

YEAR-END SUMMARY REPORT

TITLE: "THE OLD ARMY IN WAR AND PEACE: WEST POINTERS AND THE CIVIL WAR ERA, 1814-1865"

INVESTIGATOR: Asst. Prof. Wayne Hsieh, History

BACKGROUND:

Wars do not fight themselves. Soldiers require some kind of machinery not only to feed, clothe, and equip themselves in the field, but also to go about the business of killing under conditions of extraordinary confusion and stress. Military organizations make all these tasks possible by using methods that are neither obvious nor easy to learn. Before 1861, a political culture that did its best to obscure questions of military policy with paeans to the citizen-soldier militia had allowed, even compelled, a small cadre of regular army officers to monopolize military competence in the United States. When a sectional war broke out, the raw and disorganized state of both adversaries' volunteer military forces dictated that they both draw generals and drillmasters from the old army's leadership cadre. These West Pointers then proceeded to channel the course and conduct of the Civil War through the military machinery that they had created, maintained, and operated in the old army, and which they bequeathed to both contending citizen-soldier hosts.¹ This dissertation focuses on the internal military logic of an antebellum past that both imprisoned and empowered Civil War field commanders.

For all the high-quality scholarship that historians and commentators have lavished upon the American Civil War, the origins and workings of the old army's military machinery remain imperfectly understood. Many historians have either ignored the mundane details of how Civil War armies went about their bloody business or assumed that the practical necessities of military organization always gave way to grander historical forces rooted in

¹Most regular army officers had graduated from the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York, which was the United States Army's most important institution during the antebellum period. About 75 percent of regular army officers in 1860 were West Point graduates. See James L. Morrison, *"the Best School in the World": West Point, the Pre-Civil War Years, 1833-1866* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1986), 15.

The term "regular army" refers to the small professional military the United States maintained in peacetime during the nineteenth century. For the antebellum period, I use the term interchangeably with the phrase "old army," which is far more elastic and which army officers and historians have used in varying manners. One historian, Edward M. Coffman, has sagely remarked that "the Old Army is the army that existed before the last war." See Coffman, Edward M. Coffman, *The Old Army: A Portrait of the American Army in Peacetime, 1784-1898* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), vii. For my own purposes, old army refers to the regular army that existed from the end of the War of 1812 in 1814 to the outbreak of the American Civil War.

To use one convenient index of the old army's importance to the management of Civil War armies, consider these figures: former regular army officers comprised 43.9 percent of general officers of all grades in the Union army and 36.7 percent of Confederate generals. See William B. Skelton, *An American Profession of Arms: The Army Officer Corps, 1784-1861* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1992), 361, 446n.4.

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ideology, culture, social organization, or some other external non-military category. Non-military historians, especially those working within the confines of professional academic history, tend to focus on topics such as the meaning and realities of emancipation, the significance of class conflict in both sections, the nature of gender roles during the war, and other problems characteristic of mid-nineteenth-century American life. Despite the merits of these fields of study, it is important to remember that Abraham Lincoln referred for good reason to "the progress of our arms, upon which all else chiefly depends" in his second inaugural address. Events on the battlefield affected every sphere of life in both contending sections during the Civil War, and those events frequently obeyed military necessities indifferent to the needs and wants of non-military forces.² The overwhelming prominence of West Pointers during the Civil War, a group frequently ignored and sometimes even reviled by a political culture deeply suspicious of professional soldiers, showed how resistant war could be to external pressures.

The military methods of the great sectional struggle grew out of long-standing roots in both American and European military practice, stretching back as far as the colonial period, but most especially to the creation of a professional regular army in the United States after the War of 1812. These methods manifested themselves concretely in drill manuals, tactical review boards, ordnance department treatises on military equipment, and American officers' official missions to Europe. During the Civil War proper, the empirical details of actual battles, chronicled so well by tactical historians, provide a venue in which the influence of these military precedents played out in a discrete set of historical circumstances.³

Although any study that devotes more than half its length to pre-Civil War material must follow the usual academic practice of focusing on context as opposed to tactical detail, it can and should avoid academic Civil War military history's own particular problems with excessive abstraction. Much of this history uses intellectual categories that become

²For the profound importance of basic close-order drill and army administration, see Richard M. McMurry, *Two Great Rebel Armies: An Essay in Confederate Military History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 92-93, 104-5. On academic history's difficult relationship with military questions concerning the American Civil War, see Gabor S. Boritt, *Why the Confederacy Lost* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 6. On the relationship between military and academic history writ large, see John A. Lynn, "The Embattled Future of Academic Military History," *The Journal of Military History* 61, no. 4 (1997). For an excellent summary of Civil War historiography on both military and non-military topics, see James M. McPherson and William J. Cooper, *Writing the Civil War: The Quest to Understand* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1998). For Lincoln's quotation, see *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Roy P. Basler, 9 vols. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press), 8:332, henceforth cited as *CWAL*. On the important links between battlefield and homefront, see Gary W. Gallagher, *The Confederate War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 12.

