

### Valor, Talent, And Patronage: Civil War Service Influenced A Future President's Political Views

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## Review

### VALOR, TALENT, AND PATRONAGE

#### Civil War service influenced a future president's political views

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**Armstrong, William H.** *Major McKinley: William McKinley and the Civil War.* Kent State University Press, 2000-05-01. ISBN 873386574

"I knew you as a soldier, a congressman, as governor, and now as President-elect. How shall I address you?" asked a well-wisher shortly after American voters elected William McKinley. "Call me Major," McKinley replied. "I earned that. I am not so sure of the rest." William H. Armstrong, an Ohioan and the author of **Major McKinley**, traces the life of McKinley from his enlistment as a private in the 23rd Ohio to his rise to major by war's end, and contends that the War defined the future president.

McKinley enlisted in the 23rd Ohio in 1861, where he experienced "life among the mules" while working in the commissary. His most famous moment in that capacity - one memorialized in bronze - came at Antietam, when he ran food and coffee through a gauntlet of fire to his hungry regiment. Shortly thereafter, due to valor, talent, and the patronage of Rutherford B. Hayes, McKinley received an officer's commission, and served as a staff officer through the remainder of the War. McKinley's service was honorable but not dramatic, and his political opponents would later attack him for serving in the rear echelon of the Union army. **Major McKinley** illustrates a part of army life often neglected in Civil War books: the daily routine of those engaged in staff and logistical duties.

Armstrong achieves two broad goals in the book: he does an excellent job describing the military life of William McKinley and he makes the case that this military service influenced McKinley's later political career. He accomplishes the first through a narrative account of McKinley's military stint. Then he relates how McKinley drew from his military experience during the political endeavors that followed.

The War gave McKinley a strong sense that former slaves should have legal rights and the vote, something the author fears McKinley betrayed when, as president, he preferred reconciliation with the former Confederate states to advocacy of rights for black Americans. Nevertheless, Armstrong's enthusiasm for his subject helps to carry **Major McKinley** through sections where the story is thin.

Though not a highly dramatic tale, **Major McKinley** thoroughly illuminates the life of the junior staff officer in the Civil War and the early life of a United States president.

*Mitchell McNaylor is a writer living in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.*