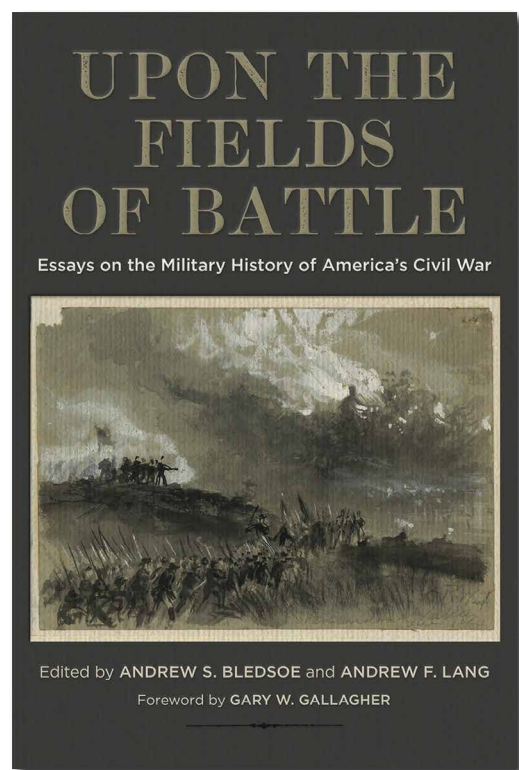


# REVIEW ESSAY

## Upon the Fields of Battle

### Essays on the Military History of America's Civil War



Edited by Andrew S. Bledsoe and Andrew F. Lang

Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, Louisiana, 2018, 320 pages

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Military history occupies an increasingly difficult position, caught between academic historians who see little value for the field, (as evidenced by declining numbers of tenure-track positions for faculty with training and expertise in military history coupled with the near-ubiquitous outsourcing of courses in U.S. military history that used to be taught by highly experienced faculty in history departments but are now left to less-qualified cadres in ROTC detachments), and military professionals concerned by the diminishing stature of operational, or “traditional” military history in a field that now considers any topic with a military focus to be military history. Attempting to thread this needle are Civil War historians Andrew Bledsoe and Andrew Lang, who have assembled a fine book that appears

well-positioned to bridge this divide. A foreword by Gary Gallagher, a staunch defender of the war’s military history who reminds readers that “the Civil War was preeminently a military event,” and a brilliant essay by Earl Hess who argues for the continuing importance and relevance of operational history, is worth the purchase price.<sup>1</sup>

But this book is actually aimed at demonstrating the incredible richness and diversity of the “new” military history for fellow academics who might not appreciate the field’s value and to also “encourage our colleagues to don the uniform of a military historian.”<sup>2</sup> Altogether, it makes a fair sally upon the entrenched resistance to military history within the academy but, like many assaults during the war itself, it may be more of a “forlorn hope” in terms of rehabilitating the field in the eyes of

those who continue to dismiss its relevance. Apparently frustrated with the field's dilution and diminishing stature within the academy, professional military colleges are already establishing their own doctoral programs, likely to the detriment of both academic and professional institutions and the larger society they both serve. Thus, works such as *Upon the Fields of Battle* that attempt to bridge this gap and "save" military history within the academy have a much greater significance than might otherwise be apparent.

