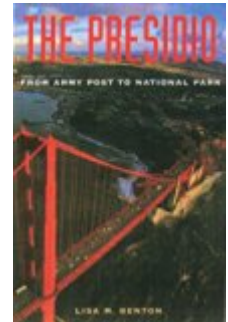


**Lisa M. Benton.** *The Presidio: From Army Post to National Park*. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1998. Xvii + 277 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-55553-335-9.



**Reviewed by** Michael Faubion

**Published on** H-Environment (August, 1999)

The relationship between the military and America's national parks is a long and interesting tale dating back to U.S. military surveys of regions that eventually became parks and the Army's early role as defender of the first parks. This relationship is perhaps most intriguing in the case of our most recent national park, the Presidio. Lisa Benton has taken on the daunting task of discussing this relationship in her new book, *The Presidio: From Army Post to National Park*, with limited success. She follows the Presidio from its establishment as a Spanish base of military operations, through the U.S. Army's occupancy after the Mexican-American War, and focuses on the politics involved in eventually creating our most recent, and the largest urban, national park.

The strongest part of Ms. Benton's work is her discussion of the competition for control of the Presidio by land developers, park enthusiasts, and the military. She connects the interests of park enthusiasts to larger environmental movements in the country and discusses how they formulated their political strategy to achieve their eventual victory in the post-Cold War base closings. She

also provides useful information about the military's forestry efforts and discusses the architecture of the Mission Revival style in the Ft. Scott area although she seems unaware of similar moves made on other military posts like Ft. Sam Houston. Most importantly, she details the debate to create the park and the role that the park fills in the national parks system.

Ms. Benton's greatest strength in this work is her discussion of the political choices made in eventually creating the Presidio as a national park. She is much weaker when it comes to the Presidio as a military base. She consistently downplays the value of the Presidio to the military, making the military sound as if the only reason for maintaining the base was to spite those interested in making some other use of the land. She ignores the role played by the base in Pacific operations from the Spanish-American War to the Cold War, although she does admit the base had some importance during World War II. The role of the Presidio as a support and command sight for operation in the Philippines, China, and other Asian countries is missing. Letterman Hospital's role as

an Army medical center is also ignored. These oversights may be the result of her ignoring military documents, I note she does not cite any in her sources, or her own bias.

The greatest contribution of this work is in her discussion of the debate of including the urban and partially developed Presidio as a national park. While advocates mounted a strong defense of the Presidio's inclusion, critics argued that the area did not fit the conventional idea of a national park and that some other, less valued status better fit the region. Along with the discussion of the debate Ms. Benton discusses the way land areas are valued and placed in a hierarchy. She makes a forceful argument that such a system which undervalues urban or cultural areas needs rethinking and that the making of Presidio into a national park was the first challenge to the traditional views. As she points out, future additions to the Park Service are more likely to resemble the multi-use areas like the Presidio than the wilderness area of Yellowstone.

Scholars interested in the debate over making the Presidio a national park and what this debate says about our national park system will find this book useful. It should create much needed discussion about our park policies and how those policies might need to change in the future. Those scholars seeking true historical treatment of the region "from army post to national park" will be disappointed and should look elsewhere.

Copyright (c) 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

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

**Citation:** Michael Faubion. Review of Benton, Lisa M. *The Presidio: From Army Post to National Park*. H-Environment, H-Net Reviews. August, 1999.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=3367>



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