

ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

Political Generals in the Civil War

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In *On War*, Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz described war as “simply a continuation of political intercourse, with the addition of other means.”¹ Few, if any, wars throughout the course of history have truly defied Clausewitz’s aphorism. Yet arguably, there has been no conflict to which it is more applicable than the American Civil War. No aspect of the Civil War better illustrates that applicability than the prevalence of so-called political generals.

Of course, as Clausewitz might remind us, an apolitical military commander is a contradiction in terms. Certainly, no general on either the Union or Confederate side in the Civil War was genuinely apolitical. Indeed, as historian Brooks D. Simpson notes, the term political general can carry “with it the misleading implication that there exists a rather stark demarcation between the worlds of the cool, disciplined military professional and the eager if bumbling amateur, the man of merit versus the man with connections.” The Union’s two greatest generals were Ulysses S. Grant, who benefited from the sponsorship of Republican Congressman Elihu Benjamin Washburne (Illinois), and William Tecumseh Sherman, who was the brother of Republican Senator John Sherman (Ohio). Nonetheless, as Simpson points out, Grant, Sherman, and other professional soldiers were graduates of West Point and were brought “to Lincoln’s attention because of their reputations as military men”. The same held true for Grant’s and Sherman’s West Point trained counterparts in gray. Political generals, on the other hand, “had been professional politicians before the war and possessed little if any military training or experience.”² Some of them, such as Massachusetts Democrat and future Union Major General Benjamin Franklin Butler, had served as officers in their state militias. As historian Thomas J. Goss notes, however, “annual militia encampments, which consisted of socializing, fancy parades, and a small amount of drill a few days each year, did not prepare these officers for the battlefield. . . .”³ In any case, Butler and other politicians were appointed to military commands because of their political connections and ability to rally important partisan, geographic, and ethnic constituencies. During

¹ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, in Michael Howard and Peter Paret, trans. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 605. (The more famous but less accurate version of Clausewitz’s aphorism is that “War is the continuation of politics by other means.”)

² Brooks D. Simpson, “Lincoln and His Political Generals,” in *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association*, 21, No. 1, (Winter 2000), 63-64.

³ Thomas J. Goss, *The War Within the Union High Command: Politics and Generalship during the Civil War*, (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2003), 14.

the war, large numbers of political generals served on both sides. They commanded brigades, divisions, corps, and occasionally even armies and military departments.

There were several important reasons for the prevalence of political generals during the Civil War. On the eve of the conflict, there were 1,105 officers in the Regular army, 824 of whom were graduates of West Point. Another 900 West Point graduates were in civilian life at the time.⁴ Even factoring in graduates of ten other private or state-backed military colleges—nine of which were located in slave states and thus provided an advantage primarily to only one side, there were simply not enough people with professional training or experience to command the number of troops who served in Civil War armies.⁵ Politicians, despite their lack of military education or experience, possessed certain skills that could be valuable in a military setting. They had experience communicating with, organizing, and directing the collective actions of large numbers of people. Some politicians, such as those who had served as governors, cabinet officials, or in other executive roles in national or state government, also possessed useful executive and administrative experience.

In addition, previous American wars offered considerable precedent for the use of political generals. During the War of 1812, for example, Major General Stephen Van Rensselaer and President Andrew Jackson parlayed their political connections into important military commands. A generation later, Democratic President James K. Polk made a point of appointing partisan Democrats to prominent military roles in order to counteract and undermine Whiggish Regular army officers, who—he believed—“not having the success of my administration at heart seem disposed to throw every obstacle in the way of my prosecuting the Mexican War successfully.”⁶ While President Abraham Lincoln, unlike Polk, frequently appointed politicians from outside his party, neither he nor Confederate President Jefferson Davis were departing from standard practice by entrusting amateurs with military responsibilities.

In fact, in some quarters, amateurs may have been viewed as preferable to West Point trained officers. Some people in the mid-nineteenth century United States, historian David Work notes, “distrusted West Point, viewing it as a bastion of aristocracy that produced elitist officers unfit to lead citizen soldiers. Traditional fears of a standing army mixed with a belief that talented citizens could properly direct military units convinced many people that the nation must look to civilians to command units within the army.”⁷ Volunteer soldiers sometimes resented what they perceived as West Pointers’ rigid discipline. “We had enlisted *to put down the Rebellion*, and had no patience with the red-tape tomfoolery of the regular service,” an Indiana veteran later wrote. “Furthermore, our boys recognized no superiors, except in the line of legitimate duty. Shoulder-

⁴ David Work, *Lincoln’s Political Generals*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 7.

⁵ Bureau of the Census, *Statistics of the United States in 1860*, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1866), 509-10.

⁶ James K. Polk, Friday, 22nd May, 1840, in Milo Milton Quaife, ed., *The Diary of James K. Polk During His Presidency, 1845 to 1849*, 4 vols (Chicago, IL: A.C. McClurg & Co., 1910), 1: 416-18.

⁷ Work, *Lincoln’s Political Generals*, 228.

straps waived, a private was ready at the ‘drop of the hat’ to thrash his commander; a feat that occurred more than once.”⁸ Political generals often nursed their own grievances toward West Pointers. Butler, for example, implied they were overly cautious by waspishly remarking that he refused “to build a bridge for West Point men to retreat over.”⁹ Butler and other political generals also sometimes felt that West Pointers formed a clique that persecuted, conspired against, and sought to undermine them.

Most professional soldiers thought as little of political generals as political generals thought of them. In April 1864, the Union army’s chief of staff Major General Henry W. Halleck claimed, “It seems but little better than murder to give important commands to such men. . . .”¹⁰ By that point in the war, many observers in the press agreed. On May 28, 1864, the *New York Herald* declared that “political generals” were “men not in any way equal to their duties, and whose presence in the army made it rather a patronage establishment than a fighting machine.” A week later, on June 4, the *Springfield Republican* published its own withering critique of political generals in the Union army. “Every one of them has terribly failed and inflicted serious damage on the national cause,” the Massachusetts paper argued.¹¹ Over the past sixteen decades, Civil War buffs and many historians have tended to echo such sentiments. Several disastrous battlefield performances on the part of political generals demonstrate that such criticisms are at least somewhat merited.

BATTLEFIELD LEADERSHIP

Ben Butler, who in 1861 was a prominent War Democrat, became one of the most controversial figures of the Civil War and arguably the archetypal Union political general. He was largely responsible for the defeat of Union forces on June 10, 1861, at the Battle of Big Bethel, one of the earliest land battles of the conflict. While Butler did not personally lead the Union troops at Big Bethel, they served under his overall command and followed his plan of battle.

⁸ William R. Hartpence, *History of the Fifty-First Indiana Veteran Volunteer Infantry: A Narrative of its Organization, Marches, Battles and Other Experiences in Camp and Prison; From 1861 to 1866, With Revised Roster* (Cincinnati: The Robert Clarke Company, 1894), 36.

⁹ William Farrar Smith, “Butler’s attack on Drewry’s Bluff,” in Robert Underwood Johnson and Clarence Clough Buel, eds., *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War. Being for the Most Part Contributions by Union and Confederate Officers. Based Upon “The Century War Series”*, 4 vols. (New York: The Century Co. 1884-1888), based on “The Century War Series” in *The Century Magazine*, November 1884 to November 1887, 4:206.

