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Christopher C. Meyers. *Union General John A. Mcclernand and the Politics of Command.* Jefferson: McFarland & Co, 2010. 216 pp. $32.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7864-5960-5.

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A New View of McClernand

It has become increasingly difficult to find anything new to say about Civil War generals, but Christopher C. Meyers's latest book, *Union General John A. McClernand and the Politics of Command* breathes life into the wilting field of Civil War military biography. Meyers's book is no ordinary account of the life and times of General McClernand, but is instead a look at McClernand's politics and the way his political aspirations intersected with his army career. Union Major General John A. McClernand–notorious for his ongoing feuds with Lieutenant General Ulysses S. Grant–was a long-time Douglas Democrat who failed to separate politics from his military decision making. Meyers writes, "The principal theme of this study of John McClernand is politics.... McClernand's penchant for politics during the Civil War alienated many high-ranking officials and his scheming undermined the command structure of the Army of the Tennessee. And therein lies the paradox of McClernand's Civil War experience. On one hand he fought tenaciously to defeat the Confederates, but on the other his intriguing undermined the federal command system" (p. 2).

Meyers's biography surveys McClernand's life from his "glory-hunting" days in Illinois when he served as a lawyer, a soldier during the Black Hawk War, and a newspaper editor, to his four terms as congressman from Illinois' Second District, to his days as a Civil War general during the western Tennessee campaign of 1862, the Vicksburg campaign of 1863, and the Red River campaign of 1864. Although three full chapters elucidate McClernand's antebellum life, only a three-page epilogue explains McClernand's postwar career.

Meyers rescues McClernand from generations of judgmental Civil War historians who have classified him as a leader who stood central among the Union's legion of "incompetent" political generals. While Meyers admits that McClernand never showed true brilliance, he proves that McClernand grasped the complexities of military strategy better than most of his contemporaries. Meyers argues convincingly that, by September 1862, McClernand had developed a grand strategy that stressed army-oriented objectives rather than place-oriented objectives. McClernand's percolating ideas outlined in concept how the war in the western theater was eventually won, by cutting the Confederacy into sections–as along the Mississippi River or along the axis of the Western and Atlantic Railroad in Georgia–and pursuing Confederate armies relentlessly, all the while severing railroads and dismantling Southern munitions factories and armories. In addition, Meyers shows how McClernand also grasped tactics. Meyers devotes a chapter to the Arkansas Post Campaign, McClernand's "greatest victory of the war," proving that as an independent commander, McClernand devised his own successful means of taking a strong enemy position. When given an opportunity to lead, McClernand stood strong on his own two feet (p. 1).

Where McClernand failed as a general officer came with his effort to politicize his army career. McClernand viewed each military achievement or promotion to higher rank the same way he viewed a successful election, as triumph over an opposition. Meyers contends McClernand's "politics of command" alienated high-ranking professionals, including Admiral David D. Porter, Major General William T. Sherman, and Major General Henry W. Halleck. McClernand once had the favor of Lieutenant General Ulysses S. Grant, but his constant scheming to receive command of the Mississippi Expedition soured Grant on McClernand's trustworthiness. After President Lincoln removed McClernand from independent command in favor of Grant in December 1862, McClernand received assignment to the 13th Corps, which command he also lost when Grant discovered that McClernand had published his–a superior's–orders in a newspaper without consent. McClernand experienced a short-lived redemption when he convinced Lincoln to as-

sign him to a new command in the trans-Mississippi theater, but malarial fever forced him to resign before any further glory (or ignominy) could be obtained.

Meyers argues that McClernand's political background did not necessarily render him an unfit general. In making his assessment, Meyers takes his cue from Grant, who tolerated McClernand because, as Meyers contends, "Grant understood the political nature of the war." He continues, "Grant's future would be severely hampered if he removed McClernand without good cause." By keeping McClernand around, Grant did some politicking of his own (p. 163). Thus, Meyers unveils little difference between so-called political generals and so-called professional generals, since each group schemed and plotted to the same degree. Why McClernand failed, while others did not, owed to McClernand's unusual habit of disrespecting the chain of command. When McClernand experienced frustration, he dealt with it by contacting Lincoln, whose acquaintance he gained from his early days as a lawyer in Illinois. McClernand routinely circumvented the authority of his superiors by appealing to Lincoln to adjudicate disputes, a tactic which might have worked in the realm of the Illinois state legislature or in Congress, but in the army, this ploy only earned McClernand a host of enemies. Meyers concludes, "McClernand did not realize that when he became a soldier he ceased to be a politician in the way he was used to. He believed he could use traditional political maneuvering to get what he wanted as a soldier.... [But] politicking for command had no place in the Army of the Tennessee" (p. 165).

Union General John A. McClernand and the Politics of Command is an excellent example of the continued usefulness of biographical history in illuminating complexities of the Civil War–in this case, the intersection of the military and politics. However, Meyers's book is limited by its narrow conception of "politics." When he refers to politics, Meyers generally means scheming or plotting. Surprisingly, one of the most essential aspects of nineteenth century politics–partisanship–goes practically unmentioned. In his first three chapters, Meyers's paints a thorough picture of McClernand's role in the Democratic Party, but after Fort Sumter, McClernand's partisanship evaporates within the narrative. One is left to wonder how it came to be that McClernand developed such a cordial relationship with his Republican commander-in-chief, while other well-known Democratic generals–such as George McClellan, for instance–did not. Further, it might have strengthened Meyers's analysis had he examined the partisan elements of strategy, seeing as how strategic development played such a pivotal role in McClernand's military career. In 2002, Mark Neely's book, *The Union Divided: Party Conflict in the Civil War North,* argued that Republicans tried to kill off "strategy," which to them, meant maneuver and entrenching. Meyers even quotes a memorandum written by Lincoln in 1862 that proposed more attention on "hard desperate fighting" and less attention on "strategy," an announcement that conflicted with McClernand's astute plan to maneuver in order to defeat the Confederate armies (p. 111). Meyers attributes much of the bickering in the Union officer corps to the divide between West Pointers and non-professionals. Could the primary rift have been between Republicans and Democrats? This line of inquiry goes unexplored.

Nevertheless, Meyers's biography offers scholars a new approach to an old subject, one that promises to make historians pause and reflect upon the untold importance of McClernand as a meteoric figure of the Civil War.

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