After Gallagher's framing analysis, built upon his and coauthor Kathryn Shively Meier's 2014 essay, "Coming to Terms with Civil War Military History," the book is divided into three sections.<sup>3</sup> Starting with "Considerations," it includes the editors' introduction and Hess's call to "reintegrate traditional military history in its rightful professional place," especially the observation that, despite the passage of 150 years, we still haven't resolved all of the important questions about the war itself, as his recent work on the impact of the rifled musket attests.<sup>4</sup> The clearest parallel to Hess's significant revision of our understanding of the war comes at the beginning of the next section, aptly titled, "The Contested Battlefield." In his essay, drawn from his larger forthcoming work on the impact of weather on the war, Ken Noe offers a reappraisal of George McClellan's performance during the Peninsula Campaign, arguing that unprecedented and unconquerable wet weather was as responsible for the general's "slowness" as any inherent personal character traits. If Noe's well-supported analysis is accepted, then McClellan may be the next general to have his professional reputation reevaluated, as has happened with Ulysses S. Grant, Robert E. Lee, and, most recently, Braxton Bragg.<sup>5</sup> Noe observes that "integrating environmental history into the sectional conflict demands interdisciplinary and intradisciplinary conversations with meteorologists, soil engineers, and other scientists, as well as other historians. Yet the effort will be worthwhile if it helps us better understand what really happened on those bloody—and often muddy—hallowed grounds."<sup>6</sup>

The next essay in the section demonstrates that Noe's talents extend from researching and writing to mentoring and training graduate students. Jennifer Murray, his former advisee and now professor at Oklahoma State University, offers an assessment of a

Civil War battle that never was, when George Meade failed to interdict Lee's retreat from Gettysburg at Williamsport, Maryland, drawing from her work on a forthcoming biography of Meade. Murray argues that Meade's tardy pursuit fits neatly with other examples of Civil War commanders failing to achieve a decisive victory on the battlefield, but the discussion omits consideration of the armies' medical establishments that were still overwhelmed with treating the unprecedented carnage inflicted over three days at Gettysburg and were therefore unable to respond immediately to another clash, which must have weighed on the minds of both the soldiers and their commanders. Coeditor Bledsoe retains the focus on battlefield events and interpretations with an analysis of Bragg's inability to decisively parry William Rosecrans's thrusts before the Battle of Chickamauga; and how such episodes provide clear learning opportunities for those studying and practicing for the responsibilities of command, especially the vital task of issuing clear and concise orders, including the "five-paragraph order," which is still taught in the professional military colleges.<sup>7</sup> John Hennessy's account of the incredible destruction in the town of Fredericksburg during the battle in December 1862 presaged a shift in strategy identified with Mark Grimsley's description of "hard war" that increasingly affected the Confederate home front; and Brian McKnight continues this expanding definition of "battlefield" by demonstrating that the massive guerrilla warfare unleashed by the opening of formal hostilities brought the war into communities across the country, where animosities lingered long afterward, and continues work by Dan Sutherland and others on the guerrilla war's significance for understanding the larger Civil War.<sup>8</sup>

The third section of the book, "The Soldiers' War," moves off the battlefield and places the soldiers who actually fought the war at the center of the analysis, building on important work done by social historians in the past half-century. Coeditor Lang begins with a chapter building upon his prize-winning work *In the Wake of War*, focusing on military occupation and emancipation, or the "Phase IV" aspects of the conflict often missing from accounts of the Civil War. Lang demonstrates clearly that efforts to remake southern society collided with entrenched ideas about race that made lasting social change difficult, limiting an

inadequately resourced Army's ability to permanently influence events.<sup>9</sup> Lang helpfully points out that Gen. Winfield Scott believed it would take three hundred thousand soldiers to garrison the south, a prediction that calls to mind Gen. Eric Shinseki's ignored predictions about the force necessary to stabilize Iraq.<sup>10</sup> Kevin Levin highlights the high frequency of executions within Confederate military formations, undercutting the "Lost Cause" myth of massive and sustained support for the insurrectionist government and revealing an unacknowledged acceptance of increasing state power on the part of allegedly independent-minded Confederates.

Keith Altavilla extends the analysis of dissent in the ranks with an examination of soldiers' support for George McClellan's 1864 presidential campaign, highlighting episodes of suppression of antiwar sentiment but also demonstrating that these had little impact on Abraham Lincoln's eventual electoral landslide. This highlights that the 1864 election was really a referendum between McClellan and Andrew Johnson, as Lincoln fulfilled barely a month of his second term before his assassination, and one wonders if McClellan would have been better able to administer the postwar period across the South, assuming that his election would not have caused the war effort to collapse altogether.<sup>11</sup> Continuing with counterfactuals, Robert Glaze explores how Confederates used the premature death of Gen. Albert Sidney Johnston at Shiloh to explain their eventual defeat, arguing that, had the general lived, he somehow could have overcome the immense logistical and personnel difficulties that plagued the western theater during the war, making him an icon of postwar memory and commemoration.

