

Union General John A. McClernand and the Politics of Command

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Review

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Meyers, Christopher C. *Union General John A. McClernand and the Politics of Command*. McFarland & Company, Inc., \$32.00 ISBN 978-0-7864-5960-5

Shedding New Light on a Political General

The Civil War made heroes and legends of many men, particularly from Illinois. John A. McClernand is rarely, if ever, listed among that group. Christopher Meyers' recent study seeks to explain why by providing a matter-of-fact narrative tracing McClernand's steady rise through the Illinois politics and his precipitous fall in the military ranks. Meyers' determines that McClernand's connections with the Democratic Party, as well as with Lincoln, and his public popularity as a congressman had positioned McClernand for a place among the pantheon of the war's greatest leaders in April 1861. Yet, McClernand's heightened wartime ambitions and insubordination tarnished his reputation and thus, relegated him to obscurity.

Meyers presents McClernand as a key antebellum operative of the Illinois Democratic Party, skillfully working behind the scenes to promote conservative/moderate solutions to the country's sectional strife, most notably popular sovereignty. He also served as a Springfield lawyer and state legislator working alongside the Herndon brothers and Abraham Lincoln. McClernand maneuvered through the turmoil of the 1850s to become an influential congressman and Democratic kingmaker, rising as Stephen Douglas's champion.

Following Lincoln's ascension to the presidency, McClernand determined to stay with the Union as the South seceded, and he emerged as the consummate political general. Lincoln appointed U.S. Grant and McClernand as general officers and stationed them in the western theater. By enlisting northern Democrats like McClernand, the president hoped that moderate southerners and his northern critics would fall in line with his plan to restore the Union. McClernand intended to use his experience on the western rivers and high-level

political connections to secure support for his schemes to conquer the Confederacy, earning laurels that he would cash in later for political glory. However, he overplayed his personal relationship with Lincoln and quickly found himself at odds with many of the professional soldiers, including Grant and William T. Sherman. McClelland frequently circumvented the West Point clique by contacting the White House directly with strategic suggestions and field reports highly critical of Grant, David Dixon Porter, and Henry Halleck.

Although a competent commander, McClelland's political ambition undermined his military legacy. Lincoln's careful massaging of McClelland's ego during the war's early campaigns in Tennessee perhaps encouraged the general to behave in an increasingly insubordinate manner, but these episodes also revealed that McClelland made little or no distinction between the political arena and the battlefield. That would be his undoing. The era of the political general was rapidly fading as the professional soldiers asserted their control over military affairs. After McClelland's impolitic machinations during the Vicksburg campaign, Lincoln accepted Grant's request to reassign McClelland to the Department of the Gulf where the general battled little except frustration and illness.

Meyers concludes that McClelland's leading nemesis, Grant, was not only a better commander, he was also a better politician, saying that Grant understood that removing political generals without sufficient cause would damage the delicate political situation and his growing credibility with Lincoln. Meyers' impressive research into McClelland's military and private correspondence allows for an excellent analysis of McClelland's immature strategic understanding of the war and his failure to grasp the political situation within the military command structure. It also makes very clear why McClelland generated such intense animosity among his superiors for ignoring the chain of command and acts of insubordination with his diatribes to Washington. Meyers argues that McClelland must be remembered as an artful antebellum politician, as well as a dutiful and competent commander who served in the shadow of Illinois' most famous sons, but who let political ambition thwart his own expectations.

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