¹⁰ Major General Henry W. Halleck to Major General William T. Sherman, April 29, 1864, in United States War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 70 vols. in 128 parts (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), Series I, volume 34, part 3, p. 332-3 (hereafter cited as *O.R.*, I, 34, pt. 2, 332-3).

¹¹ *New York Herald*, May 28, 1864; *Springfield Republican* (Massachusetts), June 4, 1864.

Unfortunately, his plan proved overly complex, resulting in confusion and friendly fire incidents along with a Confederate victory.¹² In 1864, as commander of the Army of the James, Butler was given the task of supporting Lieutenant General Ulysses S. Grant's campaign against General Robert E. Lee in northern Virginia by advancing on Richmond from the southeast, thus drawing the attention of Confederate forces who might otherwise have reinforced the Army of Northern Virginia. When Grant explained this plan to Lincoln, the president colorfully and aptly described it as one in which "Those not skinning can hold a leg."¹³ Butler, however, turned out to be a poor leg-holder. Confederates under General P. G. T. Beauregard pushed his men back to their defenses on a neck of land between the James and Appomattox rivers. Butler's trapped army, Grant later explained, "was as completely shut off from further operations directly against Richmond as if it had been in a bottle strongly corked."¹⁴ This made Grant's job more difficult, contributing to the massive casualties sustained by Union forces during the Overland Campaign.

Butler was not the only political general who failed as a leg-holder in 1864. Another was Major General Franz Sigel, a popular figure in the German American community. Unlike most political generals, Sigel possessed genuine military training and experience. Born in the Grand Duchy of Baden, he had graduated near the top of his class at a military academy in Karlsruhe. In 1848 and 1849, he participated in one of the many revolutions that broke out across Germany, leading several thousand troops in battle, albeit unsuccessfully. Like many other participants in those revolutions, he fled to the United States when reactionary forces reasserted control. According to Work, "At the beginning of the Civil War, Sigel could make a strong argument for being one of the most experienced military officers in the United States."¹⁵ Nonetheless, like other political generals, he received his commission for largely political reasons. As a leg-holder in 1864, Sigel was assigned the task of pinning down Confederate forces in the Shenandoah Valley while Grant battled Lee. On May 15, however, his southward advance up the Valley was blocked when he was soundly defeated by a smaller Confederate army at the Battle of New Market. To add insult to injury, the Confederates who defeated him included teenage cadets from the Virginia Military Institute, some as young as fifteen.¹⁶ Ironically, the Confederate army was also led by a political figure, Major General John Cabell Breckenridge. Despite his victory that day, Breckenridge, like Sigel, had contributed to several disasters during the war. New Market was not Sigel's first failure. In August 1861, he delivered a dreadful performance at the Battle of Wilson's Creek. A year later,

¹² Work, *Lincoln's Political Generals*, 31-32; Goss, *The War Within the Union High Command*, 81-82.

¹³ John Hay, diary entry for April 30, 1864, in Michael Burlingame and John R. Turner Ettliger, eds., *Inside Lincoln's White House: The Complete Civil War Diary of John Hay* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999), 194.

¹⁴ Lieutenant General Ulysses S. Grant, "Report of Lieut. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant, U. S. Army, commanding Armies of the United States, including operations March, 1864-May, 1865," in *O.R.*, I, 45, pt. 1, 19.

¹⁵ Work, *Lincoln's Political Generals*, 21.

¹⁶ James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 724.

while serving as a corps commander in Major General John Pope's Army of Virginia, Sigel repeatedly failed to move his troops quickly enough, hampering Union operations in a campaign which culminated in the disastrous Union defeat at the Second Battle of Bull Run. In fairness, Sigel performed adequately during the Second Battle of Bull Run itself. Nonetheless, he bears some responsibility for the battle's disastrous outcome. His poor generalship leading up to it contributed to the fact that Union forces were in a situation that allowed them to be so soundly defeated in the first place.¹⁷

Major General Nathaniel Prentiss Banks, who served before the war as Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives and then as governor of Massachusetts, completed the trifecta of political generals who failed to "hold a leg" in 1864. Unlike Butler and Sigel, who were to help Grant skin Lee, Banks was to help Major General William T. Sherman skin General Joseph Eggleston Johnston and capture Atlanta. He was supposed to move east from New Orleans to capture Mobile, Alabama, after which he was to thrust to the northeast. This would deprive the Confederates of a major port and force them to divert troops who might otherwise have reinforced Johnston. Before advancing east, however, Banks was ordered to move northwest up the Red River and capture Shreveport, Louisiana. While he should not be blamed for the diversion the Red River Campaign represented, he does bear responsibility for the campaign's execution. Unfortunately, he bungled the execution, failing to capture Shreveport and taking so long that he missed the deadline to begin moving toward Mobile. Thus, as historian Bruce Catton points out, "When Sherman moved down toward Atlanta he would have to move without . . . 10,000 veterans" he had loaned to Banks, "and Joe Johnston would get some 15,000 reinforcements who should have been kept busy in southern Alabama."¹⁸ As in the case of Sigel and Butler, Banks's failure in 1864 was hardly his first. In May 1862, he suffered a humiliating defeat at the hand of Major General Thomas Jonathan "Stonewall" Jackson in the Shenandoah Valley at the First Battle of Winchester.

One final Union political general bears mention: the notorious Daniel Edgar Sickles. On February 27, 1859, while representing New York's Third District as a Democrat in Congress, Sickles shot and killed Philip Barton Key II, the U.S. District Attorney for the District of Columbia and the son of "The Star-Spangled Banner" author Francis Scott Key.¹⁹ Sickles had discovered that Key was having an affair with his wife. In the lurid trial that followed, Sickles was represented by a team of lawyers that included Edwin McMasters Stanton, Lincoln's future Secretary of War. Stanton and his colleagues managed to secure a not guilty verdict by arguing that Sickles had been temporarily insane when he shot Key, the first successful use of such a defense in American history. After the trial, Sickles (who was himself an incorrigible philanderer) reconciled with his wife, Teresa Bagioli Sickles, a decision which outraged some people more than his murder of Key. When the war began, Sickles, probably driven both by patriotism and a desire to restore his

¹⁷ Work, *Lincoln's Political Generals*, 67-71.

¹⁸ Bruce Catton, *Grant Takes Command*, (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1969), 174.

¹⁹ Felix G. Fontaine, *Trial of The Hon. Daniel E. Sickles for Shooting Philip Barton Key, Esq., U.S. District Attorney, of Washington, D.C., February 27th, 1859*, (New York: R. M. De Witt, 1859), 3.

reputation, raised the Excelsior Brigade in New York for the Union army and secured a brigadier general's commission to command that brigade.

