Review

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During the Civil War, 583 men served as full generals in the Union army. Some names are prominent in American memory—Grant, Sherman, Meade, McClellan, Burnside, and Hooker. They compiled varied combat resumes, but the thing they all shared was their West Point pedigree. West Pointers comprised just less than half of the Union generals.¹ The others were plucked from civilian lives as lawyers, politicians, and businessmen by President Lincoln, who was short of commanders even in the first year of the war. Those civilians-turned-military-leaders are often called political generals, or citizen generals, because they owed their appointments more to political influence and connection than to martial acumen. Many served in obscurity, while others gained fame off the battlefield.

In 1864, General Henry W. Halleck offered this assessment of some political generals: “It seems but little better than murder to give important commands to such men as [Nathaniel P.] Banks, [Benjamin F.] Butler, [John A.] McClernand, [Franz] Sigel, and Lew. Wallace, and yet it seems impossible to prevent it.”² Halleck’s dim assessment of these political generals is shared by many historians, largely because they narrowly focus on their battlefield abilities. But Texas A&M University-Qatar professor David Work attempts to broaden that assessment with his recent book *Lincoln’s Political Generals*, which is based upon his Hay-Nicolay Prize winning dissertation. Work argues that political generals “were not the failures often depicted in the historical literature and popular culture, but instead compiled mixed records” (5). While he devotes a large portion of his book to assessing generals in the field, he also brings attention to their roles in noncombat arenas of the war

effort—military and civilian administration, commerce, policies concerning freed people, Reconstruction, and garnering political support for the administration.

Work's study examines sixteen political generals: Banks, John C. Frémont, Robert C. Schenk, Stephen A. Hurlbut, James S. Wadsworth, Francis P. Blair Jr., Butler, McClernand, John A. Dix, James W. Denver, Daniel Sickles, John A. Logan, Sigel, Carl Schurz, James Shields, and Thomas F. Meagher. Work selected them as a manageable sample from which to examine the effectiveness of political generals and because they represent influential members of the Union constituency.

Lincoln calculated his military appointments as he did any other patronage position rewarding a stalwart Republican, and he used military appointments of Democrats, Germans, and Irish to persuade those groups to support the Union cause. Consequently, Work chose a sample of which half were Republicans, half Democrats, and a quarter German or Irish. Work is correct that his small sample size is necessary, because “to study every political general in more than superficial detail would be infeasible” (4). However, there is a significant drawback to his approach; namely he does not provide any quantitative analysis of exactly how many political generals there were. He ambivalently states, “Perhaps well over one hundred men potentially may be classed as political generals” (2, emphasis mine). Some discussion of how his sample is representative in the larger context of political generals and regular Army generals would have been helpful.

After an introductory chapter and another chapter introducing his cast of characters, Work spends the next six chapters and 131 pages (more than half of the text) examining the battlefield impact of political generals. He follows a chronological approach in this section of the book, and because of his sample size he is able to cover every major campaign and battle with the exception of the final months of the war in the eastern theater.

Work returns to three themes throughout the battlefield chapters. First, political generals without previous command experience or who had previously failed in combat should never have been entrusted with command of independent forces. Work illustrates this point again and again—with Frémont in Missouri; Banks’s defeats in the Shenandoah Valley, Cedar Mountain, and Louisiana; Butler at Fort Fisher and his failure to support Grant near Richmond and Petersburg; and Sigel at the Battle of New Market. Political considerations, such as Frémont’s abolitionist support, Butler being a Democrat, and Sigel being a prominent German-American, often forced Lincoln into keeping...
these generals in command longer than they should have been, but their military incompetence eventually led to the end of their military careers.

Second, Work observes that political generals who learned on the job, commanding smaller forces under West Point trained officers and earning their promotions through martial merit, proved to be “capable, if not excellent, battlefield commanders” (156). Logan, Blair, and Wadsworth, exemplars of this second theme, are the three generals that Work portrays in most glowing detail. Logan and Blair worked their way up from colonels, demonstrating their competent military leadership during the Vicksburg and Atlanta campaigns as division and corps commanders. Wadsworth appears as one of the most level-headed political generals in a group of mostly petulant egoists, the characteristic that likely made Wadsworth an able division and corps commander. Still, among these three men, only Logan, Work argues, was worthy of an independent command.

Work sympathetically portrays Logan’s disappointment when he was passed over for command of the Army of the Tennessee in 1864 for West Point-trained Oliver O. Howard. The preference for West Point officers over political generals and the feuds that erupted between them is the third theme Work examines in the battlefield chapters. Regular army officers, including Halleck, viewed many citizen generals as incompetent and self-promoters. One of the biggest West Point-political general fights that Work examines occurred between McClellan and Grant during the Vicksburg Campaign. Consequently, the chapter on Vicksburg is the strongest chapter among the battlefield chapters because the author goes beyond simple combat narrative and assessment and allows many of the historical characters’ voices to come through in a way that is not evident throughout the rest of the book. Work could be faulted for not examining the West Point-political general conflicts in more depth, but the subject has been sufficiently and recently covered in Thomas Goss’s The War with the Union High Command (2003).

