

# Civil War Barons: The Tycoons, Entrepreneurs, Inventors, and Visionaries Who Forged Victory and Shaped a Nation

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## Review

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**Wert, Jeffrey D.** *Civil War Barons: The Tycoons, Entrepreneurs, Inventors, and Visionaries Who Forged Victory and Shaped a Nation*. Da Capo Press, \$30.00  
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In *Civil War Barons* Jeffrey D. Wert weaves the stories of nineteen businessmen together into a narrative of the Union's organizational response to the demands of the Civil War. Wert's approach widens the scope of his analysis beyond that of a group biography to elucidate the networks that these businessmen built between government administrators, natural resources, and the men that labored and fought to preserve the Union. This broad view does not obscure the role of the individual in his account. To the contrary, the self-determination of these particular historical actors plays a central role in Wert's explanation of the North's, and then the Nation's, economic development. On the surface, this study is deceptively simple: It's clear, concise, and accessible prose, and Wert's deliberate avoidance of jargon and theory, make it an ideal book for students and non-specialists. That is not to say history buffs and historians will not benefit from reading this work. The more informed reader will understand the boldness of Wert's assertions, and consider them within the contexts of various approaches to United States history and the more fundamental ideological debates to which his argument belongs.

Wert states his argument clearly and repeats variations of it throughout this artfully composed book: "The Union war effort rested almost entirely upon private enterprise," Wert contends, "... by 1865, the merchant economy of the past was giving way to industrial capitalism. Organization on an unprecedented scale had achieved victory and heralded the future" (195–196). In other words, the Union's extant industry, relatively large population, and abundant resources did not win the Civil War on their own. The enterprising men whose organizational capacity, speculations, and actions met the demands of the North's wartime economy formed the structural links necessary to support successful military operations. According to Wert, their entrepreneurial character, networking skills, and ability to mobilize

capital and resources resulted in the preservation of the Union. Moreover, the businessmen that engineered and managed the North's victory galvanized the socioeconomic impulse that industrialized and developed the rest of the Nation in the decades that followed the War.

The businessmen featured in this book range from the very well-known to the relatively unknown. Most readers will recognize names like Andrew Carnegie, Cornelius Vanderbilt, and Cyrus McCormick. Fewer readers, though, will recall the names of Henry Burden, James B. Eads, and other figures that typically only occupy regional or local historical memories. Wert situates each of these individuals into one of eleven categories, with which he thematically orders and titles the eleven chapters of the book. He structures the chapter titled "The Inventors," for instance, around the backgrounds and actions of Burden and Eads, both of whom developed and produced military technologies. Eads, in response to the demands of the war, grew his antebellum business designing and manufacturing submersible equipment, which he used to salvage sunken cargo from the bottom of the Mississippi River. He transformed his firm and as a result won Navy contracts to build river gunboats out of iron. Moreover, he invented a steam-powered revolving turret that earned him recognition among the world's mechanical engineers. Each of these businessmen, familiar and unfamiliar, helped build the Nation's future with unique contributions to the northern war effort.

Wert's thoughtfully selected quotations transform his thorough archival research into an engaging account. This liberal usage of the historical actors' own words works well in terms of method and style. By allowing his subjects to speak for themselves, Wert refrains from abstracting or amplifying the meanings embedded within his source materials. Further, his quotations bring the narrative to life, and allow the reader to drift into the past by imagining the interactions of these historical voices. For example, in Wert's chapter titled "The Improvisers," the voices of the War Department's Ordnance Chief James Ripley, journeyman machinist Christopher Spencer, and President Abraham Lincoln engage in a series of exchanges that result in a shooting match between the latter two men. The conversations range from Ripley berating Spencer's repeating rifle by calling it a "new-fangled jimcrack" to President Lincoln expressing a genuine interest in it by asking to see the "inwardness of the thing" (76–83). Out of context, such dialogue may seem trivial, but within the broader scope of this work it reflects the author's ability to craft historical contention with adroit storytelling.

In *Civil War Barons* Wert convincingly argues that the massive organization on which the Union's victory hinged awoke a sleeping giant—the nascent industrial power of the United States. Importantly, Wert crafted this narrative in a way that will provoke historical thinking in the minds of students, everyday readers, and Civil War enthusiasts alike. The book's readability and accessibility, in fact, may be the book's greatest strength. Yet the broadly appealing, finely rendered trajectory of Wert's narrative works to constrain the book's analytical depth, too. That is to say, one may read this study as a narrative of unqualified progress, as Wert did not include the historical voices of those whom would have added diversity to this interpretation. Be that as it may, this book's many assets make it one worth reading. It will certainly inspire readers to imagine some of the important past relationships and processes that shaped the present.

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