³For judicious comments on the genre of Civil War tactical history, see Mark Grimsley, "Review Essay: The Continuing Battle of Gettysburg," *Civil War History* 49, no. 2 (2003): 185. Grimsley defines "pure" battle history" (what I term tactical history) as "history in which the command, operational, and tactical dimensions are strongly foregrounded and the political, social, and culture dimensions are dealt with in passing or avoided altogether. Pure battle history has its place—and contrary to what some may believe, it is difficult to do well—but like any other kind of history it needs to fit into a larger context and extend a larger dialogue." I distinguish what I call tactical history from the "history of tactics," which deals with the general military methods soldiers use on the battlefield.

unmoored from the war and concern themselves too closely with important but distinctly separate historical issues such as the quality of military leadership on the western front during the First World War or the origins of strategic air bombing during the Second World War. One historian, Mark Grimsley, may be right to describe pure battle history as "the blood-and-guts equivalent of a Harlequin romance novel," but tactical history does at least benefit from an empirical base lacking in many academic discussions of the war's military significance.⁴

All schools of scholarship have their strengths and weaknesses, but none has examined the war as a practical problem of military management faced on a daily basis by actual soldiers and officers. Neither a somewhat-anachronistic concern with the Civil War's "modernity" nor a diffuse preoccupation with its ever-changing and contested representation fully captures the importance and difficulty of simply feeding an army of tens of thousands in the field, of training soldiers to move from one point to another under conditions of extreme stress, or taking a position by force of arms. Ideology will not by itself feed and equip an army in the field; cultural conventions frequently disintegrate in the stress of battle; black powder can foul the familiarities of peace-time social organization as badly as it does a musket barrel. For all the flaws in the old army's training and institutional structure and the far from uniformly successful generalship of West Point-trained generals, regular army men possessed knowledge and skills that neither the Union nor the Confederacy could do without. Before the raw citizen-soldier armies of the Union and Confederacy learned their trade the hard way under the tutelage of a small core of old army professionals, West Pointers and their students at a few antebellum military colleges composed the only coherent groups of people who knew how to fight the war of nation-state armies that both Union and Confederate war aims demanded.⁵

⁴Ibid., 187.

⁵What I have termed the "modernization school" of Civil War military history is the most influential strain of work among academic military historians of the war. Much of the modernization school's work is linked to but somewhat separate from, the "new military history," which dominated academic military for the last generation but can no longer truly be described as "new." For an early critique of the new military history, see Dennis E. Showalter, "A Modest Plea for Drums and Trumpets," *Military Affairs* 39, no. 2 (1975).

The most important early members of the modernization school are Allan Nevins and Bruce Catton. See for example Bruce Catton, *The Army of the Potomac: Glory Road* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1952), 29, 235-42; Allan Nevins, *The War for the Union*, 4 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1959-1971). Two of Nevins' subtitles in his multi-volume history are especially revealing, "The Improvised War, 1861-1862," and "The Organized War, 1863-1864." In another essay, Catton described Grant as "the modern man emerging; beyond him, ready to come on the stage, was the great age of steel and machinery . . . Lee might have ridden down from the old age of chivalry, lance in hand, silken banner fluttering over his head. Each man was the perfect champion of his cause, drawing both his strengths and his weaknesses from the people he led." Bruce Catton, "Grant and Lee: A Study in Contrasts," in *The American Story: The Age of Exploration to the Age of the Atom*, ed. Earl Schenck Miers (n.p.: Broadcast Music, 1956), 204. For a contrasting view, see Gary W. Gallagher, "An Old-Fashioned Soldier in a Modern War?: Lee's Confederate Generalship," in *Lee and His Army in Confederate History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 151-90.

