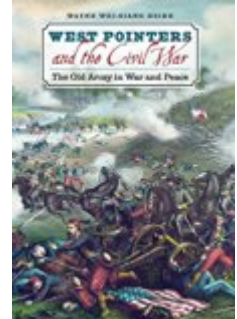


Wayne Wei-siang Hsieh. *West Pointers and the Civil War: The Old Army in War and Peace.* Civil War America Series. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009. Tables, figures, maps. xiii + 285 pp. \$30.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8078-3278-3.



Reviewed by Charles R. Bowery

Published on H-CivWar (September, 2010)

Commissioned by Martin P. Johnson (Miami University Hamilton)

A grouping of stone monuments in the central academic area at the United States Military Academy, named Reconciliation Plaza, celebrates both the Civil War service of Northern and Southern graduates and the role of those graduates in bringing about sectional reconciliation at war's end. These officers received their professional schooling at West Point, served in the antebellum Regular Army and in many cases in the Mexican War, and went on to lead the Union and Confederate armies in the Civil War. Their alma mater, conceived and built during the Jefferson administration, was a tangible symbol of the professionalization of the United States Army. Thus, West Point and its graduates represented the arc of American military policy from the early Republic to the dawn of the twentieth century.

Wayne Wei-siang Hsieh, professor of history at the U.S. Naval Academy, has written a truly original and interesting study that places the Civil War within the context of the development of the United States Army in the nineteenth century. In the process, he offers a corrective to what he

deems an intellectually flawed approach, the connection of the Civil War forward in time to World War I. Rather, he argues, "it would be more fruitful to look at the Mexican War, which not only occurred fifteen years before the Civil War but also shared many of the same commanders and participants" (p. 8). This is not a new idea, but Hsieh's contribution is to demonstrate the threads of tactical, organizational, and logistical continuity that link the Civil War firmly with the Mexican War and the post-War of 1812 military reforms of John C. Calhoun and General Winfield Scott. He clearly views the Civil War as preindustrial in its conduct, rather than as the first modern, industrial war as many historians have portrayed it.

West Pointers and the Civil War is organized both chronologically and thematically. The first two chapters examine the development of the U.S. Army between the War of 1812 and the Mexican War, while chapter 3 describes the decisive American victory produced by the post-1812 reforms. Chapter 4 details post-Mexican War changes in tactical concepts; the 1850s saw the creation of

most of the infantry, artillery, and cavalry doctrine put to use on the battlefields of the Civil War. In chapter 5, Hsieh describes the reaction of West Point cadets and graduates to the antebellum sectional crisis, introducing the provocative argument that were it not for the Old Army's professional development and resulting victory in Mexico, the westward expansion of slavery would not have been possible, and that the war would have proceeded from other causes.

The antebellum Regular Army developed out of the recognition, reinforced by the failures of militia in the War of 1812, that large-scale, interstate warfare required a professional military establishment. The tension between the citizen-soldier and the regular, combined with a deep-rooted American suspicion of large standing armies, limited the development of American military institutions and kept the army largely on the margins of American society. This marginalization had the unintended effect of giving the Regular Army, as Hsieh describes it, a "monopoly on violence" in nineteenth-century America. The army produced by post-1812 reforms, led mainly by West Point graduates and built largely on the French model, went to war with Mexico in 1846 and soundly defeated the Mexican Army. The pre- and post-Mexican War secretaries of war, Joel Poinsett and Jefferson Davis, were important catalysts to the professionalization of the U.S. military.

