

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Joan Waugh.** *U. S. Grant: American Hero, American Myth.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009. 373 pp. \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3317-9.

**David Work.** *Lincoln's Political Generals.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009. 287 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-03445-9.

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## Politics and Generals

With the advent of the sesquicentennial of the American Civil War, we can anticipate a wave of renewed interest in this great American watershed. As with other significant historical anniversaries and commemorations, scholars will explore new questions as well as reexamine standard historiographic themes. As we reflect on the Civil War's meaning and significance, one area of particular interest will be the military aspects of the war, and in particular, the generals who led the U.S. and Confederate armies. Two new publications by David Work and Joan Waugh offer exciting and fresh entries into this burgeoning Civil War historical literature.

Examining a well-worn topic, David Work, in his first book, *Lincoln's Political Generals*, explores the impact and contribution of Northern politicians who were appointed to the rank of general. Moving beyond Bruce Catton, James McPherson, Brooks D. Simpson, and Thomas J. Goss, Work probes Abraham Lincoln's use of politicians as generals and concludes that only a few of them could be considered complete failures, and that more often than not, they made a significant contribution to the war.[1] Examining an equally controversial subject, Joan Waugh, a professor of history at UCLA and author of two previous books, examines the changing image of Ulysses S. Grant in American public memory. By asking new questions and exploring new themes in her *U.S. Grant: American Hero, American Myth*, Waugh concludes that no person "symbolized both the hopes and the lost dreams of the [Civil] War more fully than Grant" (pp. 307-308). Together, Work and Waugh vividly remind us that war and politics are inextricably intertwined and that the politics of war don't end when the shooting stops.

David Work illustrates the inseparable links between war and politics by exploring the contribution political

generals made to the Union war effort. Work defines "political generals" as individuals who owed their appointment to Lincoln's desire to secure their political loyalty (p. 2). Work selects sixteen political generals, eight Republicans and eight Democrats, and looks at all aspects of their military careers, not just their combat experience. He concludes that contrary to the prevailing notion, the political generals made an important contribution to winning the war. More specifically, he argues that while the combat leadership of these men was mixed, they made a strong contribution in terms of military administration. Even the poor combat commanders like Nathaniel P. Banks, Franz Sigel, and Benjamin F. Butler, did well in managing the logistical and political aspects of administering a military department. Overall, Work concludes, the contributions of the political generals outweighed their failures, regardless of how dramatic those failures, especially combat failures, appeared to be.

One strength of Work's book is his analysis of the political generals' combat records. Even though he criticizes other historians for focusing almost exclusively on battlefield experiences, Work expends a great deal of effort carefully examining the combat leadership of these sixteen generals. He argues that their failures were no greater than those of other citizen generals during the Civil War and that many of the political generals, like John A. Logan and Francis Blair, Jr., were quite effective, particularly when they were under the command of a more seasoned officer. Work concludes that most combat failures came when the political generals were given independent command.

Work also provides a significant analysis of how the political generals served President Abraham Lincoln's purposes. In mobilizing the army, Lincoln quickly found

that there were not enough men to fill the officer ranks. Work argues that Lincoln took advantage of this situation by appointing both Republican and Democratic Party politicians, which helped him build critically important popular support for the war. For Lincoln, the appointment of Republicans was a source of patronage that helped cement crucial party unity, while his appointment of Democrats helped solidify support from the political opposition loyal to the Union. By explaining the role of the political generals in a context less sordid than previous studies have suggested, Work provides insight and understanding as to why seemingly inexperienced men were given such important military responsibilities.

Work's strongest contribution to our understanding of political generals in the North is his analysis of the noncombat contribution of these men, an area often overlooked by previous historians. He examines the military and quasi-civil administration of Banks and Butler in Louisiana, John A. Dix in Virginia and New York, Robert Schenck in Maryland, Sigel in West Virginia, and John C. Fremont in Missouri. Work argues that the political generals made their most significant contribution to the war effort when managing the thorny issues of how to assert Federal authority over a hostile population; work with local civil government; oversee trade; initiate Reconstruction; conduct fair elections; establish courts; manage confiscated property, including slaves; manage the refugee problem; preserve law and order; and deal with the disloyal.

While Work has made an important contribution to our understanding of the political generals in the North, he leaves some important questions unanswered. For example, how did citizen generals differ from political generals? Neither had West Point training or formal military experience, both often received appointments through patronage, and in terms of military records, each had spectacular successes and failures. Why then should we bother to focus on the political generals? One also wonders how similar political generals in the North were to those in the South. Did Southern political generals fair as well or poorly as their Northern counterparts? Lastly, if political generals played such an important role in Lincoln's efforts to rally the war effort, then why didn't he appoint more political generals after 1861-62? The fact that Work's study generates new questions does not detract from the quality of the book. Instead, it indicates that we can build upon his work and explore new topics.

While Work explores the inextricable link between politics, war, and the military, Joan Waugh carefully ex-

amines the politics of the memory of war. Waugh blends biography and cultural history in order to trace the shifting legacy of Ulysses S. Grant, arguably the most famous politician and general of the Civil War. Waugh asks why the reputation of Ulysses S. Grant, once considered by Americans equal in significance to George Washington and Abraham Lincoln, has been twisted and diminished to the point that he is now generally viewed as a brutal general and inept president. Waugh's thesis is that the reason why the popular perception of Grant changed so dramatically from hero to ne'er-do-well lies in the complex interplay between the desire for national reconciliation and the power of the "Lost Cause" mythology.

