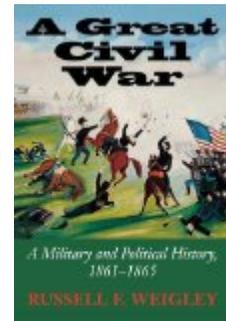


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Russell F. Weigley. *A Great Civil War: A Military and Political History, 1861-1865*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000. xxviii + 612 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-253-21706-6.

Reviewed by Brian C. Miller (Department of History, The University of Mississippi)
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Seeking the Military and Political Synthesis

In one of his final historical volumes, the late Russell F. Weigley sought to make sense of the chaos of the American Civil War, both on the battlefield and in the political arena. By synthesizing years of military history scholarship, Weigley's *A Great Civil War* strikes a careful balance between the actions of the Union and Confederate governments and the military campaigns that ravaged the American landscape. From the secession of South Carolina to the surrender of Robert E. Lee at Appomattox, the author presents a one volume political and military history of one of the most frenzied and complex moments in American history. Readers will find thorough discussions of Napoleonic tactics, the battles in both the western and eastern theaters, the political debates over conscription, emancipation, and sustaining the financial costs of war as well as the overall revolutionary significance of the war. Any endeavor of this magnitude should be commended.

At the same time, to cover the wide-ranging territory the author skillfully navigated through in his work proves difficult for the reviewer. Thus, only a few substantial arguments will be examined in this review. Weigley argues that the Civil War transformed into a revolutionary movement the moment Union commanders and politicians began discussing emancipation as a war aim. The author chronicles in exquisite detail the road to emancipation, adding a special amount of emphasis to Lincoln's personal transition and thought process as well as his actions when dealing with early Union commanders who asserted emancipation as an early war aim.

Weigley notes, "For black men to march through the slave states wearing the uniform of the U.S. Army and carrying rifles on their shoulders was perhaps the most revolutionary event of a war turned into revolution" (p. 191). The revolution produced by the Civil War may have, according to the author, made the terrible suffering of the war worth the cost. Weigley writes, "Still, the liberating of so many [slaves], and of their descendants, along with the preservation of the American experiment in democracy, may well appear to our rough human calculations as gains not falling short after all of justification for the terrible price of the Civil War" (pp. 452-453).

Readers will certainly find moments of analysis to debate into the wee hours of the morning at Civil War Roundtables. When pinpointing the failure of the South during the war, the author looks directly at military strategy. In order to win the war, Weigley argues that the Confederacy needed to place more weight on the eastern theater of operations. Weigley states, "it would have made sense to relegate the West more candidly to mere delaying operations, thereby making it possible to reinforce Lee enough that he could win his battles and campaigns by more decisive margins than he did, and that he could seriously threaten if not capture Washington" (p. xxi). He concludes, "Though the Confederate soldiers fought stubbornly, often heroically, in the end they did not fight hard enough to save the Confederacy" (p. xxvii). The Confederacy, by not utilizing a guerilla style of warfare throughout the war, failed to keep any nationalistic spirit alive. Thus, when the Confederacy col-

lapsed shortly after Lee's surrender at Appomattox, Weigley wonders if Confederate nationalism "was never a true nationalism" (p. 456).

When examining the Union, Weigley focuses on the transformation of the Union Army into an emancipating machine. He asserts, "At first, thousands of Union soldiers grumbled about their new role; but it was also true that the horrors of slavery were such that Northern boys confronting the scarred bodies and crippled souls of African Americans as they marched into the South experienced a strong motivation to become antislavery men" (p. 192). Despite this claim, the voices of the soldiers would assist the author greatly in proving his analysis of the newfound emancipation duty of the Yankee soldiers. As the war evolved, Russell Weigley points the finger of blame at Ulysses S. Grant for the protracted war that continued through 1864 and into 1865. He writes, "Perhaps Grant might have served the entire Virginia Theater better if he had not personally traveled with the Army of the Potomac, which tended to constrict his vision" (p. 329). However, the author does not examine the sigh of relief breathed from within the Union ranks when Grant pushed the army forward after the Wilderness, whereas Meade had waited following Gettysburg.

Despite the overall strength of the military and political analysis, there are times when a few omissions stand out. With the book beginning in 1861, the author never sets the stage for the Civil War to begin. By ignoring the significant events of the tumultuous decade of the 1850s, the secession movement seems historically out of context. While Weigley offers a thorough discussion of Gettysburg, Vicksburg and Petersburg, the battles of Stones River (Murfreesboro) and Fredericksburg only receive one paragraph of attention. Gustavus Smith's short tenure commanding the Confederacy at Seven Pines following the wounding of Joseph Johnston does not appear in the discussion of the transition from Johnston to Lee within the command structure of the Army of Northern Virginia.

Moreover, time and time again, I found myself craving the inclusion of some social history. In a 1989 article, historian Maris A. Vinovskis urged Civil War historians to examine the social dimensions of war and called for social historians of the nineteenth century to look no further than the Civil War to understand the social culture of the decades following the war.[1] With the author primarily utilizing political and military documents, and an added emphasis placed on secondary sources, the voices of the common soldier and citizen are entirely ab-

sent. What was it like for a soldier who fought at the Mule Shoe in Spotsylvania, Virginia? What was it like for African-American soldiers to charge into the Crater at Petersburg and how did soldiers from the South react to viewing black troops in action for the first time in the Petersburg campaign? How did the letters from southern women at home draw their husbands, brothers and fathers back home near the close of the war? Without the voices of the common soldier and the home front, the social impact of the war simply does not appear. As the actions and attitudes of those on the home front affected those on the battlefield, an appreciation of the ordeal of the average citizen is vital for a more complete military analysis. At the same time, a social analysis would draw more meaning to the discussion of each specific military campaign. Bull Run eradicated the persistent drum tap of war in the northern newspapers and made a lengthy war a reality. Shiloh, with more casualties than all previous American military endeavors combined, made a bloody war a reality, especially to the citizens of southwestern Tennessee and northern Mississippi, who spent months cleaning up after the battle. The photographs following Antietam transformed the casualties of war from a list in the local post office to actual faces and bodies that simply made the war more tangible, and consequently, more horrific. Granted, many volumes in recent years have examined the social relevance of the war. However, with a cry from within the historical community to infuse military history with social history, thereby creating the "new military history," the social impact of battles and political decisions could have been sprinkled throughout the volume.

Despite a few reservations, Weigley has certainly produced one, if not the best, political and military histories of the war. A clear sense of narrative drives the story forward, with occasional moments to examine the larger political ramifications of foreign affairs, emancipation, and the budding plans for reconstruction as well as the careful tightrope Lincoln walked with the Border States. Scholars and general readers alike will finish reading Weigley's work and have a clear understanding of how politics drove the war and at the same time, the war drove the political arena. He is to be commended for taking on a task not seen since James McPherson's *Battle Cry of Freedom*.

Note

[1]. Maris A. Vinovskis, "Have Social Historians Lost the Civil War? Some Preliminary Demographic Speculations," *Journal of American History* 76 (1989): pp. 34-58.

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