

Staffing The War: Grant's Innovative Staff Structure Went Unimitated By Other Generals

Benjamin Franklin Cooling

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Review

STAFFING THE WAR

Grant's innovative staff structure went unimitated by other generals

Cooling, Benjamin Franklin

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Jones, R. Steven *The Right Hand of Command: The Use and Disuse of Personal Staffs in the Civil War*. Stackpole Books, 2000-05-01. ISBN 811714519

Behind every successful general lies a good staff. Staff development has accompanied the evolution of the profession of arms, and today's revolution in military affairs (the impact of the Information Age) seems unlikely to change that dependency. Yet professional military staffs emerged more quickly in Europe than in the United States. For what they called staff work, American commanders relied much longer upon themselves, a small coterie of family and friends, or a sprinkling of junior officers. Prior to the Civil War, that staff work mostly comprised clerical duties and messenger service.

Staff functions today are clearly defined to include gathering and evaluating information, preparing detailed plans, translating a commander's decisions into orders, and transmitting instructions to subordinate elements of the command, as well as specialized administrative, operational, or logistical duties. Such things are second nature to staffers from the Pentagon down to the field level. Not so during the Civil War era, as shown in the work of R. Steven Jones, assistant professor of history at Southwestern Adventist University.

The Right Hand of Command picks up where J. Boone Bartholomees, Jr., left off in *Buff Facings and Gilt Buttons: Staff and Headquarters Operations in the Army of Northern Virginia, 1861-1862*. Jones, however, concentrates on the development of personal staffs for four specific field commanders rather than on a general history of how officers added special staffers to handle ordnance, subsistence, medicine, transport, etc. The appeal of Jones's work lies with its integration of the specific personalities and command functions clustered around Generals Lee, Sherman, McClellan, and Grant. The results may surprise readers.

Lee, a former staff officer himself, made the least use of a four-man staff that included the able Robert G. Chilton. Sherman, too, believed in a small staff. Jones observes that neither general used his staff "in any but the traditional functions of writing and delivering orders." McClellan, possibly the most versed of the four in European staff development, remained hesitant about transferring those lessons to America. He did employ his capable father-in-law, Randolph B. Marcy, as an important link with Washington. Only Grant built a professional staff between the time he was expeditionary force commander in 1862 and general in chief during the last year of the War.

Jones believes that it is impossible to know if Grant's staff system "hurried the end of the Civil War." He simply suggests that Grant saw a need, and alone among the four found a creative way to fill it using an organizational element available to all Civil War generals. Grant created a modern staff "and made it his right hand of command."

In the end, Jones concludes that three factors governed Civil War personal staff employment. They were army size (the larger the force, the greater the need for staff help), cooperative operations (independent forces operating toward common objectives), and a commander's willingness to improve staff work. If a general saw no real benefit in staff work then neither the presence of large army nor the plan for cooperative operations could encourage him to improve that staff work.

Can we be sure that the examples of Lee, Sherman, McClellan, and Grant were at all typical? Adding other important "case studies" of generals like Winfield Scott, William T. Sherman, George H. Thomas, Albert S. Johnston and Joseph E. Johnston, Braxton Bragg, or even Union naval commanders like David Porter and David Farragut might have further confirmed Jones's thesis.

Still, **The Right Hand of Command** introduces a less-noticed cast of characters surrounding the stars, thereby offering a new approach to Civil War command and control. To answer just how truly influential as opposed to merely useful aides were to commanders will require an expanded effort to study staff experience below major command. Was staff evolution a handmaiden of the industrialization of war or merely a whim of the individual in charge?

Noting that the Civil War was hardly without innovations in staff structure, Jones nevertheless remarks that advances in this area were not permanent - there

was no organized plan or process to modernize staff work throughout the United States (much less the Confederate) army during the War. Demobilization returned the American military to its small budgets and limited role in national defense. Even Grant did nothing to institutionalize his experience. Such modernization awaited the 20th century.

Benjamin Franklin Cooling is Professor of Grand Strategy and Mobilization with the Industrial College of the Armed Forces, National Defense University, Washington, D.C.