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Thomas J. Goss. *The War within the Union High Command: Politics and Generalship During the Civil War*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2003. xi + 300 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-1263-5.

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## A New Model of a Modern Major General: The Case for a Political Dimension to Union Generalship in the Civil War

A New Model of a Modern Major General: The Case for a Political Dimension to Union Generalship in the Civil War.

As far back as the 1860s, lay readers and historians alike have taken for granted a dichotomy concerning Union commanders in the Civil War. This assumption posits the “professional” generals (like Ulysses S. Grant and William T. Sherman) on the one hand, and the “political” ones (like Nathaniel P. Banks and Benjamin F. Butler) on the other. Historians then depict Civil War strategy, tactics, and command as the latter group doing all it can to snatch defeats from the jaws of the former’s hard earned victories.

In *The War within the Union High Command*, Thomas Goss takes issue with both ends of this stereotype. Goss argues that historians need to have a broader definition of generalship. Lincoln appointed generals to do more than win battles on the tactical or even strategic level. According to Goss, there were two aspects to the president’s approach to war. First, he had to have the support of the majority of the northern population, and the results of that support had to translate into volunteers to take the field against the Confederates. Secondly, he needed capable men to lead that army to victory.

Lincoln had no professional military training, and so did not inherit the bias against volunteers and politicians shared by many regular troops. So Lincoln pulled from two separate pools of manpower, each with its own

unique qualifications. The U.S. Army’s professional soldiers provided an obvious source of trained leadership, and offered the best chance for tactical and strategic victories on the battlefield. Unfortunately, the U.S. Army before the war was so small that its men could only make up a fraction of the forces that Lincoln needed to subdue the rebels. Also, obscure West Pointers could not marshal the political support Lincoln needed in order to raise and support an army. The political generals, while often proving to be military embarrassments to the Union cause, were strong exactly where the West Pointers were weak. They could provide Lincoln with both popular support for the war effort and numbers for the army. While failing on the battlefield, Lincoln’s appointments sometimes had significant effects on morale on the home front and could raise thousands of men for the Union cause.

So, if a particular political general fulfilled the mission for which Lincoln selected him by raising troops and support, how can historians write him off as a total failure, whatever his military record? According to Goss, the current definition of successful generalship cannot convincingly answer this question. Clausewitz defined war as politics carried on by other means, and so Goss argues any definition of generalship that does not include politics is too narrow.

Goss also provides his readers with an interesting look at the development of a professional U.S. Army. He points out that both factions, the military professionals

and believers in the volunteer system, had been around since the Revolution. It was only during the Civil War that the professionals emerged triumphant and successfully applied their negative depiction of their more politically minded brethren in the volunteer service. That depiction, in turn, has colored the historians' view of the war ever since.

If this were simply a book that sought to resurrect the reputations of the political generals, Goss would open himself up to the charge that he relies too heavily on semantics. What better way to show that men like Butler were good generals, than to redefine what being a "general" means? Goss's definition seems so broad at times that virtually any politician in uniform who contributed to the war effort would be a successful general, whatever

his military record may have been. Some readers will still prefer to describe these men as they have always been: miserable generals, but useful politicians.

But that idea is exactly what Goss wants to question. He calls his readers to re-examine generalship and the responsibilities inherent to it. It is too easy to forget that, while studying guns and trumpets has merit, the guns and trumpets were never an end in and of themselves. Historians can no more afford to consider generals in a political vacuum than any other aspect of the war. Goss provides a case for a broader definition, thereby adding a new facet to a well-worn topic. Serious students of the war may not agree with every conclusion Goss draws, but should find his book interesting, useful, thought-provoking, and well worth their time.

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