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Lincoln's Political Generals by David Work

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Work, David. *Lincoln's Political Generals*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2012. xii + 287 pages. Paper, \$19.95.

Historian David Work's study examines the impact that sixteen of Lincoln's so-called political generals had on the Union effort during the American Civil War. These were men Lincoln selected on the basis of party affiliation (eight Republicans and eight Democrats), geographic distribution, ethnic origin (Germans and Irish are represented), and by the size of the units they commanded. He laments that previous studies have focused too narrowly on battlefield results. The author finds that these "citizen generals," as they preferred to be called, compiled poor to mixed battlefield records, but were "not the failures often depicted in historical literature and popular culture" (p. 5). He maintains that they provided good service in the military administration of conquered portions of the South, charted the early course of Reconstruction, helped determine commercial policy, enforced the draft in the North, and spoke in support of Lincoln's policies and candidates. Work believes that their overall impact benefitted the Northern cause; but he also finds that Lincoln did not always employ these men effectively and to his detriment left them in field commands after they had clearly demonstrated their incompetence.

Within this well researched book are a wide range of sources, including the papers and memoirs of the generals, newspaper accounts of political and military affairs, a large number of primary and secondary works on every aspect of Lincoln's presidency, and the standard sources on military matters such as the *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*. After providing a pre-war background of the sixteen generals: Nathaniel P. Banks, Francis P. Blair Jr., Benjamin F. Butler, James W. Denver, John A. Dix, John C. Fremont, Stephen Hurlbut, John Logan, John A. McClernand, Thomas F. Meagher, Robert Schenk, Carl Schurz, James Shields, Daniel Sickles, Franz Sigel, and James S. Wadsworth, the bulk of this study traces their battlefield records before reviewing their contributions in the political arena.

Work maintains that the use of political generals was a necessity for Lincoln, who won only thirty-nine percent of the vote in 1860, to secure support for a war that was not completely popular even in his own party. He finds that Lincoln appointed these influential men to avoid the grief that would surely follow if they were passed over for commands and in the hopes they would help him raise an army from their constituents. The problem was that almost all failed miserably from the start. They failed to enforce discipline in the ranks, argued with the West Pointers above and below them, were timid in battle, and refused to accept blame when they were clearly at fault. Some created political problems, as when Fremont emancipated the slaves in his department in 1861 at a time when Lincoln and the Congress were clearly conducting the war to restore the Union only.

While a few of the political generals, especially Logan and to a lesser degree Blair and Wadsworth, proved they could be effective combat generals under the guidance of West Pointers, most proved that giving politicians independent command of corps or armies was a "recipe for disaster" (p. 74). Lincoln, however, fearing the wrath of their influential friends and constituencies, continued to give them one chance after another in spite of the results and protests of his professional soldiers. In fact, neither the chronic alcoholism exhibited by Meagher, the scandalous money-making schemes conducted by Butler and Hurlbut, nor the humiliating defeats experienced by Banks at Port Hudson and Sabine Crossroads, Sigel at New Market, or Butler at Bermuda Hundred could lead to their permanent removal. Tensions between these men and West Pointers impeded the conduct of operations to the point where Henry W.

Halleck, Lincoln's general-in-chief, felt that political generals had almost ruined the army and would soon ruin the country.

Work is right when he finds that political generals performed best in military administration or what he calls "quasi-civil support." This included controversial activities like suppressing newspapers, confiscating property, running elections and arresting those who opposed Lincoln's policies. In Maryland, for instance, John Dix engaged in wide-scale arrests of citizens in 1861, including members of the state legislature, as the only way to prevent the state from seceding. He, and later Schenk, continued to oversee elections in Maryland to make sure the small minority in favor of Lincoln's war remained in power. Work, however, concludes that the "trouble they caused must have made Lincoln wonder whether their appointments were worth it" (p. 232).

The research here is excellent and the writing thorough; however, the facts uncovered could easily be interpreted as showing that Lincoln mismanaged the war due to his use of political generals. They failed on the battlefield, cost the lives of Northern soldiers, and pursued selfish policies designed to advance their careers at the expense of Lincoln's popularity. After so many embarrassments, Lincoln and the political class he served were only able to survive the backlash in the North by keeping in power the very generals responsible for the problems in the first place and resorting to ever more radical acts. It seems that Lincoln, in spite of the great numerical and material advantages he enjoyed, just barely outlasted the much weaker South, and only after altering the republic in ways the vast majority of Americans in 1861 would have vehemently opposed.

From the material presented here one gets the opinion that Lincoln would have been better off to leave the higher commands exclusively in the hands of professional officers and keep the politicians in command of smaller units where their constant self-promotion and scheming could do less harm, or in command of military departments behind the lines. It appears unlikely that politicians would have refused to serve in a war they wanted, or accepted once it started, if they had been denied command of corps or armies. A closer review of the drawbacks commensurate with not employing these men in such high places would aid our understanding of this topic. This reader gets the sense that the President, even though he was the choice of the political class, had he the chance to start over, would have severely limited their potential impact on battlefield results. It is no wonder that these types of generals go out of fashion in successful military nations.

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