

Paul Taylor. *The Most Complete Political Machine Ever Known: The North's Union Leagues in the American Civil War.* Civil War in the North Series. Kent: Kent State University Press, 2018. xiv + 322 pp. \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-60635-353-0.

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Joining the growing tide of literature concerned with understanding nationalism in the Civil War-era North, Paul Taylor's *The Most Complete Political Machine Ever Known: The North's Union Leagues in the American Civil War* offers a detailed analysis of the creation and maintenance of one of the war's least understood institutions—Union Leagues. Union Leagues—private (sometimes secret) clubs formed by civilians interested in expressing their support for the Union cause, cultivating patriotic attitudes, and policing treasonous dissenters—were, according to Taylor, “the North’s *primary* arbiter of how loyalty and treason were defined” in the loyal states during the conflict (p. 12). In the literature on nationalism during the Civil War, a true study of these civilian-led institutions has been absent, though much needed. By providing the first full-length study of Union Leagues, Taylor offers historians a chance to better understand how Civil War Americans understood loyalty and treason, and, perhaps most critically, how they defined and expressed the idea of the Union in the midst of a war of disunion.

Taylor's work builds on several recent studies in order to establish the state of the field for studying civilians and their loyalties in the Civil War-era North. Among the most important for understanding the Civil War generation's baseline conception

of the Union is Gary W. Gallagher's *The Union War* (2011). Gallagher's study took on the challenge of synthesizing a scattered literature on Northern loyalty during the conflict and argues that for the wartime generation the preservation of the Union represented the paramount goal of the war. Because the United States represented the “last, best hope” for a successful democratic republic in a sea of monarchies and despotic European regimes, Americans believed if they failed to sustain the nation in the face of a secession threat, the democratic experiment would be judged to have failed.[1] Taylor's depictions of the political and social loyalties of Civil War Northerners, meanwhile, are heavily informed by the studies of J. Matthew Gallman (*Defining Duty in the Civil War: Personal Choice, Popular Culture, and the Union Home Front* [2015]), Mark E. Neely Jr. (*The Union Divided: Party Conflict in the Civil War North* [2002]), and Adam I. P. Smith (*No Party Now: Politics in the Civil War North* [2005]).

Taylor also relies on the work of scholars who have recently reopened investigations into the legal and political questions of treason and loyalty raised by the war. Critical for Taylor's treatment of the question of treason is William A. Blair's *With Malice toward Some: Treason and Loyalty in the Civil War Era* (2014). Blair's careful analysis of the

civilian North's response to secession helps explain the rise of Union Leagues that hoped to use the printed word and public condemnation to punish treason and reveal the activities of traitors. Blair's research attempted to reconcile the widespread sentiment he found among Northerners, which held that Southern states had acted treasonously in leaving the Union, and the failure of the Northern judicial system to respond to treasonous activity. Citizens, Blair contends, often moved more swiftly than federal agents in punishing traitors in their midst, forcing the government to rethink its legal position on the question of treason. Taylor builds on Blair's work by showing how quickly civilians escalated their crusade against disloyalty—and how civilians came to believe that winning the war for the Union depended as much on defeating secessionists at home as it did on inflicting military defeats on the Confederacy.

Taylor begins his study with a brief overview of the antebellum antecedents to Union Leagues. Almost all the institutions Taylor identifies, regardless of geographical section, shared common traits, including an economically elite membership and an affinity for secret rituals. Prominent forebears of Union Leagues included the Free Masons, the Nativist Know-Nothings, and the Wide Awakes, a youth organization cultivated by the Republican Party to encourage young voters to engage in the election of 1860. In the face of growing sectional tensions, Taylor identifies the increasing politicization of civilian societies. While the Union Leagues that emerged during the war were not explicitly Republican, they did adopt the party's adherence to the preservation of the Union as the war's ultimate goal.

When historians of the Civil War trace civilian morale during the conflict, they typically identify two major depressions in Northern morale: one that stretched from the late summer of 1862 through the spring of 1863 (resulting in dozens of Republicans losing their congressional seats in the off-year elections of 1862) and a second, far deeper

morass, that emerged in the spring of 1864 and threatened to destroy Abraham Lincoln's chances at reelection the following November. These depressions correlated with the failure of Union armies to achieve substantial victories in the war's eastern theater—where a rotating cast of generals faced the intractable Confederate commander Robert E. Lee. In response to the first of the major declines in Union morale, following general George B. McClellan's failure to capture the Confederate capital at Richmond despite coming within fifteen miles of the city, the Lincoln administration increased its demand for troops and Union Leagues emerged across the North to identify, condemn, and oppose men who attempted to avoid military service or expressed disloyalty to the cause.

