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Lincoln's Political Generals

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Review

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Lincoln and his Politically Appointed Generals

The jury is still very much out on the long-standing historical indictment of Abraham Lincoln over his eager, naïve, and allegedly haphazard recruitment of hapless, if popularly appealing, political and ethnic generals to fight for the Union. David Work, in his first major book, has gone a long way toward exoneration.

This is a subject that has engaged historians for quite some time. By tradition, the story holds that Lincoln, the green, untested, and uncertain commander in chief, put far too much reliance on Democrats and Germans in order to both raise needed troops and hold the pro-Union but anti-slavery political center in the effort to preserve the Union. The military result, this traditional version of the story maintains, was unmitigated disaster—at horribly high cost in human life. Recent scholarship has added much nuance to this old, simplistic point of view, but done little to relieve Lincoln of responsibility for, at best, a high degree of feckless cynicism.

In an essay for the *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association* back in 2000, for example, Brooks D. Simpson re-examined the long-held belief that so-called political generals like John McClelland, John C. Frémont, and Franz Sigel were more than “unmitigated disaster[s]” on the battlefield, whatever their value to Lincoln’s campaign for re-election.” Ultimately, Simpson came down on the side of tradition, arguing that the most famous “political generals” did so poorly in that critical year of 1864 that, whatever good political reasons for appointing them three years earlier at the outbreak of the rebellion, “their retention proved costly.” In Simpson’s words: “The costly military mistakes these men made outweighed whatever political benefit their retention may have

realized. Retaining incompetent generals in order to appease political constituencies thwarted the chance for a victory in 1864 and increased the human toll on the battlefield... Victory may have come in spite of the decision to retain these men in command, not because of it." These were harsh words indeed.

In his recent book on the American Civil War, the pre-eminent military historian John Keegan did not dissent. When war broke out in 1861, he asserts, the Union turned to lawyers, teachers, and businessmen, often "those with political experience," as substitutes "in the absence of an officer class." But as Keegan sees it: "Standing in the community did not, however, necessarily translate into ability as a military leader, particularly of military innocents." But James M. McPherson offered a convincing dissent in his Lincoln Prize-winning, *Tried by War: Abraham Lincoln as Commander in Chief* (2008). Critics of Lincoln's political generals may be right, McPherson suggests, but only in the narrowest sense. Professionally trained generals were often disastrous, too, he notes. And more importantly, "consideration of national strategy trumped military strategy. The mass mobilization that brought 637,000 men into the Union army in less than a year could not have taken place without an enormous effort by local and state politicians as well as by prominent ethnic leaders."

Now it is time for all historians—and all students of the Civil War—to read David Work's well-researched and persuasively argued version of this story. Work does not dispute Simpson's contention that Lincoln's insistence on keeping Sigel in high command through the 1864 election campaign in order to cement his German support resulted in such disasters as New Market. But the author advances a convincing theory to re-consider and re-interpret the overall record of Lincoln's political and ethnic generals.

Work does not shy away from piling on examples of these commanders' gross incompetence: Nathaniel Banks' "idiotic" work at Port Hudson, Sigel's incompetence at Sulfur Springs, McClelland's horrific decisions at Fort Donelson, Thomas Meagher's failures at Fredericksburg. Work piles on the woeful stories: failure to enforce discipline, inability to process intelligence, outrages against the civilian population, and absurd braggadocio.

Yet the author also reminds us of Benjamin Butler's brave and visionary identification of fleeing slaves, or "contrabands of war," as he called them, as a potentially revolutionary element in prosecuting the war. Both Butler and Banks experimented with "contract labor" systems meant to introduce ex-slaves into the

world of paid work, and however flawed their efforts, however ultimately unfair to blacks, it was an earnest effort that went well beyond the Lincoln Administration's reluctance to deal with the issue of contrabands and, ultimately, freedmen. Butler was among the first, moreover, to enlist blacks to fight in the military, despite widespread opposition (and lack of initial support from Lincoln himself). Work's complex overall portrait of Butler as a field commander and occupier are particularly fascinating and rewarding—especially his account of the general's work in New Orleans, where he famously made war not only against Southern women who insulted federal soldiers, but also against foreign consuls who stubbornly sided with the Confederacy even after the Crescent City fell to the Union. Another political general, John A. Dix, is given some of the credit he deserves for helping to quell the New York draft riots of July 1863.

In sum, the author defends Lincoln's decision to seek Democrats and foreign-born leaders to raise troops as a legitimate weapon of war, pointing out that unifying the North and its disparate political and ethnic elements was no small task for a new president who had received only 55% of the northern vote. True, men like Dan Sickles carried notoriety with them to high command, but Work reminds us that the idea of political generals was a time-tested tradition in American military affairs; President Polk, he notes, was far more reckless and brazen by excluding Whig generals, whenever he could, from opportunity for glory during the Mexican War (Taylor and Scott were simply too good to hold down). Besides, Work adds, Democratic generals like John A. Logan did well enough to earn major reputations during Lincoln's war. As for ethnic choices like Franz Sigel ("the strongest German in the Union," in Thurlow Weed's words), "the loyalty of both the Germans and Irish was impossible to predict" in early 1861. Lincoln was no fool politically; his Republican party was a brand-new coalition, and he did what he needed to do to satisfy his far-flung tapestry of support in time of emergency.

Work reaches another compelling conclusion. He argues that the so-called political generals who served "under professional officers" who were trained at West Point tended to "function creditably." Only when these political generals "received independent commands invariably failed." In sum, the contributions of political generals to the Union war effort was, the author insists, at worst "a mixed blessing."

As Work believes, Lincoln's reliance on political generals looks far worse in hindsight than it did during the crisis of the Union. When the war broke out, he

points out, there were simply not enough professional generals to go around. Nor was there any real reason to believe “that politicians or any civilians would not make good generals.” Besides, civilian commanders had performed well during many of the nation’s previous military crises. True, as Work concedes, political generals exhibited many liabilities: “they hesitated, did not act decisively, allowed their forces to become strung out, failed to reconnoiter, and struggled to understand the complex situations that developed on the battlefield.” But in all these shortcomings, they were often no more incompetent than the most elaborately trained professionals. (How effective, after all, was the experienced and well-trained McClellan—who was allegedly non-political but turned out to be the Democratic candidate opposing Lincoln’s bid for a second term?)

Work believes that most political generals “fell somewhere between mediocre and competent, depending on how much responsibility they held... . How successful a political general was on the battlefield was often determined by the size of his first unit.” More importantly, and not to be underestimated, they certainly did expand political support for the war—for which success they too often lack the credit they deserve. They were often good administrators, excelling as commanders of military departments and districts, and they represented a positive force against slavery (think of Frémont’s precipitant emancipation orders) in behalf of black freedom and enlistment.

Considering their frequent battlefield failures, were their appointments worth it? Work insists they were, and it will be hard for future generations of scholars to make a different, better, or more convincing argument. This is a very fine study. Still missing is a good analysis of how Jefferson Davis fared with his own political generals on the other side of the conflict—think John C. Breckinridge. Maybe Work had better get back to work.

Harold Holzer, co-chairman of the U. S. Lincoln Bicentennial Commission, has authored, co-authored, or edited 35 books on Lincoln and the Civil War. His recent prize-winning works include Lincoln at Cooper Union and Lincoln: President-elect.