By the summer of 1863, Sickles was a major general, commanding the Third Corps in the Army of the Potomac. On July 2, 1863, on the second day of the Battle of Gettysburg, the Third Corps was assigned to the Union's left flank. "Among all the corps commanders, Sickles found himself defending the least defensible ground in the Union line," historian Stephen W. Sears acknowledges. "His assigned section was roughly the southernmost third of Cemetery Ridge, extending [Major General Winfield Scott] Hancock's Second Corps position southward to Little Round Top. At the point where the ridge reached the shoulder of Little Round Top it was virtually no longer a ridge; for some 100 yards the advantage of high ground was lost."²⁰ Without seeking permission from or even properly informing his commanding officer, Major General George Gordon Meade, Sickles moved his corps forward 1,500 yards to a section of higher ground. "As a battlefield tactician, the impulsive Sickles revealed himself that day to be like the chess neophyte who sees a promising opening move but fails to see ahead to the further moves in consequence," Sears writes.²¹ Untethered to the rest of the Union line and exposed to Confederate attacks from multiple directions, the Third Corps suffered heavy losses. Sickles himself lost his right leg. To this day, he has defenders who believe his decision to move his troops forward inadvertently blunted the Confederate assault on the Union left. Perhaps. Perhaps not. Whether Sickles unwittingly saved or almost caused the destruction of the entire Union army, the way in which he moved his men forward, failing to inform Meade or Hancock, was inexcusable, resulting in the unnecessary deaths of many Union soldiers and leaving the Third Corps shattered.

The Confederates enjoyed their own share of disasters at the hands of political generals. Two in particular—Brigadier Generals John Buchannon Floyd and Gideon Johnson Pillow—helped cause one of the greatest Confederate defeats of the war. Floyd had served as President James Buchanan's secretary of war until December 1860. Before leaving office, he decided to cap his notoriously corrupt tenure with one final act of high treason, attempting to transfer 125 cannons from Pittsburgh to arsenals in the South in anticipation of possible civil war.²² He then returned to Virginia, where he had once served as governor, to advocate for disunion. When Virginia seceded, President Jefferson Davis made Floyd a brigadier general to, as historian Steven E. Woodworth writes, "gratify the onetime governor's many supporters in Virginia and elsewhere."²³

Pillow held the rare distinction of being a political general in two different wars. His appointment during the Mexican War came courtesy of President Polk, a close political associate. Pillow had helped his fellow Tennessee Democrat secure their party's nomination in 1844. During

²⁰ Stephen W. Sears, *Gettysburg*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2003), 249.

²¹ Stephen W. Sears *Controversies & Commanders: Dispatches from the Army of the Potomac*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1999), 213.

²² McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 226.

²³ Steven E. Woodworth, *Jefferson Davis and His Generals: The Failure of Confederate Command in the West*, (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1990), 80.

Major General Winfield Scott's masterful campaign from Vera Cruz to Mexico City, Pillow worked tirelessly to undermine and steal credit from his commanding officer. Eventually, Scott had enough and attempted to have Pillow court-martialed for insubordination, only to see Polk intervene to protect his crony.²⁴ Pillow remained a major figure in Tennessee politics after the Mexican War. In 1861, he helped Governor Isham Green Harris rally support for disunion. In early May, weeks before voters approved Tennessee's unconstitutional secession from the United States, the state entered into a military alliance with the so-called Confederacy and formed a new "Provisional Army of Tennessee" under Pillow's command.²⁵ When Tennessee's entrance into the so-called Confederacy was formalized, this Provisional Army and its commander became part of the new Confederate army. According to Woodworth, although Jefferson Davis held well-founded doubts about Pillow's competence, "He could not insult Tennessee, by no means the most solidly pro-southern of the Confederate States, by refusing to accept its chief general into Confederate service."²⁶

In February 1862, Floyd and Pillow were, respectively, first- and second-in-command at Fort Donelson, a strategically vital post on the west bank of the Cumberland River in northwest Tennessee. Along with its sister Fort Henry, twelve miles away on the east bank of the Tennessee River, Fort Donelson formed the lynchpin of the entire Confederate defensive line in the West, which stretched all the way from the Alleghenies to the Mississippi. Fully aware of this was an, at that point, obscure Union brigadier general, Ulysses S. Grant. On February 2, Grant set out from Cairo, Illinois, with a joint army-navy taskforce consisting of roughly 15,000 troops and a squadron of ironclad and wooden gunboats commanded by Flag Officer Andrew Hull Foote.

Grant and Foote captured the poorly designed and weakly defended Fort Henry with naval gunfire alone on February 6. Fort Donelson, however, would be a tougher nut to crack. Defended by roughly 17,000 Confederates, "'Fort' Donelson," historian James McPherson writes, "was not really a fort; rather, it was a stockade enclosing fifteen acres of soldiers' huts and camp equipment. The business end of the defenses were two batteries of twelve heavy guns dug into the side of a hundred-foot bluff on the Cumberland to repel attack by water, and three semicircular miles of trenches to repel it by land."²⁷ Even a military genius, as Grant undeniably was, might find Fort Donelson difficult to capture, especially when starting with a smaller force than that which defended the fort. Like many of history's other great generals, however, Grant was not merely brilliant and audacious. He was also lucky. At Fort Donelson, he had the good luck to face a Confederate force led by Floyd and Pillow.

²⁴ Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 683, 780, and 791.

²⁵ Nathaniel Cheairs Hughes, Jr. and Roy P. Stonesifer, Jr., *The Life and Wars of Gideon J. Pillow*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 23-35 and 157-62.

²⁶ Woodworth, *Jefferson Davis and His Generals*, 30-31.

²⁷ McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 396, 398, and 402.

Grant's forces began besieging Fort Donelson on the evening of February 12 and continued to extend their lines the following day. On February 14, Grant attempted to capture Fort Donelson in the same manner he had captured Fort Henry. This time, however, naval gunfire alone proved inadequate. Foote's ships were heavily damaged in the failed attack, and their crews suffered heavy casualties. Foote himself was wounded when a Confederate shell destroyed the USS *St. Louis's* pilothouse. Still, Grant remained optimistic. After all, he had the Confederates essentially surrounded. Recognizing the same thing, Floyd, Pillow, and third-in-command Brigadier General Simon Bolivar Buckner met that evening and decided to attempt a breakout. Before the Confederates launched their attack on February 15, Grant had gone five miles downstream to confer with Foote, who was unable to come to him due to his wound.²⁸ While Grant was absent, Confederate forces under Pillow struck the Union right, which coincidentally was commanded by another political general, John Alexander McClernand. Overall, Brigadier General McClernand fought well that day. Nonetheless, the Confederates eventually forced him back, opening an escape route. As disaster loomed, Grant returned from his conference with Foote. Refusing to panic, he reorganized his battered forces and launched a successful counterattack, retaking most of the positions lost earlier in the day. "In this moment of crisis at Fort Donelson, Grant met one of the supreme tests of his career as a soldier," Catton writes.²⁹ As Grant was successfully meeting his test, Floyd and Pillow were failing theirs in spectacular fashion. With an escape route open, Pillow lost his nerve and ordered Confederate troops to return to their defensive positions. As Buckner tried to convince Pillow to go through with the escape plan, Floyd arrived on the scene. Initially, he backed Buckner. But Pillow, as Woodworth writes, argued "that the men were tired and hungry and needed to retrieve their blankets and knapsacks. This was no time to start a long march. Thereupon Floyd flip-flopped and, agreeing with Pillow, sent everyone back to the fort. It was a move of sublime stupidity that probably could have been achieved only through the combined efforts of a Floyd and a Pillow."³⁰

In fairness to Floyd and Pillow, had they gone through with their escape plan, their right flank would have been exposed to attack by Grant's reorganized forces. Grant would probably have used this opportunity to cut the Confederate army to pieces. Even so, far more Confederates would have successfully escaped Fort Donelson. As it happened, seven hundred Confederate cavalrymen under former slave trader and future war criminal and terrorist Lieutenant Colonel Nathan Bedford Forrest managed to slip away by fording a stream too deep for infantry. In addition, four Virginia regiments escaped aboard an available steamboat with Floyd himself, and Pillow slipped away in an abandoned scow, accompanied by his chief of staff.³¹ The two Confederate political generals had declined to share the fate of most of their men. Floyd, remembering his treachery against the United States as secretary of war, worried he would be tried

²⁸ Bruce Catton, *Grant Moves South*, (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1960), 153-64; McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 400.

