

# The Commanders: Civil War Generals Who Shaped the American West

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## Review

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**Utley, Robert M.** *The Commanders: Civil War Generals Who Shaped the American West*. University of Oklahoma Press, \$29.95 ISBN 9780806159782

Students of American military history tend to focus on the nation's large-scale, conventional conflicts between peer forces on set-piece battlefields. This focus ignores the salient fact that in the nation's two hundred forty-plus years, her land forces have spent most of their time and resources in low-intensity conflict: counterinsurgency, counterterrorism, or peacekeeping. That cognitive dissonance makes Robert M. Utley's new book an interesting and useful contribution. Utley, a former Chief Historian of the National Park Service and author of more than twenty books, is one of the nation's foremost authorities on the American West. In *The Commanders*, Utley shifts his lens to a collective biography of seven officers who served as major generals for the Union cause in the Civil War, and who went on to serve as commanding generals in the American West after the war. Thus, their careers bridged both the nation's defining conflict and the "small wars" against Native American tribes west of the Mississippi River. After an opening chapter that serves as a concise overview of the post-Civil War United States Army, seven chapters take up each general's antebellum background, Civil War service, and role in the wars of the American West. A concluding chapter draws some general conclusions and assesses the commanders as a peer group.

The United States Army's operations west of the Mississippi River were arranged into the Divisions of the Missouri and the Pacific, commanded by lieutenant generals. Within each division, brigadier generals commanded departments comprising the territory of parts of one or more modern states. These department commands were thus the critical operational linkage between tactical operations against various tribes, and the U.S. Government's general policies that sought to "civilize" Native American tribes and to bring East and West together into one unified polity. In Utley's perceptive analysis, a department commander had four imperatives: smooth working relationships with the division commander; administrative efficiency in his

department; efficient staff procedures, most notably logistics; and success in combat operations against Indian tribes. Thus, success as a department commander depended on two rather different competencies: skill behind a desk, and skill in the field.

Several of the officers whom Utley evaluates in *The Commanders* are already well-known to students of the Civil War. Of the seven, John Pope achieved the highest Civil War command, but his generally competent service in the West has of course been overshadowed by his bombastic failures as the commander of the Army of Virginia. George Crook studiously cultivated his reputation as the Old Army's premier Indian fighter, and was a capable logistician as well as a relentless fighter. His reputation outlived him into modern historiography, but Utley judges Christopher Columbus Augur, who had an utterly undistinguished Civil War record, to be the best combination of administrative commander and tactical fighter. Augur shunned the limelight, however. Utley highlights Augur's able service in two separate departments, including multiple complex field operations on the Plains and in Texas, and ranks him first among the seven brigadiers in overall capability. Nelson Miles was the best pure combat officer of the group, but his tactical successes in the West came as a colonel in field command. Alfred Terry and Oliver Howard were average commanders across the board, and Utley deems E.O.C. Ord, who served in the Army of the James at the end of the Civil War, to be the least capable department commander of the group. To this reviewer, there appears to be one dynamic deserving of additional study across this group, the degree to which each officer was able to work with the three defining American political and military leaders of the post-Civil War period: Ulysses S. Grant, William T. Sherman, and Philip H. Sheridan.

*The Commanders* is an interesting look at the ante- and post-bellum Western military careers of seven Civil War generals, and Utley offers judicious analysis of each officer's role in both the American Civil War and in the development of the American West. While success in one conflict did not translate directly to success in the other, some general trends appear in each officer's story, and this book adds significant depth to our understanding of the U.S. Army's difficult transition to and from unconventional warfare in the nineteenth century.

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