

# Lincoln's Lieutenants: The High Command Of The Army Of The Potomac

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## Review

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**Sears, Stephen W.** *Lincoln's Lieutenants: The High Command of the Army of the Potomac*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, \$38.00 ISBN 9780618428250

### Inside the Union High Command

The Army of the Potomac, arguably the Union's most important field army, has been the subject of many historical examinations. Classic works like Bruce Catton's beautifully-written narrative trilogy and Russell H. Beatie's analytical multivolume study have, for years, remained the standard accounts of that army and its exploits during the Civil War. Among modern historians, Stephen W. Sears is perhaps the most well-known modern chronicler of the Army of the Potomac and its campaigns, and his series of books on the Civil War in the East continue to sell to both popular and academic audiences alike.

Sears, in *Lincoln's Lieutenants: The High Command of the Army of the Potomac*, takes the army's leadership and command culture as his particular focus. In a sense, Sears' group biography approach may seem rather old-fashioned. By foregrounding the "great men" of the army and detailing the complex interplay of relationships, personalities, conflict, and controversies in their experiences, the lives and deaths of common soldiers and those not on the front lines tend to blur into the background of Sears' tale. The officers in *Lincoln's Lieutenants* are the prime movers in Sears' drama, which is as he intends it. Some may decry such an approach as out of touch or elitist, but his decision to focus on the Army of the Potomac's high command is what makes *Lincoln's Lieutenants* a particularly valuable contribution to the historiography. The art of command during the Civil War was an especially personal enterprise; human interactions, shared histories, and complicated relationships among a small group of high-ranking military leaders could, and did, shape the nature and course of the conflict. Without a clear understanding of these very personal connections, it is impossible to gain a complete picture of how Civil War armies operated. Sears is to be applauded for undertaking this monumental task and

executing it with grace and grandeur.

For all its rhetorical élan and narrative ambition, there are still quibbles to be found in *Lincoln's Lieutenants*. Sears, a (critical) biographer of George B. McClellan, spends about half of his 900-plus page effort, or nine of his eighteen chapters, detailing McClellan's tenure as commander of the Army of the Potomac. Ulysses S. Grant, who did not technically command the army but who loomed over George G. Meade's shoulder in Virginia from 1864 to victory, is the subject of only about three total chapters. Further, Sears' criticisms of McClellan are not new, and much his McClellan material is drawn from earlier works on the Peninsula Campaign, Antietam, and other pieces. McClellan partisans will be chagrined at Sears' unsympathetic analysis of "Little Mac" as a commander, and Sears seems to be largely unpersuaded by reevaluations of McClellan by Ethan S. Rafuse and others. If readers are looking to Sears for a reinterpretation of the standard McClellan criticisms, many of which were perpetuated by post-war political partisans, they will be disappointed. Also, those hoping that Sears would integrate the wave of fresh Grant historiography now appearing in both academic and popular media will also come away unsatisfied. While much of the Grant and post-Gettysburg Meade material appear to be based on new research, the Overland and Petersburg Campaigns, the Shenandoah Valley Campaign, and the Appomattox Campaign feel surprisingly rushed in a volume so massive in length and scope. Further, Grant's experiences in the Western Theater, so essential in shaping his approach to war in the East, hardly appear at all.

Still, *Lincoln's Lieutenants* is a remarkable achievement. The personalities of most (but not all) of the Army of the Potomac's generals shine through, and the bickering, rivalries, arguments, and power struggles among these leaders makes for fascinating reading. For readers with the patience and endurance to digest such a large book, Sears' work pays dividends in its insights and sheer entertainment value. Scholars will find points of disagreement with some of Sears' conclusions, his use of evidence, and what they may see as outdated or erroneous interpretations, and readers already familiar with his earlier works might long for something new. The book also suffers from a lack of useful maps or organizational charts and tables. But while the sheer weight of detail in *Lincoln's Lieutenants* might overwhelm some, and the heavy focus on the McClellan years is imbalanced, Sears has managed to present the best single-volume synthetic narrative of the Army of the Potomac's leadership yet written.

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