²⁹ Catton, *Grant Moves South*, 166-70; Work, *Lincoln's Political Generals*, 53.

³⁰ Woodworth, *Jefferson Davis and His Generals*, 82.

³¹ McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 401-2; Woodworth, *Jefferson Davis and His Generals*, 83-84.

for treason and hanged. Thus, he handed his command over to Pillow who in turn handed it off to Buckner.

On the morning of February 16, Buckner sent Grant a message under a flag of truce, asking the Union general to agree to an armistice and “the appointment of Commissioners” to discuss terms for the surrender of Fort Donelson and its defenders. Grant famously replied, “No terms except an unconditional and immediate surrender can be accepted. I propose to move immediately upon your works.” With no alternative, Buckner surrendered the fort and its 12,000 to 15,000 remaining defenders to Grant. Afterwards, the former West Point classmates and comrades during the Mexican War had what Grant described as a “very friendly” conversation. Buckner argued Grant would have had more difficulty capturing the fort if he had been in command. Grant replied that if Buckner had been in command, he would “not have tried in the way I did. . . .”³² When Grant learned of the escape of Pillow, who he held in particularly low esteem, he joked, “if I had captured him I would have turned him loose. I would rather have him in command of you fellows than as a prisoner.”³³ As it was, Pillow and Floyd had, by their incompetence, performed a great service the United States. The fall of Fort Donelson fatally compromised the entire Confederate defensive line in the West, forcing them to abandon their positions in Kentucky and most of Tennessee, including the state capital, Nashville. It also rescued from obscurity the individual who, with the exception of Abraham Lincoln, did more than anyone else to lead the United States to victory.

While Floyd and Pillow were exceptional for just how unsuited they were for their roles, the Union’s Major General John Alexander Logan was probably the only political general who truly excelled at every level of command. Logan hailed from southern Illinois, known at the time as “Egypt.” Formed by the confluence of the Mississippi and Ohio rivers and home to many transplants from the South, Egypt was both strategically and politically significant. It was no coincidence that Logan was not the only Union political general from the region. John McClelland also came from Egypt. Interestingly, both were Democrats who campaigned alongside Senator Stephen A. Douglas in his 1858 contest with Lincoln.³⁴ Logan was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives during the same election cycle and reelected in 1860. According to Grant, “Logan’s popularity” in Egypt “was unbounded. He knew almost enough of the people in it by their Christian names, to form an ordinary congressional district.”³⁵

Logan’s attitude during the secession winter following Lincoln’s election and even in the immediate aftermath of the Confederate attack on Fort Sumter made some suspect he was a secessionist. “The Republican papers had been demanding that he should announce where he stood

³² Ulysses S. Grant, *Personal Memoirs of U. S. Grant*, 2 vols., (New York: Charles L. Webster & Company, 1885), 1: 310-11, 313.

³³ John R. Procter, “A Blue and Gray Friendship: Grant and Buckner,” in *The Century Magazine*, April, 1897, Vol. LIII, No. 6, 944.

³⁴ *Rock Island Argus* (Davenport, IA), September 11, 1858; *Chicago Tribune*, September 20, 1858.

³⁵ Grant, *Personal Memoirs*, 1: 244.

on the questions which at that time engrossed the whole of public thought. Some were very bitter in their denunciations of his silence,” Grant later wrote.³⁶ In June 1861, however, Logan began speaking forcefully in favor of the Union, settling any doubts about his loyalty. After the disastrous First Battle of Bull Run on July 21, he decided to further commit to his country. Returning to Egypt and addressing his constituents, he declared, “The time has come when a man must be for or against his country...I, for one, shall stand or fall with the Union, and shall this day enroll for the war. I want as many of you as will to come with me. If you say ‘no,’ and see your best interests and the welfare of your homes and your children in another direction, may God protect you.”³⁷ Logan quickly began recruiting a new regiment for the Union army, raising and taking command of the 31st Illinois Infantry as a newly commissioned colonel.

Logan benefited from starting out as a regimental commander rather than as the leader of a larger formation, unlike many other political generals such as Butler and Banks. Goss argues this gave him the “opportunity to learn and grow prior to having to coordinate brigades and divisions, artillery, cavalry, and logistics, and a large headquarters. . . .”³⁸ Logan performed brilliantly at Fort Donelson, where he was wounded twice while leading the 31st Illinois. After the battle, Grant recommended his promotion to brigadier general. Lincoln quickly approved this recommendation, though according to Goss, “Logan’s appeal to the administration had little to do with his successful performance as a regimental commander.”³⁹ Logan, known by his troops as “Black Jack,” continued to excel as he moved up the ranks and took on new responsibilities. Indeed, reporting to Secretary Stanton after observing Grant’s Army of the Tennessee during the Vicksburg Campaign, Assistant Secretary of War Charles Anderson Dana wrote, “On the whole, few can serve the cause of the country more effectively than he, and none serve it more faithfully.”⁴⁰

By the spring of 1864, Logan, by then a major general, commanded the Fifteenth Corps in the Army of the Tennessee, now led by Major General James Birdseye McPherson. (The Army of the Tennessee was one of three armies under the overall command of Major General William T. Sherman during the Atlanta Campaign.) When McPherson was killed in action on July 22, Logan temporarily assumed command of his army, leading it to victory over Lieutenant General John Bell Hood’s Confederates.

³⁶ Ibid., 245.

³⁷ Mary Simmerson Cunningham Logan, *Reminiscences of a Soldier’s Wife: An Autobiography* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1913), 98; James Pickett Jones, “Black Jack”: *John A. Logan and Southern Illinois in the Civil War Era* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967), 87-101.

³⁸ Goss, *The War Within the Union High Command*, 87.

³⁹ Ibid., 86.

⁴⁰ Assistant Secretary of War Charles A. Dana to Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton, July 12, 1863, in Charles A. Dana, *Recollections of the Civil War: With the Leaders at Washington and in the Field in the Sixties*, (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1902), 68.

