

The Railroad and the State: War, Politics, and Technology in Nineteenth-Century America

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Review

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Angevine, Robert G. *The Railroad and the State: War, Politics, and Technology in Nineteenth-Century America*. Stanford University Press, \$65.00
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Public and private improvisation

An aspect of American nation-building

Building the American state and nation in the 19th century is generally described in large terms, such as the Civil War, the settling of the West, or industrialization. These general categories of American history are often connected in surprising ways, and one of these is the changing interrelationship among the political authorities, state and national, the private companies that built and owned the railroads, and army officers who gave support, suggestions, and engineering aid to the railroads. These three factions, two public and one private, operating both locally and nationally, combined to create an infrastructure that both tied the nation together across the continent, and helped America survive the crisis of secession and war. Robert Angevine's outstanding book on **The Railroad and the State** describes the process and the problems whereby the army, the railroads, and the government came together.

In America, unlike continental Europe, the national government did not create a central plan for rail construction. Before the war, most Americans regarded the constitution as a treaty between sovereign states rather than the fundamental law of the nation, and almost all regarded the enumerate powers allotted to Congress and the President as the limits of constitutional government rather than its starting point. The political culture of prewar America was focused upon the states, which were considered the proper agents for large scale internal improvement. Even the states, however, were not the primary agents in building the rail system; that role fell to private, though usually politically connected, companies that raised capital by selling stocks and bonds. The companies promised profits to investors and economic growth to the

communities that assisted them with rights of way and financial inducements. But the railroad companies, though flush with promoters, were woefully short of engineers, and here the army could help. West Point was the leading engineering school in America in the 1820s and 1830s, and the military policy did not then forbid army officers from working as surveyors and civil engineers for the expanding railroads. Although army officers were technically on loan (or worked in their free time, or took extended leave) they functioned in a civilian rather than military capacity, and often found the pay and prestige of railroad work more enticing than routine garrison duty. Without central direction, individual railroads combined their need for technical skill with army officers' engineering education and local community's desire for economic development into a burgeoning rail network in prewar America.

The Civil War and the needs of post-Appomattox transportation brought changes in the American way of railroad building. Initially focused on local, limited markets with only modest capital investment, the railroad became a national industry dependant upon Congressional action, army deployment, and continuing access to national financial markets. In the West, unvanquished Indian tribes and the absence of preexisting towns and markets made a national rail focus inevitable, and military leaders from Grant to Sherman to Sheridan were enthusiastic about the transcontinental systems. The role of the military shifted from engineering to protection against hostile Native Americans, and the national government helped support the progress financially while private companies pushed the new lines west toward dreams of gold and land. The railroads grew from local into national companies capitalized in New York and beyond the reach of local control, and the federal government became the focal point of financial aid on the one hand and political regulation on the other. The function of the railroads in the Indian wars and the consolidation of the frontier army in large permanent posts is one theme of his last substantive chapter. Angevine describes the shift in scale and institutional focus in clear, careful, and persuasive prose.

The Spanish-American War in 1898 exposed a massive lack of coordination between the army and the roads it helped survey, engineer, and protect. The military had no central plan to use the rail system of 1898 to transport troops and supplies. The choice of Tampa as the central port of embarkation for the Caribbean made things worse, since the city had two lines leading north but only one from city to port. The railroad, in spite of contractual obligation to be prepared to move the military, had made no plans to do so, and was disinclined

to disrupt profitable civilian passenger and freight service to accommodate the army. The army began mobilizing in April, and a month later, rail traffic clogged up throughout the Gulf South. Nonetheless, in spite of incompetence, obstruction, and general lack of logistical preparation, the army and the railroads straightened the traffic jam out by the end of June. Improvisation and on-the-job training triumphed over a lack of planning. Still, it was an ironic ending to nearly a century of cooperation, as the railroads, the national government and the army had drifted in different directions.

As is common for a good work of history, Angevine's book leads to avenues of investigation and interpretation suggested by its research and thesis that are beyond the boundaries of the present text. Angevine describes the American way of building railroads as one of improvisation and experiment, with local boosterism complementing private ownership, all mixed with political log rolling and imaginative fiscal expedients, and supported technically by the army. While this lack of system might be hard to defend, it worked at least as well in the 19th century as did the more nationally planned European rail grids. As Angevine points out, the technology changed rapidly in the first half century of railroading, not only in rail and rolling stock, but also in telegraph and bridging. American diversity of rail lines, along with the invariable preference for cheap initial construction to be replaced with better lines later on, allowed American railroads to keep abreast of technological and engineering improvement throughout the century. This main theme of Angevine's book raises implicit questions about the usefulness of modern, centrally directed industrial policy, where planning is inevitably based upon a particular level of technological developments in spite of continuing technological change. Angevine's book deals with major historical issues that go beyond the formal scope of his essay, a primary indication of a book that is not only good but also important.

James D. Hardy, Jr. is a professor of history in the Honors College at Louisiana State University and has published several books on both history and literature, including one on baseball.