Leading the way in setting the agenda for the newly forming Union Leagues were the cities of Philadelphia, New York, and Boston. Taylor explains that the men who formed pro-Union organizations in many of the North's largest cities had deep connections to another wartime institution, the United States Sanitary Commission, whose mission involved supporting the sick and wounded soldiers of the Union Army in an effort to raise morale among enlisted men and channel the patriotic impulses of civilians who saw working with the commission as a way to contribute time and money to the war effort. The clubs in Boston, Philadelphia, and New York decided that their affiliations would be with the Union, not the Republican Party. The primary goal of each new club was to promote loyalty. Despite avoiding a partisan stance in their charters, Taylor reveals, the leagues received the backing of prominent members of the Lincoln administration, including Secretary of State William H. Seward.

In tandem with the rise of the elite Union Leagues along the Eastern Seaboard, many mid-western cities experienced a proliferation of the clubs. Unlike their patrician eastern counterparts, pro-Union clubs in the country's interior were

open to any loyal man, regardless of his personal wealth or social standing. Taylor explains that East Coast Union Leagues were able to leverage the economic and social status of their members to financially harm men deemed disloyal. If a Union League decided that a man's words or actions had proven his support for secession and the Confederacy, members would cancel business contracts and terminate social friendships. These personal attacks spread across the Northern business sector. Companies began terminating employment contracts with men who were found to be disloyal. Taylor suggests that the practice of threatening disloyal men with economic consequences helped quash vocal anti-Union sentiment in the North and ostracized Copperheads in the Northern public imagination.

As their movement gained momentum, Union Leaguers turned to the written word to distribute their message to a wider audience. Taylor explains that several movements helped the leagues disseminate their pro-war message, including the suppression of treasonous newspapers by the army and the willingness of the postal service to work with the leagues in conveying their pro-Union materials through the mail. In examining hundreds of pamphlets and editorials, Taylor determines that the literature disseminated by the Union Leagues aimed to support the morale of troops and convey a message of support and a reminder to disillusioned soldiers of their patriotic duty. As the material spread across the North, Union Leagues gained control over defining loyalty during the conflict. Taylor suggests that the broad spectrum of men who organized clubs professing to support loyalty to the nation, whether proletarian or patrician, had one belief in common—"whoever is not with us is against us" (p. 135).

When Northern morale dipped again in the lead-up to the election of 1864, the Union Leagues prepared to wage a war on behalf of the Republican Party. Though almost every club professed to abhor partisanship, each organization embraced

playing politics in order to sustain the war effort. Every Northerner knew that the election would mean the difference between continuing to wage the war to restore the Union (the Republican platform) or ending the war and resulting in permanent secession of the South (the Democratic agenda). Union Leagues adopted several tactics during the election to help ensure a Republican victory. Among the most important was the effort to allow soldiers in the field to cast ballots. Union Leagues figured that most men who wore blue uniforms would vote to reelect their commander in chief (soldiers voted 3 to 1 for Lincoln over his opponent, McClellan). Taylor suggests that great success of the Union Leagues in distributing pro-administration, anti-Democratic propaganda and limiting the distribution of Democratic materials helped to turn the tide for the Republicans.

Taylor concludes with a chapter about the Union Leagues during Reconstruction. The movement fizzled out in the decade following the Civil War, Taylor argues, because initiatives to desegregate Union clubs, who had welcomed newly freed African Americans to form Southern chapters, led to their abandonment by whites who had never fully embraced emancipation as a desirable outcome for the war. Thus, Taylor concludes, the real importance of the Union Leagues lay in their policing of treasonous and disloyal sentiments in the North from 1862 to 1864. The major achievement of pro-Union organizers proved to be their galvanization of the electorate in favor of reelecting Lincoln. Leagues expertly manipulated the press and used coercive measures to ostracize anti-Union individuals.

Taylor's conclusions offer good fodder for historians of Civil War nationalism to consider as they continue to refine our understanding of how loyalty and patriotism helped to define the politics and prosecution of the conflict. Taylor suggests in his concluding paragraphs that Union Leagues prompted the federal government to action in better defining the law during a time of war. Union

Leagues had independently policed what they internally deemed to be treasonous speech and disloyal action. Through their efforts to define loyalty, they aided, Taylor claims, in transitioning the nation from an autonomous collection of states into a republic where power rested primarily in the hands of the federal government. The new Union the leagues helped to shape thus looked radically different than the one they had defended during the war.

Taylor's work will be of interest to a range of scholars, most especially those interested in how laws governing censorship, freedom of speech, and treason can be bent or reshaped in times of war. Wars offer historians an unmatched platform for understanding nationalism—as it is during periods of conflict that citizens are forced to articulate and define their loyalties and conceptions of the state. Taylor's study should prompt historians to take careful note of the irony in that fact. Wars are exceptional and understanding nationalism in the context of conflict can lead historians to make claims that are exceptional. *The Most Complete Political Machine Ever Known* strikes a commendable balance between the fallacy of claiming more than evidence allows and the assured argument that studying the activities of Union Leagues can allow historians to see how the Civil War forced loyal Northerners to define and defend their conception of Union, while also acknowledging the sometimes violent, often coercive, measures undertaken in defense of those ideas.

Note

[1]. Roy P. Basler, Marion Dolores Pratt, and Lloyd A. Dunlap, eds., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 9 vols. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 5:537.

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