In building her argument, Waugh first chronicles Grant's life and career, documenting the qualities of his character—his tenacity, modesty, integrity, simplicity, resoluteness, and imperturbability. Waugh contends that these qualities served him well as a general, from Forts Donelson and Henry to Five Forks and Appomattox. These characteristics, she argues, are also what made him attractive to Americans as a politician. Waugh states that Grant's character helped him win two terms as president, during which he managed Reconstruction, the 1873 economic depression, westward expansion, foreign affairs, and political factionalism. This biographical information serves as a foil for Waugh as she explores how a man who was once hailed as a humble, democratic hero became seen as a plodding, greedy, and corrupt butcher.

In examining why Grant's reputation declined so dramatically, Waugh provides an insightful discussion of the "Lost Cause" mythology. Waugh analyzes the many familiar aspects of the Lost Cause, whose tenets claim that the war was never about slavery but about states' rights, that Southern armies were never really defeated but simply overwhelmed by numbers, and that Robert E. Lee embodied the Southern ideal of unflawed loyalty and dedication. Waugh explains that elevating Lee to a demigod meant that Grant's reputation had to be destroyed. The Lost Cause, consequently, portrays Grant as a brutal and uncaring general who won battles only by sacrificing thousands of lives. This image of Grant was reinforced by Southern criticism of his hated Reconstruction policies.

In addition to her examination of the Lost Cause, Waugh skillfully weaves the theme of national reconciliation into her analysis of Grant's reputation. Symbolized by the building of the Grant Monument in New York City, better known as Grant's Tomb, the spirit of reconciliation at the beginning of the twentieth century em-

phasized nobility, sacrifice, and the greater glory of the nation. Within this context, Reconstruction was viewed as excessive, wrongheaded, and a failure. The controversial issues of slavery and of citizenship for African Americans were downplayed, and the question of race all but banished from national politics. Waugh argues that Grant's reputation diminished as a byproduct of the "Reconciliationists" drive to erase the bitterness of Reconstruction and ease the divisiveness of race. The scandals of the Whiskey Ring and Credit Mobilier were all that was needed to complete the ruin of Grant's reputation in public memory.

Like Merrill Peterson's 1994 study of Abraham Lincoln and public memory, David Blight's 2001 analysis of race and the Civil War in American memory, and Barry Schwartz's more recent 2008 examination of Lincoln's image in modern American memory, Waugh's analysis of Grant provides fresh insights into the dynamics of public memory and history.[2] Her exploration of the power of the Lost Cause mythology and of the reconciliation movement in shaping the public memory of Grant is particularly strong. As a result, Waugh's work contributes to the growing body of literature that brings scholarly balance to our understanding of Grant.

Despite Waugh's important contributions, she occasionally borders on the apologetic for Grant, as if to compensate for the unfair criticisms heaped upon him over the past century. For example, in reference to Grant's "Indian Policy," she states that the president "strongly advocated peaceful methods" (p. 135) even though the United States fought three wars against the Apache and Sioux and gobbled up large amounts of land during his administration. Waugh also sympathetically portrays Grant in reference to Reconstruction. While acknowledging that it was a failure in terms of bringing justice to African Americans, she finds that under Grant, Reconstruction may be considered a success because it restored political, economic, and social relations between the North and South (p. 150). Lastly, she excuses the corruption in Grant's administration by declaring that he "was neither the first nor the last president to engage in nepotism" (p. 126).

More substantively, Waugh's discussion of Grant's presidency fails to fully examine the difficult issues of Reconstruction. Her analysis relies heavily upon revisionist historiography that tends to blame the failure of Reconstruction on the intransigence of the South and the lack of resolve in the North. At the same time, she credits Grant for his courage and his principles in signing the Force Acts of 1870-71 and the Civil Rights Act in 1875. In contrast, the more recent post-revisionist historians,

like Michael Perman, Les Benedict, and William Gillette, argue that these acts were insufficient and that Grant was, overall, inconsistent in his policies, which further exacerbated the nearly intractable difficulties of Reconstruction. Waugh's analysis could have been strengthened had she more directly engaged this historiographic debate.

Regardless, Waugh has written an outstanding book. Her compelling analysis of how Grant moved in American memory from the hero of Union victory to a figure of reconciliation and sectional harmony, and lastly to a symbol of the excesses and corruption of Reconstruction and the Gilded Age reminds us that "cultural wars" are not a recent phenomenon. Equally important, by insightfully analyzing the myths, emotions, facts, and politics of the public memory of Grant, Waugh demonstrates the critical importance of defining the past.

Carl von Clausewitz, the oft-quoted nineteenth-century Prussian military theorist, famously wrote that war is politics by other means. David Work's study of Civil War Union army political generals and Joan Waugh's analysis of the public memory of U.S. Grant illustrate variations of Clausewitz's dictum. Work shows us that political influences on the military are not inherently bad, while Waugh demonstrates that public memory of war and its heroes is also politics by other means. These two outstanding books signal a hopeful beginning to the commemoration of the American Civil War sesquicentennial.

#### Notes

[1]. Bruce Catton, "Lincoln's Mastery in the Use of Volunteer Soldiers and Political Generals," *Lincoln Herald* 57, no. 3 (1955): 9-10, Catton, *America Goes to War: The Civil War and Its Meaning Today* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1958); James McPherson, *Ordeal by Fire: The Civil War and Reconstruction* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1992), McPherson, *Abraham Lincoln and the Second American Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Brooks D. Simpson, "Lincoln and His Political Generals," *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association* 21 (Winter 2000): 76-77; and Thomas J. Goss, *The War within the Union High Command: Politics and Generalship during the Civil War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2003).

[2]. Merrill Peterson, *Lincoln in American Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); David Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001); and Barry Schwartz, *Abraham Lincoln in the Post-Heroic Era: History and Memory in Late Twentieth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

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