In the final three chapters, Work shifts his attention from the theaters of war to an examination of political generals’ roles dealing with civil-military administration, slavery, and African-American soldiers, and helping to solidify support for the war and the Lincoln administration among their various political, geographical, and ethnic constituencies. These last chapters are Work’s most persuasive attempt in redeeming the historical understanding of political generals’ value to the war. Unfortunately, these chapters comprise less than a third of the book’s text, compared to the 55 percent devoted to combat analysis.
The chapter “Quasi-Civil Support,” which deals with political generals’ civil-military administrative duties in border states and the South, is the book’s most enlightening chapter. Work covers many subjects in it: arrests of Confederate sympathizers, suppression of newspapers, confiscation of property, tensions with local governments and citizens (for instance, Butler’s infamous “Woman Order”), the draft, regulating commerce, maintaining law and order, elections, and initiating Reconstruction in Louisiana. None of these topics are novel to Civil War students. However, Work’s assessment of these issues in the context of the abilities of political generals is insightful. If political generals were suited for anything, it was governing and administering; Work concludes that “political generals tended to perform well in positions of military government” (183).

Yet the evidence he presents calls that conclusion into question. Butler and Hurlbut were unquestionably corrupt and used their administrative positions to become wealthy. Work himself oscillates on the administrative abilities of Banks in Louisiana when he writes: “Banks’s Reconstruction efforts were partially constructive but ultimately fruitless” (182). The author’s narrow focus on sixteen political generals tends to limit the effectiveness of his argument in this chapter. For instance, when he writes about Schenck’s conflict with Maryland Governor Augustus Bradford, it may have been helpful to know how Schenck’s successor in the Middle Department, fellow political general Lew Wallace, was able to develop a positive working relationship with Bradford. A broader analysis of how regular army officers fared by comparison in administrative positions would have also been helpful in assessing political generals’ effectiveness in administration. For instance, he could have compared and contrasted General Edward R. S. Canby’s administration of Louisiana with Banks’s efforts in that state.

In chapter ten, “Slavery, Freedom, and Black Soldiers,” Work concludes that “Perhaps in no other area of the war effort did political generals make a greater contribution toward determining Union policy than in regards to slavery.” This argument is fairly well supported. Butler’s decision to ignore the Fugitive Slave Law and treat slaves engaged in Confederate actions as contraband of war eventually led to passage of the First Confiscation Act, which turned Union forces into liberators, weakening the Confederacy. Frémont’s decision to issue an emancipation order in Missouri, although generally criticized for overstepping his authority, foreshadowed a position that Lincoln eventually assumed as a war measure. However, political generals compiled mixed records on other issues regarding African Americans.
Work describes the labor system instituted by Butler and Banks to employ freed people as “a flawed system” that trapped blacks “somewhere between slavery and freedom” (196, 194–95). Also, political generals were not positively unified in reaction to the Emancipation Proclamation and the decision to enlist African-American soldiers. This solid chapter would have benefited from more analysis of the political generals’ personal opinions on racial issues and how the war changed their views.

In Work’s final chapter on political generals’ exertion of political influence, he claims that “the most important reason Lincoln commissioned politicians was to generate political support to restore the Union and win the war” (202). Yet, as with most of the other roles political generals assumed in the war, Work concludes that their support in the political realm was also a “mixed blessing” (226). In fact, Work can only point to two of the sixteen political generals he studies (Dix and Logan) as offering “effective political support” to the Lincoln administration and the war effort (226). In half the chapter, Work chronicles his subjects’ constant petitioning of Lincoln, cabinet members, and congressmen to advance their own military careers. The energy expended on self-promotion often outweighed the few positive contributions some generals made as stump speakers.

Overall, it was refreshing to read a monograph that takes seriously the contributions of political generals to the war effort. However, the author did not fully convince this reviewer that political generals were a positive benefit to the cause. In fairness, Work’s only contention is that these men compiled mixed records and that their noncombat service was just as important, if not more so, than their battlefield records. Yes, they did compile mixed records, but when less than 20 percent of the generals studied emerge as consistently capable commanders, while others compiled unethical or unproductive records as administrators, it is difficult to see how Work’s portrayal differs from earlier assessments.

The book’s organization stymies Work’s effort to challenge the stereotype of political generals. It is difficult to assess the positive value of political generals as a whole when arguments about their effectiveness are based upon a small sample that is implied, and not demonstrated, to be representative of the larger context of political generals and their capabilities. Likewise, an evaluation of political generals in contrast to the performances of regular army generals would have been helpful. Another factor that undermined Work’s argument is that if students of history are supposed to look more at the administrative abilities of political generals than their battlefield records, then it makes little
sense to devote over half of the book to combat narrative and assessment and less than a third of the book to their administrative duties and noncombat accomplishments.

There are some other more minor flaws in the book. On page thirteen, Work identifies Ohio’s governor, who subsequently served as Lincoln’s postmaster general, as Merriam Dennison, when his first name was William. This might be excused as a typographical error, but the error is repeated in the endnote. Regarding the endnotes, they are exclusively source-only citations. Some discussion in the endnotes of secondary works or evaluation of primary sources would have been helpful. Although Work does employ a good number of manuscript sources, it is surprising that he did not better utilize the voluminous manuscript collections of Banks and Butler, especially considering the prominence of both generals in the book.

Work had a difficult task in trying to positively reevaluate a group of commanders that have so often been denounced or simply ignored in secondary sources. *Lincoln’s Political Generals* is a good start for re-examining our historical understanding of citizen generals. General readers and Civil War enthusiasts will no doubt enjoy learning more about the careers of officers that are rarely discussed in the standard literature. There is also a real benefit in the final three chapters of the book for students and scholars alike to reconsider assumptions about how to assess the impact of a Civil War general, especially a politically appointed one. Hopefully, the study Work has presented will serve as a stepping-stone for scholars to a more comprehensive evaluation of political generals in the future.