

### Bluecoats and Tar Heels: Soldiers and Civilians in Reconstruction North Carolina

Ralph Mann

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

---

#### Recommended Citation

Mann, Ralph (2009) "Bluecoats and Tar Heels: Soldiers and Civilians in Reconstruction North Carolina," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 11 : Iss. 3 .

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol11/iss3/4>

## Review

Mann, Ralph

Summer 2009

**Bradley, Mark L.** *Bluecoats and Tar Heels: Soldiers and Civilians in Reconstruction North Carolina*. University Press of Kentucky, \$50.00 hardcover ISBN 9780813125077

### A Closer Look at Reconstruction in a Southern State

Mark L. Bradley, a historian with the U.S. Army Center of Military History, uses North Carolina as a test case to analyze the behavior of the victorious Union army during Reconstruction. Not surprisingly, his findings completely reverse the “Lost Cause”/Dunning school views of a prostrate South ruled by military despots who aided and abetted rampaging, bestial freedmen in abusing and misruling Southerners. Much more relevant is his challenge to current interpretations arguing that the army presence was too weak, or too tied to the old planter regime to defend the freed people and southern Unionists. On the contrary, Bradley sees the U.S. Army as able, while often far too slow and conciliatory, to disperse Regulators and Klansmen and establish order in violence-prone Carolina communities. Tellingly, however, Bradley can cite more statements of appreciation of army actions from white civilians than from black—whose interests rarely came first for an army that shared southern racism.

Patterns were in place from the very start. White elites were dedicated to maintaining the old social and racial structure; satisfying them while protecting the rights of the freed people was simply impossible. Sherman’s too-sweeping terms to Joe Johnson, soon to be overturned by Andrew Johnson’s government, contained a provision that Southerners would maintain property rights. This was seized on by irreconcilables to mean that slavery was protected by the terms that ended the war. Further, Sherman, despite his easy terms, was still hated as no one else was across the South. And finally, and most importantly, when he made peace, Sherman had many things on his mind unrelated to slavery and the freedmen—among them fear of Confederate guerrilla warfare and of vengeful Union soldiers, infuriated by Lincoln’s assassination. Federal and army policy

toward the South likewise had other competing considerations, prominently including the cost of maintaining soldiers and the concern that local Republican politicians would use the army as a private police force. Much of the reluctance to take action attributed to the generals in North Carolina would best be laid at the feet of vacillators in Washington. Meanwhile, Carolina whites, embittered by defeat, used violence to control blacks in 1866—long before Radical Reconstruction.

The “Lost Cause” tales of oppressive military rule and insolent blacks were rooted more in pre-war fears of Northern domination and racial stereotypes than in the post-war actions of the U.S. Army. The 2200 soldiers who stayed in North Carolina after Sherman’s army went home could hardly dominate the whole state, and the black soldiers whose presence infuriated Carolinians interacted with (and abused) black civilians more than they did with whites. Not until 1871, when Klan violence forced Grant to reverse his policy of “let us have peace” and enforce the Ku Klux Acts, did the military have a clear focus on putting down the resistance that Bradley calls the continuation of the war by other means. When the army did act, it was effective, but far too late to save North Carolina’s Republican Party. After 1875, with a new white supremacist constitution and firmly in power, Democrats finally reciprocated army conciliation—but by then the freedmen and Unionists were largely out of the picture.

The behavior of the generals in charge bears out this general interpretation. During John Schofield’s brief ad hoc administration, he essentially followed Andrew Johnson’s Reconstruction policy. His replacement, Thomas Ruger, on starting to re-establish civil government immediately found conflicts over jurisdiction to be the crux of military-civil government conflicts. He established that the army would act when the civil authorities could or would not—military courts would try cases involving freedmen, since blacks could not testify by North Carolina law. More basically, if reluctantly, the army would maintain order when the locals could not. During Military Reconstruction, only Dan Sickles would make radical “leveling” changes—as when he eliminated property qualifications for office holders, tried to control the proliferation of weapons, and integrated public transportation—but his actions did not long endure after he departed. Edward Canby expanded military authority, stopping court cases based on wartime animosities. And when pro-Confederates, using a loophole in the Amnesty Acts, prosecuted Unionists for wartime actions for which they themselves had been granted amnesty, Canby made the amnesty universal. But unlike Sickles, he never tried to reshape society. Canby also presided over a

peaceful election to the Constitutional Convention mandated by the Reconstruction acts of 1867; eighty-five percent of eligible blacks voted while many Conservative whites boycotted the election. Afterwards, Canby thought the soldiers could be removed, but during the election ratifying the "radical" constitution, a new organization appeared: the Ku Klux Klan. While failing to intimidate black voters in 1868, the Klan would remain overtly political, serving, as Bradley says, as the "terrorist wing" of the Conservative party. Meanwhile, with North Carolina back in the union, Canby handed over authority to the new civilian government. From then on, the army played only a supporting role. William Holden, the Republican governor, relied on a biracial militia armed by Grant more than on the 700 soldiers Grant and Meade would allot to the state.

But 1870 brought a Conservative victory, rooted in Klan successes. Holden was impeached, two Republican office holders were murdered, and violence became endemic enough in certain counties so that Grant finally abandoned the policy of conciliation. In 1871, the Ku Klux Acts empowered Grant to use the full resources of the federal government, and the power of the Klan was broken. Bradley makes clear the impact of the army, assisting federal marshals and the secret service. In 1870, with the Klan rampant, the Republican vote was down 13,000 while the Conservative vote was up 3,000; in 1871, with a weakened Klan, the Republican vote rebounded by 11,000, while the Conservatives lost 3,000. The Republicans returned to power—but only briefly.

While Bradley uses very traditional interpretations of the "bargain of 1876" as the end of Reconstruction, and of the rise of white supremacy and "Lost Cause" rhetoric in the 1890s to meet the threat of Populism, he makes his own historiographical impact by complicating the interpretation of the role of the army in North Carolina. He convincingly demonstrates that the army and its soldiers were sometimes criminal—Sherman did not lead an army of Sunday School teachers into the Carolinas—usually racist, almost always slow to act, but once in action, able to reduce the Klan to a mob eager to confess and begging for amnesty. With this sound work, Bradley's own earlier study of the war's end at Bentonville, and Gordon McKinney's study of Zebulon Vance and the traditional white political point of view, we have a better understanding of the transition from war to peace (or war by other means) in North Carolina than we do for the rest of the South. Bradley's call for scholars to test his findings in other southern states is well taken.

*Ralph Mann teaches U.S. Social and Civil War history at the University of Colorado, Boulder; his current research concerns war, kin, and subsistence in Appalachian Virginia.*