to the convention's smooth proceedings. Marszalek contends that these antebellum experiences convinced the future general that any challenge in life could effectively be managed by adhering to proven methodologies.

At the outset of the Civil War, Halleck's organizational abilities made him a logical choice for high command, but as Marszalek points out, the chaotic arena of war was very different from the controlled environment of a college classroom, a claims court, or a convention hall. The traits that made Halleck a success prior to the war ironically proved his undoing during the war. Initially, Halleck exhibited solid leadership in establishing relative order over occupied Missouri and then devising

the correct strategy for breaking the Confederacy's territorial defense in the western theater. But it was the boldness of Ulysses S. Grant that brought the staffroom plans to battlefield fruition at Fort Donelson and Shiloh. Marszalek emphasizes that Halleck's dislike for Grant stemmed less from jealousy of the latter's combat success and more from his subordinate's neglect in following proper military procedure.

Elevated by President Lincoln to overall commander in 1862, Halleck's innate shortcomings soon became apparent. Lincoln wanted a warrior, but he got a bureaucrat. As Marszalek states, Halleck "saw his role as coordinator rather than commander, administrator not fighter" (p. 137). Accordingly, Halleck rarely visited the front, preferring instead to manage the war via the telegraph. Although he often displayed a firm grasp of the strategic situation, the uncertainty of war paralyzed the man whose intellect garnered the sobriquet "Old Brains." Marszalek explains that in the summer of 1862, Halleck knew that generals McClellan and Pope needed to concentrate their forces against Lee in northern Virginia, but instead of ordering it done, he deferred to his strong-willed field commanders and merely offered suggestions. In the process, he avoided responsibility, at least in his own mind, for the disasters that followed. Similar indecisiveness characterized the subsequent campaigns of 1862 and 1863 to such a degree that Union generals increasingly ignored Halleck altogether and communicated directly with the War Department. Marszalek notes that Halleck did find solace during these wartime trials by indulging an old passion: military doctrine in the form of General Orders No. 100, which created longstanding U.S. policy for dealing with insurgents.

The most important portion of Marszalek's book is his discussion of Halleck's performance during the last year of the war. With the decisive Grant now in overall

command, Halleck at last found his true calling—chief-of-staff to a man he had come to respect. Marszalek describes the Grant-Halleck relationship as "militarily efficient" (p. 202). Liberated from the strain of high command, Halleck's administrative skills finally bore fruit for the Union. Almost reveling in the bureaucratic task of processing military paperwork, Halleck enabled Grant to focus more closely on the combat situation. And as a military historian with knowledge of Washington politics, Halleck offered his new commander advice on a variety of topics and thereby served as a useful sounding board for Grant. Marszalek argues that Halleck's performance as the North's senior staff officer in a modern, total war should never be underestimated; the clerk can be as important as the soldier in achieving victory. If nothing else, Halleck's insistence that military papers be saved makes him "the father of the *Official Records*", an accomplishment of perhaps greater significance to Civil War scholarship than anything else that happened in that struggle (p. 232).

Marszalek's biography is thoroughly researched; he mines deeply a vast array of correspondence by and about Halleck. Moreover, the book is well written with generous coverage of both the man's genuinely happy married life and the numerous health problems that exacerbated his wartime nervousness and contributed to his death in 1872. The author might have explored how Halleck's concept of military bureaucracy compared with the concomitant development of the much-heralded Prussian general staff, but Marszalek has done service enough with this thoughtful study. While in some respects corroborating the longstanding view of Halleck's ineffective generalship, Marszalek gracefully places the man's shortcomings in perspective and thereby rescues him from military mediocrity. In the end, Halleck was not a wartime supernumerary, but was rather the quintessential staff officer.

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