

Secession Fever: Was General William Harney Too Cautious In 1861 Missouri?

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Recommended Citation

Hackemer, Kurt (2001) "Secession Fever: Was General William Harney Too Cautious In 1861 Missouri?," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 3 : Iss. 2 .

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol3/iss2/25>

Review

SECESSION FEVER

Was General William Harney too cautious in 1861 Missouri?

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Spring 2001

Adams, George Rollie *General William S. Harney: Prince of Dragoons*. University of Nebraska Press, 2001-02-01. ISBN 803210582

When William S. Harney retired from the United States Army in 1869 after 51 years of service, he left behind a mixed legacy. Widely acknowledged for his innovative tactics in fighting Indians on the frontier as well as his important contribution to the success of General Winfield Scott's Mexico City campaign in the Mexican War, Harney nonetheless felt obligated to defend himself against potential detractors of his record in Missouri during the 1861 secession crisis. Relieved of command for not assisting pro-Union forces vigorously enough as the state's future hung in the balance, Harney spent the rest of his life fighting the unfair implication that his actions had reflected disloyalty.

In **William S. Harney: Prince of Dragoons**, George Rollie Adams persuasively demonstrates that Harney's entire career was driven by a love for the army and the conviction that he must always follow his conscience even if that meant defying authority. Unfortunately, his convictions were accompanied by what Adams aptly summarizes on page 286 as a "quick temper, foul mouth, violent nature, vindictive bent, and callous behavior." That put him in a number of awkward situations over the course of his career, including several courts-martial, but it also reflected a strength of character that served him well in circumstances that might have overwhelmed a lesser man. So, while Harney incurred the wrath of his superiors for precipitating an international crisis with Great Britain over San Juan Island in 1859 and for hesitating in Missouri in 1861, he was instrumental in pacifying the Sioux in 1854-55, returning order to Bleeding Kansas and preparing the Utah expedition in 1857-58, and serving on the Indian Peace Commission after the Civil War. In doing so, he became a pivotal figure in 19th century American military history.

Were it not for his tarnished Civil War service, Harney would have found a modern biographer long ago, but Adams's work now more than fills the void. His biography is thoroughly researched, clearly argued, and engagingly written, even if it occasionally asks too much of the reader. For example, the impetuous Harney of the San Juan Island crisis became the cautious Harney of secession-minded Missouri less than two years later. Adams's explanation on page 237 that Harney exercised caution "because he so intensely desired to avoid destruction of lives and property" may be true, but it seems out of character for a man whose reputation was both marred and enhanced by his consistent use of violence. Those interested in this aspect of Harney's career may want to look deeper for an explanation. Still, this is a relatively minor quibble.

Adams's biography, which will not soon be surpassed, does a wonderful job of rescuing an important historical figure from relative obscurity.

Kurt Hackemer is an assistant professor of history at the University of South Dakota. His The U.S. Navy and the Origins of the Military-Industrial Complex, 1847-1883 will be published in May 2001 by Naval Institute Press.