Chapters 6 through 9, a chronological recap of the Civil War, provide solidly argued answers to the essential questions that have occupied generations of military historians: how did the Union win, and why did the war unfold as it did? Hsieh looks not to technology, as did J. F. C. Fuller (in *The Generalship of Ulysses S. Grant* [1929]) and Basil H. Liddell Hart (in *Sherman: Soldier, Realist, American* [1929]), or to the tactical developments of rifled muskets and earthworks, as have Paddy Griffith (in *Battle Tactics of the Civil War* [1987]) and Earl J. Hess (in his trilogy *Field Armies and Fortifications in the Civil War: The Eastern Cam-*

paigns, 1861-1864 [2005], *Trench Warfare under Grant and Lee: Field Fortifications in the Overland Campaign* [2007], and *In the Trenches at Petersburg: Field Fortifications and Confederate Defeat* [2009]), but to the same cohort of West Point graduates who served in Mexico.[1] Hsieh contends that for most of the war, the Union and Confederate armies operated in a state of equilibrium brought on by formations of similar size and skill, and by leadership with a shared background and education from West Point. Confederate armies generally possessed an edge in leadership skill at the brigade, division, and corps level; and Confederate personnel policies, which placed new recruits into established regiments in contrast to the Union policy of simply building new units, tended to encourage unit cohesion and the development of combat experience over time. These factors tended to offset growing Union advantages in materiel and manpower as the war went on, and it took the operational and strategic synergy of Generals Ulysses S. Grant and William T. Sherman to break this equilibrium beginning in early 1864. At war's end, the conservatism and shared upbringing of the West Point-trained U.S. officer corps prevented the devolution of the conflict into guerrilla warfare and facilitated sectional reconciliation, a fact that is commemorated in granite at the modern U.S. Military Academy.

West Pointers and the Civil War amplifies and builds on two other landmark works of American military history, Edward M. Coffman's *The Old Army: A Portrait of the American Army in Peacetime, 1784-1898* (1988), and William B. Skelton's *An American Profession of Arms: The Army Officer Corps, 1784-1861* (1992). In a concise and well-written argument, Hsieh weaves together an institutional history of the antebellum army's development, an intellectual history of the manuals and treatises that various reformers and officers wrote (and which West Point graduates put into practice on the battlefield), and a concise opera-

tional overview of both the Mexican War and the Civil War.

The prospective reader should not be deceived by the thinness of this volume. At only 197 pages, *West Pointers and the Civil War* merges a thought-provoking set of arguments on several interrelated topics. At a distance of almost 150 years since the guns fell silent, a truly original analytical framework for the American Civil War is a difficult and noteworthy feat. Hsieh has crafted an original contribution to the literature on American military history between the War of 1812 and World War I, offering a nuanced view of the Civil War's place in that continuum.

Note

[1]. Fuller and Liddell Hart make explicit connections between the Civil War and the industrial warfare of World War I. Paddy Griffith argues for the centrality of the rifle musket in determining the character and outcomes of Civil War battles. Earl J. Hess focuses on the role of entrenchments on fieldworks in the war's Eastern theater.

A

a

-

C

Three

s

Four

C

Five

-

A

A

S

W

Six

Nine

-

[1]

[2]

-

,

up

[3]

[4]

A

Professor

truly

s

In *_The Generalship of Ulysses S. Grant_* (1929) and *_Sherman: Soldier, Realist, American_* (1929),

, respectively,

[2]. In *_Battle Tactics of the Civil War_* (1987),

in his trilogy

T

:

Field Armies and Fortifications in the Civil War: The Eastern Campaigns, 1861-1864 (2005).

Trench Warfare Under Grant and Lee: Field Fortifications in the Overland Campaign (2007).

In the Trenches at Petersburg: Field Fortifications and Confederate Defeat (2009)

(All Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press)

[3]. Edward M. Coffman, *_The Old Army: A Portrait of the American Army in Peacetime, 1784-1898_* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

[4]. William B. Skelton, *_An American Profession of Arms: The Army Officer Corps, 1784-1861_* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1992).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-civwar>

Citation: Charles R. Bowery. Review of Hsieh, Wayne Wei-siang. *West Pointers and the Civil War: The Old Army in War and Peace*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. September, 2010.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=30305>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.