Logan, considering his performance, deserved to be named as McPherson's permanent successor as commander of the Army of the Tennessee. Unfortunately, some of the West Pointers serving under Sherman objected. Sherman himself shared their reservations and ultimately gave the job to Major General Oliver Otis Howard, returning Logan to command of the Fifteenth Corps. In his *Memoirs*, Sherman explained that he believed he "needed commanders who were purely and technically soldiers, men who would obey orders and execute them promptly and on time" in order to capture Atlanta, "for I knew that we would have to execute some most delicate maneuvers, requiring the utmost skill, nicety, and precision." He added that he regarded both Logan and Major General Francis Preston Blair, Jr.—commander of the Seventeenth Corps during the Atlanta Campaign and probably the second most capable combat leader among Union political generals, as mere "volunteers" hoping to win "personal fame and glory" rather than as "professional soldiers."⁴¹ Grant, in his own *Memoirs*, seemed to hint at gentle disagreement with Sherman's decision, writing he had "no doubt, whatever, that he did this for what he considered would be to the good of the service, which was more important than that the personal feelings of any individual should not be aggrieved; though I doubt whether he had an officer with him who could have filled the place as Logan would have done."⁴² Logan was indeed "aggrieved," but as Work writes, he "suppressed his anger for the good of the Union cause and remained in the service. In private, he complained that he received 'no credit' for any of his achievements because 'West Point must have all under Sherman who is an infernal brute.'"⁴³

Several months later, Logan again came close to receiving command of an army. Following Sherman's September 2 capture of Atlanta, Hood eventually decided to swing his army northwest into Tennessee—much of which by that point was under Union control. Despite suffering heavy losses at the Battle of Franklin on November 30, by December 2, 1864, the Confederate Army of Tennessee had reached the outskirts of Nashville. Tennessee's capital, which had been under Union control since Grant's February 1862 triumph at Fort Donelson, was defended by Major General George Henry Thomas's Army of the Cumberland. Grant repeatedly telegraphed Thomas, urging him to attack, but for days Thomas remained seemingly inactive. In Washington, Secretary Stanton—a man not known for his patience even at the best of times—grew increasingly frustrated with Thomas. Indeed, on December 2, the same day Hood arrived outside Nashville, Stanton—likely upset that rebel forces had made it that far in the first place—telegraphed Grant, "This looks like the McClellan and Rosecrans strategy of do nothing and let the rebels raid the country."⁴⁴ Fed up with what, from 500 miles away at least, seemed like dithering, Grant ordered Logan to proceed to Nashville. If, when Logan arrived, Thomas still had not attacked, Logan was to relieve him and

⁴¹ William T. Sherman, *Memoirs of General William T. Sherman*, 2 vols. (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1875), 2: 86.

⁴² Grant, *Personal Memoirs*, 2: 353-4.

⁴³ Work, *Political Generals*, 133. (As consolation, Sherman convinced Howard to let Logan take his place riding at the head of the Army of the Tennessee during the Grand Review of the Armies in May 1865.)

⁴⁴ Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton to Lieutenant General Ulysses S. Grant, December 2, 1864, 10:30 a.m., in *O.R.*, I, 45, pt. 2, 15-16.

take command of the Army of the Cumberland. Grant and Stanton, however, had grossly underestimated and misjudged George Thomas. While McClellan might have used a need for more preparation as an excuse to do nothing, Thomas was no McClellan. He genuinely *was* preparing to attack. He did so with massive force on December 15 and 16, while Logan was still traveling. As historian Elizabeth R. Varon writes, Hood's Army of Tennessee disintegrated "in a swirl of confusion and demoralization."⁴⁵ Also disintegrated was Logan's chance to command the Army of the Cumberland. However, while Logan was no doubt disappointed, the fact that he was even considered for an army command after the failure of so many other political generals in such a role testifies to his genuine gift for military leadership.

No other political general met the standard for battlefield leadership set by Logan. Only a few, such as Logan's colleague Frank Blair, Jr., came close. Nonetheless, it would be a mistake to dismiss political generals as a class and to label them as dangerous incompetents who caused more harm than good. While it is true that only Logan excelled at every level of command, it is equally true that few if any political generals caused as much damage to their respective causes as did Floyd and Pillow. As Work argues, "The majority of political generals fell somewhere between mediocre and competent. . . ."⁴⁶

Even Butler and Sigel demonstrated occasional flashes of competence and, in Sigel's case, a moment of genuine brilliance. It was Butler who reestablished communications with Washington after it was cut off from the North in the aftermath of the Pratt Street Riot in Baltimore in April 1861. While he did not have to face organized Confederate forces to accomplish this, it was a potentially highly dangerous operation. Later, in late September 1864, Butler was up against organized Confederates when he competently oversaw a portion of a Union offensive that, while failing to break Lee's hold on Richmond and Petersburg, did achieve minor gains.⁴⁷ As previously noted, Sigel, despite his poor generalship leading up to the Second Battle of Bull Run, performed adequately during the battle itself. His finest moment, however, came on May 8, 1862, during the Battle of Pea Ridge at which he commanded two divisions in an army led by Brigadier General Samuel Ryan Curtis.⁴⁸ "Personally sighting the guns, Sigel directed a barrage against the

⁴⁵ Elizabeth R. Varon, *Armies of Deliverance: A New History of the Civil War*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 377.

⁴⁶ Work, *Political Generals*, 229.

⁴⁷ Catton, *Grant Takes Command*, 366. (During that offensive, fourteen African American soldiers under Butler's command earned the Medal of Honor in a single engagement at New Market Heights on September 29.)

⁴⁸ When it comes to political generals, Curtis himself presents an interesting taxonomical case. While he had graduated from West Point in 1831 and had commanded a regiment of volunteers during the Mexican War, he had also served three terms in the U.S. House of Representatives, representing Iowa's First District as a Republican. Generally speaking, scholars have not viewed Curtis as a political general. For example, in their respective works on Union political generals, both Work and Goss treat Curtis as a West Pointer and contrast him with political generals. Curtis could arguably challenge Logan's standing as the finest political general if he were to be classified as such. William L. Shea, *Union General: Samuel Ryan Curtis and Victory in the West* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2023), 11, 22-41, 73-74, 80, 83-84; Work, *Political Generals*, 42; Goss, *The War Within the Union High Command*, 99.)

Confederate positions, destroying enemy guns and disrupting their infantry formations,” Work writes. Then, Sigel “ordered forward his infantry and drove the Confederate forces from the field.” Sigel’s efforts helped ensure Union victory at Pea Ridge. As Work notes, “He used his artillery brilliantly, displaying gifts as an artilleryist that he did not possess as a commander of infantry, though on this day he did deploy his infantry in the positions from which they could easily exploit the artillery barrage.”⁴⁹

Ultimately, neither Butler’s nor Sigel’s accomplishments outweigh their costly failures. They deserved their reputations for poor battlefield leadership. In other cases, however, political generals with serious failures on their records did achieve enough that they probably deserve to be remembered as inconsistent rather than incompetent. On the Confederate side, Major General Sterling Price—a former governor of Missouri—ended the war with a mixed record. So too did Major General John C. Breckenridge—President James Buchanan’s vice president, southern Democrats’ 1860 presidential nominee, and the general who defeated Sigel at New Market. When it comes to political generals who fought on behalf of the United States, there may be no better example of inconsistency than Major General Lewis “Lew” Wallace. At the Battle of Shiloh in April 1862, Wallace caused his division to become hopelessly lost when he took a wrong turn, delaying desperately needed reinforcements. Yet on July 9, 1864, he quite possibly saved the United States at the Battle of Monocacy when he engaged a much larger Confederate force that was moving toward Washington. Although Monocacy was a tactical defeat, it delayed the Confederates for a full day and bought time for Union reinforcements to bolster the capital’s defenses. If not for Wallace, Confederate forces under Lieutenant General Jubal Anderson Early may very well have breached Washington’s defenses. While Early would not have been able to hold the capital, it would not have mattered. Simply by entering the city, Early would have dealt a crushing blow to Northern morale, quite possibly ensuring Confederate victory in the war by destroying any hope for Lincoln’s reelection.

