

The War within the Union High Command: Politics and Generalship During the Civil War

Lesley J. Gordon

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Gordon, Lesley J. (2004) "The War within the Union High Command: Politics and Generalship During the Civil War," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 3 .

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol6/iss3/31>

Review

Gordon, Lesley J.

Summer 2004

Goss, Thomas J. *The War within the Union High Command: Politics and Generalship During the Civil War.* University Press of Kansas, \$34.95 ISBN 700612637

Elite vs. amateur

West Point and the Commons

The study of Civil War generalship has gotten a bit stale. Many historians and buffs keep asking the same familiar questions: Did the South have better military leaders? Why did it take so long for the Union to find competent commanders? And of course, could Robert E. Lee have won the battle of Gettysburg? These sorts of queries fail to deepen our broader understanding of the war, its causes or its consequences. Instead, such trite questions (and their equally misleading answers) tend to reduce the conflict to a predictable story of famous battles and famous leaders.

Thomas J. Goss's new book, **The War within the Union High Command** wants to recast the whole debate about Civil War generalship. The author, an army major working as a strategic planner for Homeland Defense, understands especially well that war, and the American military as a whole, cannot be studied in a vacuum. He recognizes that the United States has a rich, complex and contradictory martial heritage that has dramatically affected its history. Nineteenth-century Americans tended to celebrate what they perceived to be the natural patriotism and talents of the amateur general over that of the elitist West Point-trained officer. Yet, today, few Americans would support appointing men or women to high levels of command without a proven military record. Goss aptly demonstrates how the Civil War helped change Americans' attitudes about military professionals.

Goss chooses to focus solely on the Union war effort, arguing that Jefferson Davis, who himself had a West Point education, did not face the same challenges

Lincoln did in achieving the north's complicated war aims. Goss contends that for the North it was not merely a question of winning on the battlefield; instead, Lincoln had to be aware constantly of the political effects of his military decisions and visa versa. He had to keep the northern public supportive of the war or the entire effort would fail. In the meantime, West Pointers clashed with political generals, each convinced that the other hurt the Union cause. At stake were two different perceptions of war: one narrowly focused on battlefield victories; the other concerned with winning the hearts and minds of the northern public.

The most impressive part of Goss's study is his discussion of the stereotypical political general. He demonstrates that some of the best known (and most maligned) amateurs like Benjamin Butler, Franz Sigel and Nathaniel Banks actually made important contributions to the North's overall victory over the Confederacy. These political generals certainly committed their share of embarrassing battlefield mistakes and few, except perhaps John Logan, displayed any real military genius. But, Goss notes, these men made significant political contributions that cannot be dismissed. They helped attract volunteers and garnered congressional and state support Lincoln had to have to win the war. Goss also notes that many professionals like George B. McClellan and Ambrose Burnside were no less disastrous on the battlefield than the likes of Butler or Banks.

By the fall of 1864, however, the struggle between professionals and amateurs had played itself out, and West Pointers were in control. It was not that politics no longer mattered. But times had changed from the first two years of war, and Lincoln had won reelection and weathered attacks on some of his most controversial policies including the Emancipation Proclamation and conscription. And he had found a general who understood the importance of politics as well as the necessity of battlefield results: U.S. Grant.

This book does have some weaknesses. The author's decision to leave the Confederacy out implies that the Union's struggle was only within itself, and not with a formidable, inspired foe. Nor is it convincing to argue that Davis did not face similar political challenges. Davis also had to worry about public morale and unpopular wartime policies. The South too had its share of political generals including John Floyd and Gideon Pillow. Finally, the book is often repetitious, and the writing could be more spirited. Civil War buffs who love a good war story will be disappointed.

Nonetheless, Goss has written a valuable book. Civil War history needs more studies such as this one to refresh the field, recast old questions and get us beyond simplistic assumptions about Civil War military history.

Lesley J. Gordon is associate professor of history at the University of Akron. Her publications include General George E. Pickett in Life and Legend (UNC Press, 1998) and This Terrible War: The Civil War and its Aftermath (Longman, 2003).