Keeping the focus on the war's after effects, Brian Matthew Jordan's essay on the 107th Ohio, which suffered tremendous losses at both Chancellorsville and Gettysburg, carries forward Lesley Gordon's path-breaking analysis on "broken regiments," highlighting the immense physical costs of the war and the long history of the Nation's failure to adequately care for its wounded veterans.<sup>12</sup> It also gives support to the alleged "dark turn" in Civil War historiography that privileges accounts of the war's incredible destruction rather than a valorous contest for the Union and liberty, though it does indicate a resurgence in unit

history that has never fallen out of favor with official historians.<sup>13</sup> Accounts such as Jordan's have great value, not just for highlighting the incredible futility and destructiveness of warfare but for reminding those who would embark on this course of the dire consequences of their actions.

Bledsoe and Lang remind the reader that, "War was not an arbitrary vacuum that consumed its participants in unrestrained violence, yielding worthless results and pointless armistices."<sup>14</sup> Had secessionists fully understood the implications of their actions in the winter of 1860–1861, it is possible that cooler heads would have prevailed and spared the Nation the bloodletting of the next four years, but it is worth recalling that, as horrific as the mangled bodies of the soldiers of the 107th were, allowing disunionists, slaveholders, and terrorists to chart the Nation's course would have been a fate far worse.

Thus, military historians still have much to offer the discipline and the broader society it serves, not least the ability to remind jingoists and interventionists of the incredible price of their actions and hopefully prevent future conflicts. Given the appearance of at least one major war during the average lifespan of every U.S. citizen, this appears to be a mission with no termination date. And, while the incredibly informative work on the war's social aspects are important for understanding societies at war, it should be remembered that such analyses are most useful when they illuminate questions central to the field of military history and, as the editors point out, "the importance of military affairs in charting the course of history," especially why nations and societies wage wars and how such conflicts are won and lost.<sup>15</sup>

A minor quibble is the absence of any maps in the book, which would help clarify confusing geographical references. For example, McLemore's Cove is identified as "between Lookout Mountain on

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the east and Pigeon Mountain on the west," which seems at odds with the actual geography, unless the author meant to the east of Lookout Mountain and to the west of Pigeon Mountain.<sup>16</sup> If publishers are to reinvigorate traditional military history, they simply must allow, encourage, and support the inclusion of adequate maps to convey the action.

Overall, the book serves as a welcome resource for those who wish to better inform themselves on various aspects of the Civil War itself, as well as those seeking to define the current state of Civil War military history. The coeditors, as well as the series editor and production staff at Louisiana State University Press, should be commended for bringing it to publication to highlight the enduring relevance of military history

to the study of the period, to demonstrate the current state of Civil War military history, and to further illuminate areas of inquiry—Hess, for example, suggests a focus on the roles of artillery and cavalry, military effectiveness, occupation duties, humanitarian relief, guerrilla conflict, and the environment.<sup>17</sup> The twelve excellent essays from leading scholars in the field highlight current trends and offer sneak previews of eagerly anticipated forthcoming works, demonstrating that the topic of Civil War military history remains robust in the wake of the recent sesquicentennial commemoration. We still have much to learn about the most destructive war in the Nation's history, and, if this book is any indication, there is an excellent community of scholars hard at work at that task. ■

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## Notes

1. Gary Gallagher, foreword to *Upon the Fields of Battle: Essays on the Military History of America's Civil War*, ed. Andrew S. Bledsoe and Andrew F. Lang (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University [LSU] Press, 2018), ix; Earl Hess, "Revitalizing Traditional Military History in the Current Age of Civil War Studies," in Bledsoe and Lang, *Upon the Fields of Battle*. In his essay, Hess explains that the "social and cultural turn" in the field led to "a redefinition of military history as any study that looked at society during wartime, even if it paid no attention to soldiers" (ibid., 21). He also laments that "relatively few historians in academia turn their hand to traditional military studies," and "the increasing marginalization of military history in general," but argues that the "study of tactics, strategy, weapons, and generalship still remains vital to any full understanding of warfare" (ibid., 22 and 29).

