

Practical Liberators: Union Officers in the Western Theater during the Civil War

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Review

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Teters, Kristopher A. *Practical Liberators: Union Officers in the Western Theater during the Civil War*. University of North Carolina Press, \$32.95 ISBN 9781469638867

Union officers in the Civil War's Western Theater were uninterested in waging a purely moral crusade to free slaves. Instead, they executed pro-emancipation policy as a practical measure after recognizing it would help win the war. So argues Kristopher Teters in this powerful volume focusing on the role Union forces played in the complicated process of emancipation.

The debate over why Union soldiers fought the war has captivated historians for decades. Perhaps the most forceful examination of pro-emancipation sentiment among Union soldiers, Chandra Manning's *What This Cruel War Was Over*, has endured heavy assault in the past few years. Teters' volume, while supporting the notion that soldiers came to find slavery central to the struggle, lends enormous support to Gary Gallagher's *The Union War* in asserting that emancipation was only ever really a means to an end--at least as far as many of the men in shoulder straps were concerned. Like Gallagher, Teters simultaneously insists Union soldiers cared little about the moral component of freeing slaves while identifying Union field armies as "the primary instrument by which emancipation became a reality on the ground" (5).

The result is an extraordinary study in just about every respect. The prose is clear and straightforward without sacrificing nuance, a sign that the author has a remarkable command of a vast source base and a powerful argument. Teters conveys that the early war political divide over emancipation's practicality was strongest between the high command (generals such as Don Carlos Buell) and a handful of subordinate officers who recognized the value of chipping away at slavery. Thus, contrary to Jonathan White's interpretation of Union Army politics which emphasizes the silencing of Democratic influence, Teters shows us what it was like for outnumbered pro-emancipation junior officers to face criticism and rebuke. But his focus

remains fixed on the vast majority of officers who harbored reservations about the question of black equality yet willingly freed slaves as a war measure. The Second Confiscation Act and Emancipation Proclamation helped awaken this realization. As a result, Teters identifies an emerging officer corps mindset in which “practical liberation” merged with a nascent professionalism that placed confidence in the authority of lawmakers and the Lincoln administration.

This is not a long book, but its brevity makes it all the more powerful. Teters forges new ground in showing us what emancipation looked like on the ground from the perspective of Union officers sometimes overwhelmed by the demands of it. He reminds us that even abolitionist officers like Hans Christian Heg and Oliver O. Howard employed black servants through a sense of white paternalism. And he correctly identifies that many of these soldiers came from the Midwest (the region Nicole Etcheson has identified as influenced by “Upland Southerners”) which fed their suspicions of African American work ethic.

Teters’ book adds to a growing literature--Peter Carmichael’s recent tour de force *The War for the Common Soldier* included--that focuses on pragmatism as the primary lens through which soldiers viewed the conflict and its meaning. This emphasis complicates previous notions of soldier political ideology as a motivating factor, offering a heavy dose of realism to the discussion and promising to move the debate out of its deep, heavily-traveled ruts. To be sure, though, this approach should enhance, not cloud the fact that many soldiers developed deep political convictions. In one of its few shortcomings, for instance, Teters’ volume devotes relatively scant attention to the explosive effect that Peace Democrats had on driving the acceptance of “hard war” measures among Midwestern regiments. Painting as disloyal anyone who refused to countenance attacking the southern way of life helped soldiers rationalize the confusing realities of war and made it easier for proponents of emancipation to mobilize support. Teters offers us a brief glimpse of this in the instance when a staff officer criticizes anti-emancipation General Jefferson C. Davis as an “infernal copperhead,” but the importance of such sentiment is not fully realized (144). Similarly, Teters mentions the West Point background of numerous generals but misses an opportunity to connect the topic of Union officer politics with that of the regular-volunteer divide that plagued the army.

Neither of these issues detracts too significantly from a truly impressive book. It is a wide-ranging exploration of emancipation’s complexity told from the Union Army’s point of

view, almost certainly the best and fullest account we have ever seen. Teters' sharp prose and command of the subject make for an engaging, accessible volume that will surely drive meaningful discussion on an important topic.

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