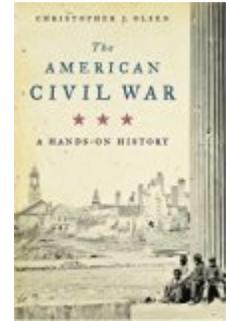


H-Net Reviews

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Christopher J. Olsen. *The American Civil War: Hands-On History*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2003. xii + 388 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8090-9538-4.

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A Holistic Civil War

Christopher J. Olsen's *The American Civil War: Hands-On History* is a concise introductory text to American social, political, economic, and military history from the antebellum era through 1877. Each chapter focuses on a specific period in the antebellum through Reconstruction period in the United States and is supplemented by primary source materials at the close of each chapter. Olsen concludes the text with a section of suggested readings that the student or instructor might find especially helpful if searching for supplemental texts or texts focused on a particular aspect of antebellum America, the Civil War, or Reconstruction.

Beginning with the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, Olsen traces the history of American expansion and its impact on the authority of each sovereign state to enact legislation controlling import/export regulations and the institution of slavery. Through a careful evaluation of the Northwest Ordinance, Missouri Compromise, Wilmot Proviso, and Kansas-Nebraska Act, Olsen exposes the impact each piece of legislation had on the emergence of the Democrat and Republican parties, the antislavery movement, and the sectionalism that followed. Supplemented by well-selected primary source material, chapters 1 through 5 smoothly and effortlessly paint a picture of the antebellum political and social scene.

Olsen then moves to discuss the American Civil War and the economic, social, political, and military impact the war had on the North and South. The war is discussed in a very readable and simple-to-follow manner which will allow students to more easily visualize and compre-

hend the myriad of goings on—socially, politically, economically, and militarily—of the war. Battles, as well as the political maneuvering in the North and South, are discussed in laymen's terms; less emphasis is placed on the actual tactical fighting of battles themselves than the social impact of the battles and the impact political events in Washington had on Union and Confederacy morale, mentality, and objectives. This non-military perspective is quite a refreshing way of reading and learning about the Civil War that may appeal to the less military-minded college/high school student. Nonetheless, no new information is provided and students with any background in the subject may find the text repetitive of facts and figures they have already encountered.

After the extensive discussion of the Civil War itself, in chapters 16 through 19, Olsen discusses the end of the war and the successes/failures of Reconstruction. Presidential and Congressional Reconstruction are discussed but without ever fully explaining the differences and the goals of each. A student without a strong United States history course covering this topic may find themselves confused in trying to ascertain the impact and importance of both. These chapters might have been more effective if combined into a brief discussion of the postwar landscape and its challenges—political, social, and economic. The fundamentals are all present but they are not discussed in the depth necessary to fully appreciate their importance and/or impact.

In a very short space, Olsen attempts, and mostly succeeds, in presenting the essentials needed to understand

the American Civil War from a holistic perspective. All of the essentials are provided; however, the text may be viewed as dull by students who have previously studied, or have ever been exposed to the subject. He falters in his holistic approach when discussing the economic, social, and political impacts of the war on the South, which is discussed at length, without equal attention to the North. Nonetheless, the discussions on the South are insightful, extensive, and thorough; students will definitely come to understand the devastating impact of the war on the Southern economy and mind-set.

Overall, *The American Civil War: Hands-On History* serves as a basic introductory text, featuring all the well-known battles, persons, and power plays in antebellum America and the American Civil War. The essentials are

all provided in a seamless chronological order but instructors should be aware that the text is undoubtedly for students who have not been exposed to previous study of the Civil War and that it is a text more focused on the impact of the war on the South than a text that addresses the nation as a whole. Nonetheless, Olsen does an excellent job in showing how the institution of slavery as a political issue was paramount over the “rightness” or “wrongness” of the “peculiar institution.” The primary sources included within the text itself are outstandingly chosen and applied but works such as J. Matthew Gallman’s *The North Fights the Civil War: The Home Front* (1994) or Joan E. Cashin’s *The War Was You and Me: Civilians in the American Civil War* (2002) would serve as excellent complementary texts.

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