On the whole issue of total war, see Stig Förster and Jörg Nagler, eds., *On the Road to Total War: The American Civil War and the German Wars of Unification, 1861-1871* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). Recent work on the social history of Civil War soldiers also fits into the mold of

Unorganized citizen-soldiers and militia could and did serve as guerrillas during the Civil War, but both the Confederacy and the Union wanted to exercise a degree of authority over the disputed territory in question far beyond the uncertain control of dispersed guerrillas. The Confederate government had to raise large standing armies capable of fighting and defeating similar Union armies, both as a goal in and of itself and for the purpose of gaining European recognition of the Confederacy as a legitimate nation-state. Irregulars can harass and deny an enemy army total control over a territory, but they cannot themselves control the territory with any degree of permanence. Guerrillas must fade away and evade contact or be destroyed.⁶

For all the old army's shortcomings and foibles, neither the United States nor the Confederacy could muster plausible alternatives to professional military expertise. The public conversation in both nations over military affairs tended to be marked by a romantic conception of war: charges on horse and foot, cold steel flashing right-and-left, silken banners waving high, and valor incarnate. Because these ideas and conceptions were as vague as they were formulaic, debates over military policy and strategy tended to evolve into proxy-discussions of political and ideological preference. For example, in the public view, the merits of the Peninsula as a line of operations against Richmond depended less on its military merits—which hardly anyone outside of the responsible military and War Department staffs understood—than on one's attitude toward the conservative Democratic politics of Maj. Gen. George B. McClellan.⁷

The near-total absence of pre-existing military expertise among the Union and Confederate publics also gave basic questions of military competence an especially marked importance during the Civil War. If we use the same European standards that old army officers recognized as a benchmark, both contending nation-states struggled to bring their armies up to even the most basic levels of competence. The gradual and

the new military history. For an excellent overview of the state of the art in Civil War army social history by one of its best practitioners, see Reid Mitchell, "Not the General but the Soldier': The Study of Civil War Soldiers," in *Writing the Civil War: The Quest to Understand*, ed. James M. McPherson and William J. Cooper (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1998).

The most important recent work on Civil War "memory" is David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, Belknap Press, 2001). Most significantly, Blight's magisterial study won a whole plethora of professional prizes, signaling the current (i.e. early twenty-first century) appeal of memory studies among academic historians who study the Civil War.

⁶For the decidedly undesirable consequences of guerilla war, see Michael Fellman, *Inside War: The Guerrilla Conflict in Missouri During the American Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989). I follow the general outlines of Gallagher's concise treatment of the guerilla option in Gallagher, *The Confederate War*, 123-27, 40-44. On the issue of international recognition, many Confederate political leaders knew how important French assistance was to successful outcome of the American Revolution and had high hopes for acquiring foreign aid from Great Britain and France.

⁷On the unrealistic and ill-informed expectations of the northern public during the Peninsula campaign, see Eric T. Dean, "'We Live under a Government of Men and Morning Newspapers': Image, Expectation, and the Peninsula Campaign of 1862," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 103, no. 1 (1995): 5-28. It must be admitted that professionals themselves could sharply differ over the military merits of individual operations, but these debates rested on premises far removed from civilian discussions of military questions.

halting process by which both armies learned their business deserves far more scholarly attention than abstract questions of strategy. The raw nature of citizen-soldier armies did not allow either combatant to take for granted such basic issues as minor tactics and rudimentary army administration.

The almost blank slate the citizen soldier armies presented, in military terms, to their old army drillmasters also gave West Point-trained regulars an importance incommensurate with their peacetime social station. The minor tactics, basic administrative machinery, and leadership corps of the old army became in effect the models for both Union and Confederate forces. The Civil War armies thus became subject to the institutional and historical context of the old army's development during the antebellum period. In sum, the strengths and weaknesses of the old army became in many ways the strengths and weaknesses of both the Union and Confederate armies. The regular army's institutions, specifically designed to pacify Indians and fight an occasional small-scale war against a nation-state army trained along European lines, proved in many ways a poor fit for the vast forces that contended on a Civil War battlefield, but they were the only model Americans had.

The tremendous institutional importance of the antebellum regular army thus allots five of the nine chapters of my proposed manuscript to events between the end of the War of 1812 in 1814 to the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861.

OBJECTIVE:

Complete the book manuscript, *The Old Army in War and Peace*, detailed in the "BACKGROUND" section above.

METHOD AND RESULTS:

This project only requires standard methods of historical analysis and research in print and manuscript sources. I acquired training in all these methods during my graduate education, and I continue to use these methods in the course of my teaching and research during the academic year here at the Naval Academy.

Also see the information given in the "BACKGROUND" section.

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"Military Knowledge and Professionalism at West Point Before the Civil War," Society of Military Historians Annual Meeting (Frederick, MD), 21 April 2007.

"The Answer He Was Born to Make?" [Lecture on Robert E. Lee's decision to secede], Symposium: The Answers They Were Born to Make: Choosing Sides in the Civil

War, Sponsored by the Museum of the Confederacy and the Library of Virginia
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“What Civil War Military History Ought to Be,” Southern Historical Association
Meeting (Birmingham, AL), 17 November 2006.

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