

ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

Political Generals in the Civil War

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Resources

If you can read only one book

Author	<i>Title</i> . City: Publisher, Year.
Work, David	<i>Lincoln's Political Generals</i> . Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2009.

Books and Articles

Author	<i>Title</i> . City: Publisher, Year. "Title," in <i>Journal</i> ##, no. # (Date): #.
Catton, Bruce	<i>Grant Moves South</i> . Boston, MA: Little Brown and Company, 1960.
_____.	<i>Grant Takes Command</i> . Boston, MA: Little Brown and Company, 1969.
_____.	"Lincoln's Mastery in the Use of Volunteer Soldiers and Political Generals," in <i>Lincoln Herald</i> , 57, no. 3, (Fall 1955).
Clausewitz, Carl von, Michael Howard and Peter Paret, trans.	<i>On War</i> , Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984.
Goss, Thomas J.	<i>The War Within the Union High Command: Politics and Generalship during the Civil War</i> . Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2003.
Grant, Ulysses S.	<i>Personal Memoirs of U. S. Grant</i> . New York: Charles L. Webster & Company, 1885.
Holzer, Harold	<i>Brought Forth on This Continent: Abraham Lincoln and American Immigration</i> . New York: Penguin Random House, 2024.

Jones, James Pickett	<i>“Black Jack”</i> : John A. Logan and Southern Illinois in the Civil War Era. Carbondale: Southern Illinois Press, 1967.
Logan, John A.	<i>The Volunteer Soldier of America; With Memoirs of the Author and Military Reminiscences from General Logan’s Private Journal</i> . Chicago, IL: R. S. Peale & Company, 1887.
McPherson, James M.	<i>Tried By War: Abraham Lincoln as Commander in Chief</i> . New York: Penguin Press, 2008.
_____.	<i>Embattled Rebel: Jefferson Davis as Commander in Chief</i> . New York: Penguin Press, 2014.
Sears, Stephen W.	<i>Controversies & Commanders: Dispatches from the Army of the Potomac</i> . Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1999.
Simpson, Brooks D.	“Lincoln and His Political Generals,” in <i>Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association</i> , 21, no. 1, (Winter 2000).
Williams, T. Harry	<i>Lincoln and His Generals</i> . New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1952.
Woodworth, Steven E.	<i>Jefferson Davis and His Generals: The Failure of Confederate Command in the West</i> . Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1990.

Organizations

Web Resources

Other Sources

Scholars

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Topic Précis

Civil War political generals illustrate the applicability of von Clausewitz's description of war as a continuation of political intercourse with the addition of other means. Political generals were politicians appointed to military commands without prior military experience or training who had the ability to rally important partisan geographic and ethnic constituencies to the cause. During the war, large numbers of political generals served on both sides. They commanded brigades, divisions, corps, and occasionally even armies and military departments. This was partly out of necessity as there were just over 2,000 West Point graduates at the start of the war and even including graduates of the ten private military academies existing then, there were simply not enough militarily trained officers to command the number of troops involved in the war. And politicians did have experience communicating, organizing and directing large numbers of people. Political generals did not enjoy a good reputation among professional soldiers, and the lack of respect was mutual. Modern students of the war have tended to regard political generals negatively and several disastrous battlefield performances show the criticisms to be somewhat merited.

In 1864 three Union political generals directed campaigns intended to support Grant's campaign against Lee in Northern Virginia. General Benjamin Butler, a prominent War Democrat led Union forces to defeat in 1861 at the Battle of Big Bethel and again in 1864 in the Bermuda Hundred Campaign. General Franz Sigel also led his forces to a disastrous defeat at the 1861 Battle of Wilson's Creek and was beaten again at the Battle of New Market in 1864 by Confederate political general John C. Breckenridge, who was also responsible for several disasters during the war. General Nathaniel P. Banks led his forces to defeat in the 1864 Red River Campaign having previously been defeated in 1862 by Jackson at the First Battle of Winchester. A last example is Union political general Daniel Sickles who commanded Third Corps at Gettysburg. His decision to reposition his Corps without permission or reporting the change led to the near defeat of the Union left on the second day of the battle.

The Confederates enjoyed their own share of disasters at the hands of political generals. Political generals John Floyd and Gideon Pillow helped cause the loss of Fort Donelson in 1862 through disastrous decisions. This defeat compromised the entire Confederate defensive line in the West leading to the loss of Kentucky and most of Tennessee.

In contrast John A. Logan was a Union political general who excelled at every level of command. Starting out by successfully recruiting for the Union, at Fort Donelson leading his regiment he performed so well that Grant promoted him to brigadier general. He performed effectively in the Vicksburg Campaign. In the spring of 1864 at the Battle of Atlanta he commanded the 14th Corps of the Army of the Tennessee and assumed command of the whole army when its commander James McPherson was killed. Though he probably deserved permanent command a West Point graduate Oliver O. Howard received the appointment.

And other political generals who had experienced failure also enjoyed successes, notably Butler during the Siege of Petersburg in 1864 and Sigel the Battle of Pea Ridge in 1862 and Lew Wallace, failing at the Battle of Shiloh in 1862 but saving the day at the Battle of

Monocacy in 1864. On the Confederate side political generals Sterling Price and John C. Breckinridge also ended the war with a mixed record. These political generals probably deserve to be remembered as inconsistent rather than incompetent.

While political generals' performance on the battlefield varied quite widely, so did the performance of West Pointers. 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. Political generals such as McClernand 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. Some of the popular leaders who received general's commissions were prominent figures in various immigrant communities. Irish immigrants were motivated and recruited by Confederate general Patrick Cleburne and Union generals Thomas Meagher and James Shields. And German immigrants were similarly influenced by political generals Alexander Schimmelfennig and particularly by Carl Schurz. More than just recruiting, particularly in the North, political generals kept opposition leaders among War Democrats and immigrant communities invested in the Union cause. After the war prominent political generals like John Logan, Nathaniel Banks and Benjamin Butler played important roles in emancipation and Reconstruction.

Of the many political generals who served on either side only John A. Logan deserves to be described as brilliant. Political generals rendered valuable service. If they proved inconsistent on the battlefield, so too did many West Pointers. Beyond the battlefield, they successfully took on roles many West Pointers were incapable of even comprehending. This was especially true of the Union. Indeed, it is safe to state that political generals deserve a not insignificant share of credit for Union victory.