Wallace was unusual because his greatest failure as a battlefield leader occurred while he commanded a subordinate formation, and his greatest success came when he was leading an independent force. It was usually the other way around. If, as Work claims, “The majority of political generals fell somewhere between mediocre and competent...,” where they fell often depended “on how much responsibility they held.”⁵⁰ Some, such as McClelland, performed well commanding brigades and divisions in combat but when promoted above their level and put in charge of corps or armies ended up struggling and causing serious problems. Others stayed within their wheelhouse and flourished as battlefield leaders. For example, Brigadier General James Samuel Wadsworth, a wealthy antislavery politician from New York, earned considerable admiration for his conduct as a division commander in the Army of the Potomac. Following Wadsworth’s death at the Battle of the Wilderness in May 1864, Major General Winfield Scott Hancock noted, “Although not a soldier by education, his example was known to be so good that, in the reorganization of the Army of the Potomac, each corps commander desired to have him as

⁴⁹ Work, *Political Generals*, 49.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 229.

commander of division.”⁵¹ Among the many other political figures who served effectively or even brilliantly leading brigades and divisions on the battlefield are Major General Jacob Dolson Cox and Brigadier General Alpheus Starkey Williams, who fought on behalf of the United States, and Brigadier General William Barksdale, who fought against the United States.

BEYOND THE BATTLEFIELD

In the end, political generals’ performances on Civil War battlefields varied quite widely, much like the performances of West Pointers. Yet even if political generals had completely earned their reputation for poor battlefield leadership, it would still be a grave mistake to dismiss their contributions. Indeed, it would be a mistake to evaluate any general—especially any Civil War general—on battlefield performance alone. War is more than a series of discrete battles; more, even, than a series of campaigns. Viewing it as such represents a failure to heed Clausewitz, or at least a failure to understand what he meant when he wrote that war is “simply a continuation of political intercourse, with the addition of other means.”⁵² It was beyond the battlefield, in the realm of political intercourse broadly defined, where political generals truly proved their worth, especially on the Union side.

An army, whether it is fighting an opposing army, occupying territory, destroying or constructing infrastructure, confiscating property, or performing any of a myriad other roles, requires personnel. Civil War armies required personnel in numbers unprecedented in American history. While there were only 16,000 men in the U.S. Army when the war began, over the course of the conflict roughly three million men (and a few women) served in either the United States or Confederate armies.⁵³ Neither side would have been able to fill its ranks if it were not for political generals. In some instances, future political generals actually began recruiting before the war even started. For example, as Goss writes, “As early as February 1861,” Benjamin Butler “began to marshal and organize troops throughout New England under the ad hoc Department of New

⁵¹ Major General Winfield Scott Hancock to Unknown Recipient, June 25, 1864, in *New York Evening Post*, September 29, 1864.

⁵² Clausewitz, *On War*, 605.

⁵³ T. Harry Williams, *Lincoln and His Generals*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1952), 3. (We will probably never know the exact number. Historians themselves differ. McPherson, in *For Cause and Comrades*, offers a figure of three million soldiers. In *The War for the Common Soldier*, Peter S. Carmichael gives two different estimates. At one point he suggests 2.7 million soldiers served the Union and 1.2 to 1.4 million soldiers served the rebels and at another point puts the respective numbers at 2.1 million and 1 million. In *This Republic of Suffering*, Drew Gilpin Faust states, “Approximately 2.1 million northerners and 880,000 southerners took up arms between 1861 and 1865.” McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 18; Peter S. Carmichael, *The War for the Common Soldier: Why Men Fought in the Civil War*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 12 and 177; Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008), 3.)

England and coordinated with state governors for the military struggle he predicted was imminent.”⁵⁴ When that imminent military struggle indeed materialized after the rebel attack on Fort Sumter in April 1861, other politicians who would go on to serve as generals played critical roles in both the North’s and the South’s mass mobilizations. As previously noted, Daniel Sickles raised the Excelsior Brigade in New York and Gideon Pillow organized the Provisional Army of Tennessee.

As the war continued, both sides continued to rely primarily on volunteers. Even the institution of a draft by the Confederates in 1862 and by the United States in 1863 did not fundamentally change this dynamic. McPherson aptly describes Civil War conscription as a “clumsy carrot and stick device to stimulate volunteering”.⁵⁵ Recruiting, however, became increasingly difficult as hopes for a short war were dashed and casualties mounted. Amid these difficulties, political generals continued to help bring in new soldiers. In the autumn of 1862, for example, McClelland—by then a major general—launched a recruiting drive in the Midwest that ended up producing a significant portion of the army Grant later led to victory at Vicksburg. McClelland ran into problems when given command of a Corps in that army and was ultimately relieved by a frustrated Grant. Nonetheless, he arguably did more to contribute to the capture of Vicksburg than any general except Grant himself.

Politicians such as McClelland played prominent roles in recruiting in large part because neither the United States nor the Confederacy possessed the sort of centralized bureaucracy that could organize and oversee a rapid mass mobilization. Instead, the Union and Confederate War Departments typically set quotas for each state, leaving many of the details of meeting those quotas to each state’s respective governor. As Indiana Adjutant General William Henry Harrison Terrell later explained, when the governor received a call for volunteers, he “always endeavored to get the influential men in every neighborhood enlisted in the work. Meetings were held, patriotic and stirring speeches were made, and regularly commissioned recruiting officers were induced to zealously exert themselves everywhere.” Recruiting officers “were selected from the men of the district, of influential character, who were especially qualified by energy and capacity for organization, as well as being conspicuous for their local popularity.”⁵⁶ Indiana’s process was hardly unique. In his memoirs, Union political general Jacob D. Cox wrote, “In an armed struggle which grew out of a great political contest, it was inevitable that eager political partisans should be among the most active in the new volunteer organizations. They called meetings, addressed the people to rouse their enthusiasm, urged enlistments, and often set the example by enrolling their own names first.”⁵⁷ In addition to these activities, politicians could also, as Goss writes, use their

⁵⁴ Goss, *The War Within the Union High Command*, 27.

⁵⁵ McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 605.

⁵⁶ *Indiana in the War of the Rebellion: Official Report of W. H. H. Terrell, Adjutant General*, (Indianapolis: Douglass & Conner, 1869), 16; Goss, *The War Within the Union High Command*, 39.

⁵⁷ Jacob D. Cox, *Military Reminiscences of the Civil War*, 2 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1900), 1: 170-1.

