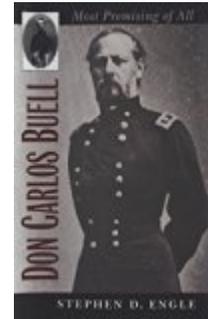


# H-Net Reviews

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Stephen D. Engle. *Don Carlos Buell: Most Promising of All*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999. xvii + 476 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2512-9.

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## Most Mediocre of All

Don Carlos Buell does not seem to have left much of a mark on the Civil War's outcome, despite having performed adequately in some important tasks. As commander of the Union Army of the Ohio from the beginning of the war through October, 1862, Buell oversaw the capture of Nashville. He is perhaps best known for having come to the rescue of a beleaguered Ulysses S. Grant at Shiloh, and for stopping – or at least getting in the way of – Braxton Bragg during his invasion of Kentucky.

But when Buell left the army under a cloud in late 1862 for his failure to pursue Bragg after the Battle of Perryville, few seemed to care or even notice. He lacked the colorful eccentricities of William T. Sherman or Stonewall Jackson, the solid record of success in critical moments like George S. Thomas or James Longstreet, or even the spectacular failures of Ambrose Burnside. Buell seemed like the Civil War equivalent of tapioca pudding, a man who “had only participated in, not contributed to, the military conquest of the Confederacy” (p. 350).

This relative obscurity is one reason why, until now, Buell did not have a biography. Another reason is the relative paucity of sources. He left behind no diary, and his personal correspondence is of such a dry, official nature that it reveals little about the man himself. Despite these handicaps, Stephen D. Engle has taken on the difficult task of trying to write a biography of this colorless and in many ways inaccessible man.

On paper Buell had all of the necessary qualifications to be a good general. Raised in a strict Presbyterian

household in southern Indiana, he learned personal discipline and attention to duty at an early age. These values helped make him a decent, if not outstanding, West Point cadet and Regular Army officer. He distinguished himself for bravery under fire during the Mexican War, receiving a serious chest wound which nearly killed him. Unlike so many of his contemporaries who left the army as soon as the excitement ended, Buell stayed on after the war, apparently unperturbed by the tedium and low pay of the peacetime army. “The army defined his life,” Engle points out, “indeed, it became his family” (p. 64-65).

When the Civil War broke out, Buell's West Point pedigree and solid military resume landed him a division in the Army of the Potomac, and eventually command of the entire Department of the Ohio, encompassing large portions of Kentucky and Tennessee. He held one of the most important posts in the Union army, and was in a perfect position to distinguish himself. However, he failed to seize the initiative in the western theater. Buell was a good organizer and a firm disciplinarian, but he was unwilling to move against the enemy with anything less than perfect preparation. He subsequently resisted attempts by the Lincoln administration to get him to invade eastern Tennessee and relieve its Unionist populace on logistical grounds, to the point that he alienated the president and many of his supporters. He also routinely returned runaway slaves to their white Southern owners, much to the chagrin of many of his own officers and men. “Buell continued to believe that his army was an extension of good government and offered the olive branch whenever and wherever he could,” Engle writes. “In this

he remained true to his belief in limited war for limited goals, even when it became evident that many of his soldiers opposed it.” (p. 285).

One byproduct of this limited war philosophy was a warmaking pace which Engle rather charitably describes as “horrendously tedious.” (p. 270). How slow was Buell? He is surely the only man during the Civil War to earn the dubious distinction of being criticized by both George B. McClellan and Henry W. Halleck – two truly outstanding slowpokes – for his glacial movements. Buell’s leisurely pace drove Abraham Lincoln to distraction, called into question his competence by colleagues and newspapermen, and in the end severely damaged his army’s morale. “He is the slowest person I ever had the misfortune to be associated with, and [he] tries my patience in the severest manner almost daily,” wrote one angry subordinate (p. 246).

His slowness was equaled only by his almost uncanny ability to alienate enlisted men, officers, reporters and politicians alike with what seemed a brusque indifference to their welfare or opinions. It should not have turned out this way; Buell had all the tools for success at his disposal, if only he had known how to use them. A native midwesterner commanding mostly midwestern troops (many from his home state of Indiana), possessed of a strong military bearing and appearance, and renowned for his personal bravery, he should have made an outstanding leader of men. But the subtle skills of inspiring volunteer soldiers were lost on him. He seemed singularly uninterested in the impression he made on his soldiers or on the politicians who could decide his professional fate. Buell was a born bureaucrat rather than a leader, who was “better at managing than waging war and was at his best when it came to bureaucratic red tape” (p. 191).

Engle argues that, in the end, the Civil War simply

passed Buell by, turning into a political and social revolution which bewildered and dismayed him. He “refused to accept the effective war the Union needed to wage” (p. 320). Buell’s extremely lenient policy of reconciliation towards white Southerners seemed out of step with the times, and his unwillingness to embrace the more radical war measures of property confiscation and emancipation left him open to charges of sympathy with the enemy. Even his one significant contribution to the Union victory at Shiloh was eclipsed by Grant’s and Sherman’s exploits on that battlefield, a fact which bothered him greatly in the years after the war. He engaged in public and bitter arguments with his former friend Sherman and others over his role at Shiloh, none of which seemed to matter. “Tragically, he died without recognizing that his story had been written in the collective memory of Americans who came to believe he was a failure,” Engle writes, and “consequently, Buell’s life ended the way it began, in obscurity” (p. 363).

Engle is remarkably evenhanded in his treatment of these issues, resisting the temptation to write either an apologia for Buell or a harsh condemnation of his actions. He also negotiates the blanks and empty spaces in Buell’s life with admirable skill, offering plausible speculation on matters such as Buell’s racial views where there is insufficient evidence for definitive conclusions. Engle is a careful, judicious biographer, and while he sometimes presses his speculations just a bit too far – in his suggestions concerning the influence of French military philosopher Antoine Henri Jomini on Buell’s military philosophy, for example – such occasions are rare and quite forgivable. On the whole, Professor Engle has given Don Carlos Buell a solid and fitting biography.

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