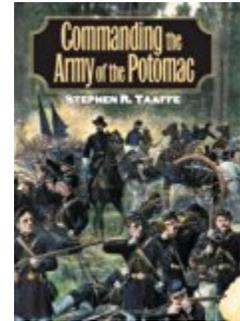


# H-Net Reviews

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Stephen R. Taaffe. *Commanding the Army of the Potomac*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006. ix + 284 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-1451-6.

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## Bureaucratic Bungling

In his *Commanding the Army of the Potomac*, Stephen R. Taaffe fills a historiographical void in Civil War scholarship by studying corps commanders of the Army of the Potomac as a group, comparing their motivations, failures, and eventual success in one of the most frustratingly sluggish and disappointing armies in American history. Having written two previous monographs on military command, *The Philadelphia Campaign* (2003) and *MacArthur's Jungle War* (1998), Taaffe brings to this latest installment acuity for portraying complex command structure. Presenting a narrative of the vast and ever-shifting Army of the Potomac, Taaffe's work complements Stephen Sears's essay collection, *Controversies and Commanders: Dispatches of the Army of the Potomac* (1999). Using five of the most influential commanders as a chronological vehicle—George McClellan, Ambrose Burnside, Joseph Hooker, George Meade, and Ulysses Grant—Taaffe explores the higher echelon of officers within the northern army. For Taaffe, most of the thirty-six corps commanders who served in the Army of the Potomac throughout the Civil War fell into one of four categories: “McClellanites,” Lincoln beneficiaries, opportunists, and (towards the end) commanders who rose through the ranks by merit. Yet, importantly, of the officers who ascended the chain of command through proven success, “only a few managed to lead corps” (p. 5). This breakdown is useful in explaining, in part, the Army of the Potomac's early failure on the battlefield. Political alliances, bureaucratic infighting, and poor leadership at the top led to the Union army's early disappointment in the eastern theater. In addition, as Taaffe argues, understanding the internal mechanics of the largest Union

army in the field, however ridiculous it often seemed, is crucial in comprehending the outcome of the war. Further, Taaffe posits, “although ideological, economic, social, and political factors were important, the war was ultimately decided on the battlefield.” And, on the battlefield, while “other Union field armies won more battles and seized more territory ... it was the Army of the Potomac that captured the Confederacy's capital and destroyed its premier army” (p. 5). Furthermore, Taaffe makes clear, “by examining the selection and retention of its corps commanders, it is possible to gain a greater understanding of the military and political obstacles the Army of the Potomac faced on its rocky road to victory” (p. 5).

Although eastern-centric in scope and argument, Taaffe's bold submission is hard to discount. That the Army of the Potomac and its commanders indelibly shaped the Union war effort is clear and, though individuals and battles have been studied in detail, Taaffe's encompassing examination of corps commanders is especially useful in tying together the oft-confused machinery of the Army of the Potomac.

The most useful system employed to explain the army's inner workings is the categorization of the four types of commanders. Using ample personal and official primary documentation, Taaffe argues that the majority of corps commanders in the Army of the Potomac fell under the sphere of McClellan—even after “Little Mac's” firing. These War Democrats turned corps commanders—Fitz Porter, William Franklin, and George Meade to name

a few—never sought total or even “hard” war, but rather a limited conflict that “did not disturb the country’s social fabric” (p. 215). They followed McClellan faithfully while he was commander and attempted to maintain his policies long after he was let go. McClellanites did not mix well with Lincoln appointees, further complicating the situation. For Taaffe, Lincoln unknowingly upset the already shaky balance within the Army of the Potomac (and Union Army as a whole) by furthering the seniority system—generally with little consultation of the army commander. By appointing Irvin McDowell, Edwin Sumner, Samuel Heintzelman, and Erasmus Keyes as McClellan’s first corps commanders, Lincoln laid the foundation for intense infighting. “Opportunists” in the Army of the Potomac, who were friends of no one unless it benefited their success, damaged the army’s progress—these characters sought ascension at the expense of other commanders and the war effort as a whole. Taaffe identifies Joseph Hooker and Philip Kearny as the ringleaders. “They were often shameless self promoters expert at cultivating journalists,” Taaffe makes clear, “and they freely criticized and denigrated their superior officers to discredit them and get them out of the way” (p. 217). Finally,

Taaffe gives well-deserved credit to those few commanders who somehow climbed through the quagmire of political squabbling and corruption to lead successful, skill-based careers as corps commanders. Led by Philip Sheridan, Edward Ord, and O. O. Howard, these commanders no doubt aided in eventual Union victory, but, due to the entrenched hierarchy of political and often corrupt commanders, merit-based officers “did not exert much influence on the Army of the Potomac’s high command” (p. 218).

“The Army of the Potomac’s officer corps, for its part, was full of recalcitrant, fractious, and egotistical men,” Taaffe concludes poignantly, “who were extraordinarily sensitive to slights real or imagined” (p. 218). Taaffe’s examination of these men is a welcome contribution to historiography concerning the Army of the Potomac and the Union war effort as a whole. *Commanding the Army of the Potomac* provides a clear and insightful view of complicated military organization, or disorganization, and serves as an ideal foundation for further work on the Army of the Potomac and the men who attempted to lead it to victory. As such, Taaffe’s work deserves a place on the shelves of Civil War scholars and “buffs” alike.

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