“political connections and pull...to marshal, equip, and concentrate these new units much faster and more efficiently than the formal War Department organization could have done.”⁵⁸ In short, Cox was entirely correct when he argued, “It was a foregone conclusion that popular leaders of all grades must largely officer the new troops. Such men might be national leaders or leaders of country neighborhoods; but big or little, they were the necessity of the time.”⁵⁹

Some of the popular leaders who received general’s commissions were prominent figures in various immigrant communities which in 1860 made up 13.15% of the U.S. population. Only 5.6% of the nation’s immigrants, however, resided in the eleven states that would form the Confederacy. In fact, Illinois, Massachusetts, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin each had more foreign-born residents than all of the Confederate states combined.⁶⁰ Not surprisingly, while a few immigrants became Confederate generals, the most notable being the Irish-born Major General Patrick Cleburne, the vast majority of foreign-born Civil War generals fought for the United States. This was more than simply a reflection of demographics, however. As historian Harold Holzer writes, Lincoln recognized that the war could “not be an exclusively...native-born undertaking,” so he “launched a concerted effort to recruit marquee commanders from various...ethnic backgrounds...”⁶¹

Because most immigrants to the United States at the time of the Civil War came from either Ireland or the various German states, Lincoln was especially interested in appointing Irish-and German-born generals. On one occasion, while discussing potential military appointments with Secretary Stanton, Lincoln brought up a German immigrant, Brigadier General Alexander Schimmelfennig. Stanton argued that other German-born officers might be more qualified. “No matter about that,” Lincoln replied, “his name will make up for any difference there may be, and I’ll take the risk of his coming out all right.”⁶² Schimmelfennig indeed became a general in the Union army, serving with what might very generously be described as mixed results. He spent most of the Battle of Gettysburg hiding in a pigsty after he became separated from his retreating brigade.⁶³

Some of the other political generals from immigrant groups, such as Major General Peter Joseph Osterhaus, Brigadier General Michael Kelly Lawler, and the Confederate Patrick Cleburne,

⁵⁸ Goss, *The War Within the War Within the Union High Command*, 43.

⁵⁹ Cox, *Military Reminiscences of the Civil War*, 1: 171.

⁶⁰ Bureau of the Census, *Population of the United States in 1860*, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1864), iv, xxix, xxxi.

⁶¹ Harold Holzer, *Brought Forth on This Continent: Abraham Lincoln and American Immigration*, (New York: Penguin Random House, 2024), 185.

⁶² James B. Fry, in Allen Thorndike Rice, ed., *Reminiscences of Abraham Lincoln by Distinguished Men of His Time* (New York: The North American Review, 1888), 392.

⁶³ Holzer, *Brought Forth on This Continent*, 269.

became effective or even excellent battlefield leaders. Still, Schimmelfennig was not the only foreign-born general put or kept in command for reasons other than ability. Franz Sigel's deficiencies as a general have already been discussed. Despite his many failures, however, he remained extremely popular in the German American community, in part because many German-language newspapers downplayed his failures or blamed them on others. "Indeed, he achieved almost the status of cult hero to German immigrants. 'Fight Mit Sigel' became a patriotic rallying cry, and the general inspired poetry, musical tributes like 'General Sigel's Grand March,' and at least two songs entitled 'I'm going to Fight Mit Sigel,'" Holzer writes.⁶⁴

Brigadier Generals Thomas Francis Meagher and James Shields were probably the two most prominent Irish-born figures in the Union army. Shields, like Sigel, left something to be desired as a field commander. He had arrived in the United States in 1826 and eventually settled in Illinois, where he became an ally of Stephen Douglas. Like Pillow, he had also been a political general during the Mexican War. Putting old political rivalries aside for the good of the nation, Lincoln asked Shields to return to uniform. Despite the advantage of past experience, Shields proved to be a disappointment. On June 9, 1862, Stonewall Jackson defeated his division at the Battle of Port Republic. Meagher had participated in the 1848 Young Ireland uprising, after which the British had exiled him to a Tasmanian penal colony. He eventually escaped and made his way to the United States where he continued to advocate for Irish independence. Indeed, according to Work, Meagher backed the Union "chiefly because he believed that only by aiding the United States in this hour of crisis could the Irish hope to win the help of Americans in freeing Ireland".⁶⁵ As commander of the Irish Brigade, Meagher often demonstrated immense personal courage under enemy fire. Unfortunately, while he also displayed flashes of genuine competence, his effectiveness was severely undermined by a serious drinking problem.

Regardless of their performance on the battlefield, foreign-born generals served an essential function. They attracted tens of thousands of soldiers by serving as symbols and in some cases by directly participating in recruiting drives. This was especially true on the Union side. According to Varon, "An estimated 25 percent of Union soldiers were immigrants, mostly German and Irish (more than 200,000 German-born and 150,000 Irish-born men wore the Union blue), and another 18 percent of the soldiery had at least one foreign-born parent. . . ." ⁶⁶ Without these soldiers, the United States would likely have perished. Many of these men fought because people such as Sigel, Schimmelfennig, Osterhaus, Lawler, Shields, Meagher, and German born Major General Carl Schurz convinced them that they had a stake in the Union's war effort.

Convincing people that they had a stake in the Union war effort, however, was about more than recruiting. As historian T. Harry Williams points out, understanding the necessity of "Creating and maintaining national unity," Lincoln "used the military patronage to unite discordant

⁶⁴ Ibid., 189.

⁶⁵ Work, *Political Generals*, 23.

⁶⁶ Varon, *Armies of Deliverance*, 273.

groups in support of the war and to keep down divisions in the North”.⁶⁷ The importance of keeping down divisions and maintaining unity in the North cannot be overstated. Because the United States did ultimately triumph, many assume that it started the war with an overwhelming advantage due to its larger industrial base and population. To win, however, it had to invade, capture, and occupy almost 800,000 square miles of territory, much of it covered in difficult to navigate terrain well suited for defensive warfare. In addition, Civil War era weapons technology gave defenders a distinct advantage. Military experts believed attackers needed to outnumber defenders by a three-to-one ratio to truly ensure victory. Union armies rarely if ever enjoyed those odds, at least until the final months of the war. Perhaps most importantly, the Confederates did not need to destroy the North’s ability to make war in order to win. They merely had to hold out long enough and make the war costly enough for war weariness to set in the North. In other words, the Confederates could simply win by not losing while the Union could only win by winning. Winning would require unity. Lincoln recognized that trying to wage a massive war with only the support of his own Republican Party would inevitably end in defeat. He avoided this, Catton writes, “in the traditional American way—the way of ward and courthouse politics. He gave to various important people, including the leaders of the opposition, a piece of the job.”⁶⁸ In other words, appointing War Democrats such as Butler, Sickles, Logan, and McClelland to military commands kept them and their supporters invested in the Union cause.

