

John Bankhead Magruder: A Military Reappraisal

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Review

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Settles, Thomas M. *John Bankhead Magruder: A Military Reappraisal*. Louisiana State University Press, \$45.00 ISBN 9780807133910

Defending Prince John

Thomas M. Settles provides an insightful and detailed account of the life, personality and historical memory of one of the Confederacy's most legendary "mavericks" in his new book, *John Bankhead Magruder: A Military Reappraisal*. Described as one of America's most "tragically misunderstood" historical figures, General John Magruder is vibrantly brought to life in Settles's study of the dashing and controversial southern icon. By culling through overlooked documents pertaining to the general's life, Settles does an excellent job of highlighting the causes for Magruder's tainted reputation by his contemporaries as well as the reasons for Magruder's confounded modern legacy. At times, Settles's temptations to "right historical wrongs" and glorify the southern maverick result in him placing Magruder on a wholly uncritical pedestal. Such seeming "hero worship" detracts from Settles's ability to offer a more sophisticated analysis of the many views of Magruder and tends to turn parts of his book into more of a "screed" against any and all of Magruder's critics. Nevertheless, the new evidence and interpretations of Magruder's life which Settles brings to the table, as well as his clarification and detailed description of crucial details about the general's character and career, make this book an interesting and informative read.

As Settles notes, many of Magruder's personal papers and records were lost in a pre-Civil War fire in California, which has prevented most historians from easily accessing details about the general's early life and the development of his character. Additionally, Settles writes that the legacy of the Lost Cause and its tendencies to glorify southern icons such as Robert E. Lee, "Stonewall" Jackson, Jefferson Davis and Joseph Johnston at the expense of less popular military figures, has profoundly influenced the historical memory of General Magruder.

However, un-deterred by such challenges, Settles delves deep into his sources to trace Magruder's military career from his youth and education at West Point through his post-war lecture circuits on the technological advances of artillery and Emperor Maximilian's concept of imperial expansion in Mexico. By contextualizing Magruder's military career within his entire life, which also included careers in law, saloon management and public speaking, as well as travels to Europe and residences in Virginia, Rhode Island, New York, Texas and New Orleans, Settles offers a much richer understanding of Magruder's intellectual development and personal complexity.

Time and again, Magruder proved himself worthy of military leadership. He boasted a strong record at West Point and several years of service and noteworthy action in the Mexican War. He is also credited with achieving the first major Confederate victory in June of 1861 at Big Bethel, in Virginia, as well as with staving off George McClellan's massive Union army on the Virginia Peninsula for over a month in 1862 against terrific odds. Additionally, his ever-expanding knowledge and use of artillery, as well as the strict training and discipline which he imposed on his soldiers, earned him the respect of both his superiors and the common soldier. Settles particularly excels in his analysis of Magruder's military technique—and prowess—through the lens of the general's uniquely theatrical personality. Magruder's flair for the dramatic—from his dress, to his near reckless boldness on the battlefield, to his penchant for deception, surprise attacks, and staged military actions in order to intimidate the enemy—was evident in and undergirded his thinking and decision-making at critical times.

However, Magruder's simultaneous affinity for refined culture, his continuous socialization, thirst for being in the "spotlight," and desire for dominance and public recognition of his merits made him increasingly controversial in many circles. Rumors of alcoholism, womanizing and over-aggressiveness plagued Magruder and more than once seriously threatened his military career. Additionally, the claims made by Magruder's critics (who later became nearly sacred "martyrs" of the Confederacy) about the general's "incompetence" and "recklessness" on the battlefield due to his love for alcohol and extreme confidence in his military superiority tainted his personality in pervasive ways. Settles's research shows that these claims were, in many cases, unfounded: Magruder supposedly took an "oath of sobriety" before Jefferson Davis upon assuming the rank of general; his famous instances of "mad" behavior during the Seven Days battles were due largely to morphine which his

doctor had prescribed for poor health; and, though he had many female acquaintances and admirers, he was deeply devoted to his wife and children who, unfortunately, were forced to endure five years of separation from him in Paris for health reasons. Settles also reveals the pragmatic “brilliance” of Magruder on the battlefield which, for many years, has been interpreted as recklessness and selfish over-zealousness. Magruder personally hired local slaves to help construct fortifications along the Virginia Peninsula, in 1862. He created an impromptu “Virginia militia” during the same campaign to compensate for numerical weakness in the face of McClellan’s sprawling army. He appointed and promoted on-the-spot officers whom he thought were essential to help carry out military strategy in desperate circumstances. He also personally expropriated cotton from Galveston, Texas in order to sell it for much-needed supplies and food for his men. While Jefferson Davis, as well as others superiors of Magruder, frequently expressed their displeasure with Magruder for “overstepping his bounds,” Magruder’s quick-thinking and creative pragmatism helped his soldiers out of many dangerous situations and earned him their respect and admiration.

