

West Pointers and the Civil War: The Old Army in War and Peace

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Review

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Hsieh, Wayne Wei-siang *West Pointers and the Civil War: The Old Army in War and Peace*. The University of North Carolina Press, \$30.00 ISBN 978-0-8078-3278-3

Crossing the Deadly Ground Once More

Over the last three decades, scholars such as Edward M. Coffman, William B. Skelton, James L. Morrison, and others have produced essential studies illuminating both the antebellum army as an institution and the myriad roles it played in the development of larger nineteenth-century American culture. Equally numerous in recent years have been works addressing the so-called rifle-musket revolution and its presumed effect on Civil War combat. Books by Paddy Griffith, Brent Nosworthy, and Earl J. Hess have chipped away at the consensus, most distinctively expressed by Perry D. Jamieson and Grady McWhiney in their landmark 1982 study *Attack and Die*, which posits that new advances in weapons technologies rendered "Old Army" tactics and doctrine obsolete and created the horrific butcher's bill incurred on fields from Malvern Hill to Franklin. In this volume, hailed by the UNC Press as the "first book to show how the antebellum U.S. Army, and especially West Point graduates, affected the course of the Civil War," Wayne Wei-siang Hsieh attempts to forge definitive connections between the pre-1860 army officer corps and the internecine conflict it came to dominate while at the same time providing added criticism of the rifle-musket paradigm. This ambitious agenda, covered as it is in 198 pages of prose, is only partly realized; too, failings in its focus, evidentiary base, and temperament prevent it from gaining the status that its press promises.

There is, withal, much to admire in this volume. Hsieh, an associate professor of history at the United States Naval Academy, displays firm command of the organizational and experiential factors influencing the development of Civil War doctrine and tactics. In the book's best chapters, the author skillfully explores institutional efforts to develop and maintain the army's infantry,

artillery, and mounted standards from 1815-1860. His brief treatment of the war with Mexico also shines, illustrating the performance of those regulars who viewed their successes south of the Rio Grande above all as vindication of their worth to an American society that had long embraced the citizen-soldier ideal. Indeed, it is Hsieh's principal contention that the antebellum United States Army's normative influence—forged through professional discourse as well as on the battlefield—created a “rough equilibrium in competence” between the military leadership of North and South (116). This factor, the author avers, played a more fundamental role in determining operational impasse during the years 1861-1865 than did either advancements in musketry or the systematic erection of field fortifications.

Notwithstanding important differences in such matters as sectional recruiting policies, the armies of the Union and Confederacy *were* peer forces in an organizational, doctrinal, technological, and leadership sense. Little wonder, then, that Civil War combat was so bloody and so often barren of decisive results. This point is of signal importance, to be sure, and the reader might expect to find in the second half of the book ample evidence that sheds light upon what appears to be a most plausible thesis. Instead, Hsieh here moves away from his controlling thought, endeavoring rather to discuss (paradoxically) the *divergent* command styles of the Army of Northern Virginia and the Army of the Potomac as well as questions of tactical finesse covered in years past and *in extenso* by Griffith, Nosworthy, and others. Moreover, much is left out of the story. One might, for example, expect proportional coverage of Civil War field armies other than those that operated within the eastern theater or acknowledgment that constraints emanating from Washington played no small part in limiting the Potomac army's ability to achieve operational success from 1862 to 1864. Last, the author at times exhibits a self-assurance that borders upon stridence in his attempt to refute the findings of numerous honored Civil War scholars. In a work as ill-defined as this and with so few pages with which to examine his subject(s), Hsieh's tone cannot help but come across at times as pleading. However, despite these deficiencies, *West Pointers and the Civil War* is a valuable work, one that is bound to stimulate discussion and further evaluation of American military professionalism and its effect upon the sectional conflict's military course.

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