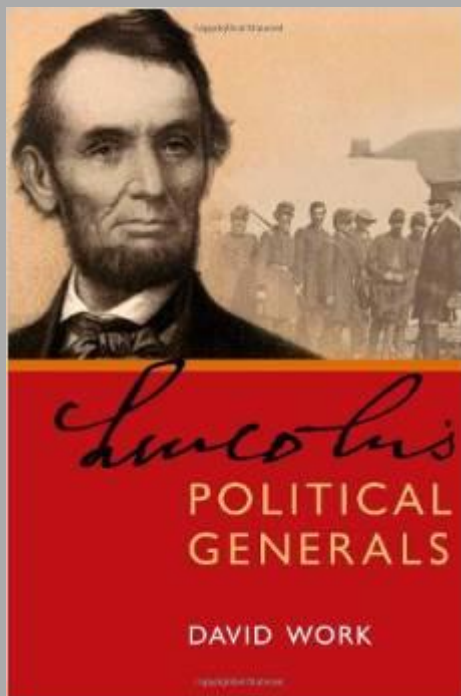


Book Review

Lincoln's Political Generals

By: David Work

University of Illinois Press (2009)



Soon after the onset of the Civil War it became apparent that armies with unprecedented sizes would be required to combat the rebellion. This in turn created a multitude of demands, including logistics, but more importantly the armies needed dozens if not hundreds more generals to command this vast increase of new forces.

Against this pressing need for more generals, and lots of them, at the beginning of the war there were only five Union generals, the youngest being fifty three years old. Two of those five resigned to join the Confederacy leaving only three septuagenarians to lead Lincoln's armies. Immediately before the outbreak of hostilities there were 1,105 officers in the Regular Army but almost 300 resigned to take Confederate commissions or to simply not take part in the war. At that time there were 900 West Point graduates in civilian life but only 114 rejoined the Federal army. In short, numbers dictated that civilians without significant military experience or training would have to be appointed or selected to fill most of the newly created positions; in 1861 alone, Lincoln appointed no fewer than forty-four political generals, sixteen of whom had no prior military experience.

There was no exact definition of "political generals" but generally it meant those civilians without significant military experience or training whose primary qualifications were based upon political factors. Not only were large numbers of generals needed to command at various levels but Lincoln deemed it was useful,

if not necessary, to gain favor with a variety of political factions, especially Democrats, but also with ethnic groups such as the German and Irish immigrants.

For his book Work has chosen sixteen such generals representing a cross-section of those appointed because of their political characteristics. Most of the names are familiar to Civil War readers but a couple of the sweet sixteen had obscure careers in the Civil War, if only because they soon resigned their commissions. Work has chosen a balance of generals, some who were appointed to general rank at the very beginning while others were promoted from lower initial ranks. Some were more successful than others although to be fair as a whole they achieved little military success, especially when operating independently of Regular Army officers.

Work provides antebellum backgrounds for each of his selected sixteen before following them as they advance, or fail, throughout the war. He assesses the strengths and weaknesses of each, giving praise when they succeed but usually providing only modulated criticism when they failed. He constantly notes that usually these political generals found most of their successes when they were under the command of Regular Army officers and conversely encountered most of their difficulties when acting independently. John Logan is credited as being the most successful of these political generals, almost rising to the rank of army commander before the end of the war. Work does not include Jacob D. Cox, another highly successful political general, whose career is later reviewed by Eugene D. Schmiel in *Citizen-General* Ohio University Press (2014).

Work also notes important contributions made by political general in non-military areas such as administrative posts, political functions, and the assistance given to freed Blacks as they try to transition into their new social, political and economic circumstances. In these areas the political generals usually fared better although of course not without occasional difficulties, some of which could be embarrassing to the President.

Work concludes that most of the political generals provided capable and necessary service that more than justified Lincoln's use of these citizen soldiers. His well-written book is extremely important to better understand the totality of

the war, including the daunting challenges of mobilizing a massive number of civilians into the army while holding divergent political elements under a common umbrella.