War Democrats in uniform not only served as symbols; in many cases they directly aided Lincoln’s efforts to maintain unity. At times, they were granted leave so they could rally support for the war effort and campaign on behalf of pro-war candidates. Just as on the battlefield, John A. Logan proved particularly effective. Many War Democrats, despite their support for the war effort, remained ambivalent about Lincoln’s policies. Logan, however, became a powerful voice in support of not only the war effort, but also of emancipation, the use of Black soldier, and Lincoln himself. While on leave in the autumn of 1864, he crisscrossed southern Illinois, campaigning for Republican candidates. Thanks in no small part to his efforts, the once solidly Democratic region voted narrowly for Lincoln and other Republicans that November. After the election, the *New York Times* crowed, “The solid Democratic column has been broken into by a grand flank movement under Gen LOGAN, accompanied by an able staff of War Democrats and Republicans.”⁶⁹

Logan’s leftward shift proved permanent. After the war, he became a Republican and supported efforts to secure equal rights for African Americans during Reconstruction. He came to believe that “the signers of Independence Hall, when declaring all men to be free and equal, had made a fatal omission. They had not inserted after the word ‘men’ the words ‘regardless of color or condition.’ In declaring for ‘free men,’ they had in view *white* men only. The movement for

⁶⁷Williams, *Lincoln and His Generals*, 10.

⁶⁸ Catton, “Lincoln’s Mastery in the Use of Volunteer Soldiers and Political Generals,” in *Lincoln Herald*. 57, No. 3, (Fall 1955), 10.

⁶⁹ Work, 223; *New York Times*, November 20, 1864.

freedom, then, was *partial*.”⁷⁰ Ben Butler’s ideological shift was even greater. Not only was he a Democrat when the war started, in 1860 he had supported Jefferson Davis for the Democratic nomination. After the war, however, he became a leader of the left wing of the Republican Party and a dedicated advocate for civil rights. Indeed, few late nineteenth century white politicians surpassed his dedication to racial justice. Butler’s leftward shift began in May 1861, when three enslaved people who had been forced to construct Confederate fortifications escaped and sought refuge with Union forces at Fortress Monroe on the Virginia Peninsula. When a Confederate officer arrived under a flag of truce and demanded that the fugitives be returned, Butler’s response demonstrated why he had been successful as both a lawyer and politician before the war. He argued that under the laws of war an army was entitled to seize enemy property as “contraband of war,” cleverly turning enslaved people’s status as property against enslavers.

Over the next four years, at least 500,000 enslaved men and women claimed their freedom inspired in part by Butler’s contraband policy. Furthermore, many Northerners who much like Butler had not opposed slavery on moral grounds before the war responded enthusiastically to what they saw as an effective way of hurting the rebellion. Lincoln, for his part, seemed to recognize that the general had handed him an argument he could use to sell emancipation to voters outside his antislavery base. He used Butler’s template to build support for a full-scale assault on slavery. In fact, a compelling argument could be made that except for Lincoln, no single Union leader was more instrumental than Butler in slavery’s destruction.

Butler may have received his commission because he was a War Democrat when the war began, but he kept his commission because of his popularity with radical Republicans. He was hardly the only Republican politician placed in military command. While Lincoln made a point of appointing prominent War Democrats, he by no means ignored his own party. Appointing Republicans gave him generals who were more likely to share his antislavery views. It also helped keep the various factions of the party satisfied. Among the many other Republicans who received military commands were Major Generals Nathaniel Banks, John C. Frémont, and Robert Cumming Schenck.⁷¹

In addition to recruiting soldiers for the army and promoting national unity, Union political generals did essential work as military administrators in border states and occupied sections of the South. Schenck, for example, helped jumpstart the recruitment of Black soldiers in Maryland and helped oversee critical elections in 1863 that granted supporters of emancipation a majority in the

⁷⁰ John A. Logan, *The Volunteer Soldier of America; With Memoirs of the Author and Military Reminiscences from General Logan’s Private Journal*, (Chicago, IL: R. S. Peale & Company, 1887), 85.

⁷¹ A case might be made that Major General Frémont made an important, albeit inadvertent, contribution to the antislavery cause by offering Lincoln a radical foil. In August 1861, he tried to emancipate enslaved people in Missouri without consulting the President. The edict, while well intentioned, was rash and ill-timed. It threatened to upend the work done to prevent critical border states from joining the rebellion. When Lincoln learned of the order, he quickly modified it to bring it into accord with the emancipation policies contained in the relatively cautious First Confiscation Act. Lincoln’s reaction bolstered his reputation for moderation. That reputation helped him convince War Democrats and other conservative Unionists to accept his own emancipation policies in the coming months.

state legislature.⁷² In Louisiana, Banks worked closely with Lincoln to promote abolition and, more secretly, the cause of Black suffrage.⁷³ As Lincoln recognized, this was complex work and people with political backgrounds were often better suited to it than West Pointers.

There were few opportunities for Confederate generals to serve in equivalent roles. Even if those opportunities had existed, it is possible—even likely—that Jefferson Davis would have proven less capable than Lincoln when it came to taking advantage of generals with political backgrounds. Lincoln certainly used political generals more effectively in other areas, such as promoting internal unity. This, of course, was due in part to the vast difference in political skill between the two leaders. Lincoln was one of history’s most masterful politicians. Davis was not. In addition, Lincoln and Davis operated in notably different political structures. Politics in the loyal portion of the United States was shaped by continuing competition between two organized political parties. In the Confederacy, however, organized political parties did not exist at all. Despite Confederate assumptions, this was actually a weakness. As McPherson writes, “In the North the two-party system disciplined and channeled political activity.” In the South, on the other hand, “Davis could not invoke party loyalty and patronage” to build support for “his policies, as Lincoln could. Opposition to the Davis administration became personal or factional and therefore difficult to deal with.”⁷⁴ When Lincoln appointed a Democrat, other Democrats were pleased. Davis’s opponents, however, were not bound together by party ties. Thus, appointing one of those opponents was far less likely to please others. Davis’s own personality only compounded the problem. In contrast to Lincoln, who was almost preternaturally thick-skinned and magnanimous, Davis reacted poorly to criticism and tended to hold grudges. Not surprisingly, Lincoln was far more comfortable granting commissions to members of the opposition and to critics within his own party, which in turn, allowed the United States to benefit from political generals to a greater extent than the so-called Confederacy.

In *The Volunteer Soldier of America*, published in 1887, John Logan claimed that the history of the Civil War “abounds with names of brilliant military men who up to the time of entering the service had received no military education, and who had enjoyed no military experience whatever”.⁷⁵ He overstated his case. Of the many political generals who served on either side, arguably only Logan himself proved worthy of being described as brilliant. Logan was closer to the truth, however, than Halleck was when he argued that the use of political generals was “little better than murder...”.⁷⁶ Political generals rendered valuable service. If they proved inconsistent on the battlefield, so too did many West Pointers. Beyond the battlefield, they

⁷² Peter Sicher, “Friction and Abrasion: The Recruitment of Slaves in Maryland,” MA Thesis, University of Virginia, 2015, doi.org/10.18130/V34377.

⁷³ LaWanda Cox, *Lincoln and Black Freedom: A Study in Presidential Leadership* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1981).

⁷⁴ McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 690.

⁷⁵ John A. Logan, *The Volunteer Soldier of America*, 570.

⁷⁶ Major General Henry W. Halleck to Major General William T. Sherman, April 29, 1864, in *O.R.*, I, 34, Pt. 3, 332-3.

successfully took on roles many West Pointers were incapable of even comprehending. This was especially true on the side of the United States. Indeed, it is safe to state that political generals deserve a not insignificant share of credit for Union victory.