2. Gary W. Gallagher and Kathryn Shively Meier, "Coming to Terms with Civil War Military History," *Journal of the Civil War Era* 4, no. 4 (December 2014): 487–508; Bledsoe and Lang, "Military History and the American Civil War," in Bledsoe and Lang, *Upon the Fields of Battle*, 6 and 15.

3. Gallagher and Shively Meier, "Coming to Terms with Civil War Military History."

4. Earl Hess, *Civil War Infantry Tactics: Training, Combat, and Small-Unit Effectiveness* (Baton Rouge, LA: LSU Press, 2015), winner of the 2016 Tom Watson Brown Award.

5. See Ethan Rafuse, "Still a Mystery? General Grant and the Historians, 1981-2006," *Journal of Military History* 71, no. 3 (July 2007): 849–74; Alan T. Nolan, *Lee Considered: General Robert E. Lee and Civil War History* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina [UNC] Press, 1991); Earl Hess, *Braxton Bragg: The Most Hated Man of the Confederacy* (Chapel Hill, NC: UNC Press, 2016).

6. Kenneth W. Noe, "'I Am Completely Checked by the Weather': George B. McClellan, Weather, and the Peninsula Campaign," in Bledsoe and Lang, *Upon the Fields of Battle*, 63.

7. Andrew S. Bledsoe, "'The Farce was Complete': Braxton Bragg, Field Orders, and the Language of Command at McLemore's Cove," in Bledsoe and Lang, *Upon the Fields of Battle*, 92 and 96.

8. Mark Grimsley, *The Hard Hand of War: Union Military Policy Toward Southern Civilians, 1861-1865* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Dan Sutherland, *A Savage Conflict: The Decisive Role of Guerrillas in the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill, NC: UNC Press, 2009).

9. Andrew F. Lang, "Military Occupation, Emancipation, and the Preservation of Union," in Bledsoe and Lang, *Upon the Fields of Battle*, 193.

10. Ibid., 199.

11. Keith Altavilla, "McLellan's Men: Union Army Democrats in 1864," in Bledsoe and Lang, *Upon the Fields of Battle*, 246.

12. Lesley Gordon, *A Broken Regiment: The 16th Connecticut's Civil War* (Baton Rouge, LA: LSU Press, 2014); Brian Matthew Jordan, "The Hour that Lasted Fifty Years: The 107th Ohio and the Human Longitude of Gettysburg," in Bledsoe and Lang, *Upon the Fields of Battle*, 260.

13. See also Susannah Ural, *Hood's Texas Brigade: The Soldiers and Families of the Confederacy's Most Celebrated Unit* (Baton Rouge, LA: LSU Press, 2017).

14. Bledsoe and Lang, "Military History and the American Civil War," in Bledsoe and Lang, *Upon the Fields of Battle*, 4.

15. Ibid., 3.

16. Bledsoe, "The Farce was Complete," 101.

17. Hess, "Revitalizing Traditional Military History," 36–37.

**Next page:** A CH-47 Chinook helicopter assigned to Bravo Company, 3rd Battalion, 126th Aviation Regiment, New York Army National Guard, prepares to land 10 March 2018 and insert soldiers of Charlie Troop, 2nd Battalion, 101st Cavalry Regiment, New York Army National Guard, into their landing zone at Java Center, New York. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Ryan Campbell, U.S. Air National Guard)