Settles illustrates the humanitarian side of Magruder’s character in noting how dedicated he was to improving the lives and comfort of his soldiers. He also brings to life the general’s fiery and passionate personality, which frequently clashed with the solemn, dour personalities of superiors such as Joseph Johnston. Magruder’s fiery nature resulted in the general’s participation in numerous duels, all of which Settles explains away by seemingly casting blame on “the other man.” Settles argues that the general’s strong personality and flashy lifestyle contributed significantly to his peers’ frequent forceful tarnishing of his reputation and military career. He also claims that Magruder’s military failings largely were the result of his peers’ incompetence or mistakes on the battlefield for which he always received the blame.

While Settles’s analysis of the Seven Days fighting and of Magruder’s perceived “failings” thereat undoubtedly challenges, for the better, our understanding of those battles and the generals involved, Settles misses the opportunity to critique Magruder in an open and honest way by insisting that Magruder’s military “genius” proves that he could not have erred during the battles. By merely laying out all the other possibilities—faulty maps, poor communication, vague battle orders, bad weather, road confusion, and the mistakes of generals such as Jackson, Lee, and Longstreet—as to why Lee’s plan of destroying McClellan’s army during the Seven Days failed, and by merely

sweeping away all blame from Magruder in favor of these other answers, Settles avoids honest intellectual “interrogation” of the other interpretations. Additionally, Settles’s writing off Magruder’s controversial transfer to the Trans-Mississippi Department after the Seven Days as one already ordered before Magruder’s performance in those battles, and Settles’s attributing of Magruder’s quarrels with superiors to a mere personality clash, leaves this reader wondering if Settles is unwilling to investigate whether Magruder possessed a deeper character flaw.

Additionally, while the symbolic and psychological significance of Magruder’s victory at Big Bethel, his brilliant deception of McClellan on the Peninsula, and his recapture of the Port of Galveston for the Confederacy, in 1863, doubtless served important purposes in the war, Settles appears to over-glorify and exaggerate the importance of those events. Had Magruder not salvaged Galveston, or had Johnston not vetoed Magruder’s decision to hold the fortifications at Yorktown for as long as physically possible, would the war really have been drastically different? Furthermore, had Jefferson Davis and Johnston let Magruder attempt to take Washington, D.C. within the first month of war, could Magruder ever have been successful? Granted, the thought of attacking the Union capital while the North was still too confused and disorganized to fight back as effectively as possible was a daring one. However, should we not more closely analyze the potential disaster that could have resulted from such rashness?

Settles’s uncritical view of Magruder and his seemingly exaggerated importance of the general’s actions characterizes this book more as a direct, somewhat embittered response to Magruder’s critics rather than as a wholly honest analysis of John Magruder. At times, Settles’s narrative descriptions about numerous military actions in the Mexican War and Civil War—even those which did not directly involve Magruder—as well as his un-interrogated, only partially analyzed “depository” of pro-Magruder ideas can lose the reader’s interest and his trust in the book’s credibility. Had Settles’s analysis of Magruder been as rich as his descriptions of the general’s fascinating and unique personality, the book might have been more complete. Nevertheless, Settles should be praised for his innovative ideas and use of relatively un-tapped source material. Additionally, Settles also should be credited with daring to challenge long-held, almost ingrained perceptions about Magruder’s place in historical memory, and with bringing “Prince John” back to life in such rich detail. As Settles noted in the opening chapter, Magruder was indeed one of the most

intriguing mavericks of his time. With a slightly more critical edge, as well as acceptance and reconciliation of his maverick nature with his military genius, scholars will be able to reach the core of General John Magruder's intriguing complexity in ways less black and white, more realistic, and thus more accepting of personal contradiction.

Ashley Whitehead is currently a Masters candidate in nineteenth-century history and Public History at West Virginia University. She also has worked for four seasons with the National Park Service and presently works as a summer Park Ranger at Richmond National Battlefield Park in Richmond, Virginia.