

A Great Synthesis: Politics And Battles Influenced Each Other During The War

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Review

A GREAT SYNTHESIS

Politics and battles influenced each other during the War

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Weigley, Russell F. *A Great Civil War: A Military and Political History, 1861-1865.* Indiana University Press, 2000-08-01. ISBN 253337380

A Great Civil War explores political and military dimensions of a conflict that has engaged the attention and interest of scholars and laymen alike for 15 decades. The defining innovation in this study is the way in which it integrates analyses of slavery, war, and the politics of the South and the North. The result is that Russell F. Weigley, a distinguished author who has been a major player in the study of American history, opens a new window to the relationship during the Civil War between politics and the battlefield. Any attempt to achieve such breadth is daunting, as the thread of argument can be easily lost. Weigley, though, has succeeded in making his lengthy study plausible and coherent, even if the prose is dense in places.

On several topics **A Great Civil War** lacks a full discussion on issues, as might be expected in any overview of the Civil War. It is particularly deficient in discussion of causation and political resolve. In passing, Weigley cites General John M. Schofield's suggestion that it was "attacks as that of Franklin, Atlanta and Gettysburg, rather than any failures of defense, that finally exhausted and defeated the Confederate Armies," but such apt observations rarely are analyzed further. Lastly, Weigley's book does not really stand alone as an introductory text on the Civil War. Too often, mere mentions of major figures occur in the text. The reader learns that Brigadier General States Rights Gist was killed under Hood at the Battle of Franklin, but is not given any biographical information or contextual reference.

Some readers may be puzzled, as I was, by the use of the word "Great" in the title. I always found this war to be tragic. However, the author's meaning may emerge at the end of the **A Great Civil War**, where Weigley evokes the

memory of his Union ancestors by noting that for them, like so many others, "the war would never end." In fact, the perennial interest in this conflict may never end. Its timelessness could have something to do with honor, as Mrs. Jefferson Davis insisted when declaring, "I would die or be hung before I would submit to the humiliation" of defeat. Perhaps for many more people, however, the battle is against racism that continues to offend our sense of justice.

Ronald R. Seagrave, director of Sergeant Kirkland's Museum and Historical Society, is author of Civil War Books: Confederate & Union, Including Related Titles Ranging from Historical Archeological to Slavery (1995) and Civil War Autographs & Manuscripts (1992).