

The American Civil War: A Military History

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Review

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Keegan, John *The American Civil War: A Military History*. Alfred A. Knopf, \$35.00 ISBN 9780307263438

Preeminent Historian Examines the American Civil War

John Keegan's reputation as one of, if not the, most preeminent military historians of the last generation needs little or no introduction. Keegan's work, especially his military studies of the First and Second World Wars, has always provided keen insight into the military history of those conflicts. Those familiar with Keegan's career know his skill in evoking the lived experiences of men in battle and a style of narrative and accessible prose that few historians can match. Thus, it should come as no surprise that historians of the American Civil War have eagerly awaited Keegan's first military history of that conflict.

What Keegan has produced, *The American Civil War: A Military History*, is a single-volume synthesis that general readers interested in the subject will find to be accessible as an introductory survey of the military history of the Civil War. The book consists of twenty-three chapters that each serves as individual essays on specific topics such as "Civil War Generalship" and "The Life of the Soldier." *The American Civil War* thus proceeds thematically, although in a loose chronological fashion. Keegan's argument is relatively straightforward: geography is the single most important factor in warfare, and the geography of North America, especially, played a crucial role in determining the course that the American Civil War would take. For Keegan, "the principal problem confronting the Federal government in its effort to restore the union" was the vast amount of space and land Union armies had to cover (70). Therefore, the topography of the American South served as a natural defense for the Confederacy, even as the Union army strategically used southern rivers against the Confederacy.

Keegan argues, “the North, unlike the South, was an established and functioning state in April 1861” and for Keegan, that distinction made the most important difference in determining the outcome of the war (302). Keegan thus recycles a laundry list of explanations for the war’s outcome as old as the conflict itself, including an emphasis on the superiority of the North’s political leadership, but mainly Keegan underscores the sheer overwhelming advantage the North had in resources and manpower. As a military history, there is not much discussion here of slavery, other than an acknowledgment of that institution’s primacy in causing the war, and a chapter (Chapter 17, “Black Soldiers”) on the decision of the Union Army to employ African Americans as soldiers and the subsequent role those soldiers played during the war.

General readers will no doubt find *The American Civil War* to be engaging and accessible. As always, Keegan’s prose is lucid and his writing a model for historians to aspire to (although one stylistic quibble: Keegan occasionally switches between past and present tense, even within the same sentence, which can be distracting and even confusing. For example, see Keegan’s discussion of southern geography on pp. 70-73). Unfortunately, serious scholars of the Civil War Era will likely find little that is new here in the way of information or interpretation. More regrettably, Keegan’s book contains numerous factual inaccuracies and errors. To illustrate, Keegan claims that slaves “formed almost half the population of the whole South” and states that “in the Mississippi delta the predominant crop was sugar” (12).

Perhaps the paucity of research presented in this volume might help to explain the errors: in what limited references that exist in the text (69 total notes in 365 pages of text), Keegan cites only published sources, many of which are secondary works by other historians (in some cases, seriously outdated secondary works at that). Some of Keegan’s sources are standard materials for the study of Civil War history; the late Don Fehrenbacher’s edited volume, *Abraham Lincoln: Speeches and Writings, 1859-1865* (1989) (although one wonders why Keegan did not consult the much more authoritative *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* [1953-1955]), the War Department’s published *War of the Rebellion* (1889) series, or Ulysses S. Grant’s memoirs.

Nevertheless, Keegan’s primary research appears to have drawn heavily from the footnotes of other scholars. Most of the secondary works Keegan relies on are among the most hallowed texts in Civil War historiography. With access to new and additional sources and more sophisticated research methods,

however, subsequent generations of historians have rightly overturned many of those texts. Thus, to take one example, that Keegan draws almost exclusively in his notes on Carl Sandburg's biography of Abraham Lincoln (instead of later works by James G. Randall, Benjamin Thomas, Stephen Oates, David Donald, or Michael Burlingame) raises an eyebrow.

In other words, for his first book-length foray into a field as saturated as the American Civil War, it is surprising and somewhat disappointing that a historian as respected and revered as John Keegan did not spend more time familiarizing himself with the historical literature and more important, the sources. While the finished product is an exoteric and enjoyable read that covers familiar ground, *The American Civil War* falls short of making any significant contributions to Civil War historiography.

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