

The First Republican Army: The Army Of Virginia And The Radicalization Of The Civil War

Zachery Fry

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Review

Fry, Zachery

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Matsui, John H. *The First Republican Army: The Army of Virginia and the Radicalization of the Civil War.* University of Virginia Press, \$39.50 ISBN 9780813939278

John Pope, the Army of Virginia, and the Road to Hard War

Civil War historians find the political motives behind Union squabbles in the Eastern Theater fascinating. Scholars and lay readers alike can count on a constant barrage of books on the high command of the Army of the Potomac, for instance, replete with well-worn accounts of backstabbing by George McClellan, Fitz John Porter, and Joseph Hooker. Over the past several years, however, a critical mass of innovative literature by young scholars such as Timothy Orr and Jonathan White has emerged to investigate the rich intersections of soldier ideology and command politics, adding to earlier pioneering work by historians such as John Hennessy. Instead of debating how many Union soldiers embraced emancipation, as scholars of the 1990s and early 2000s did, historians now want to know what that undeniable ideological divide meant for command and control.

Into this fray marches John H. Matsui with *The First Republican Army*, an investigation of the Army of Virginia and its political culture under Maj. Gen. John Pope in the summer of 1862. Matsui argues that Pope's short-lived army, later absorbed into the larger Army of the Potomac, pierced the heartland of northern Virginia as a vanguard for hard war against slavery and southern society. He attributes this phenomenon to two principal facts: first, that the Army of Virginia, more than its counterpart under George McClellan, represented a true cross-section of the Republican-voting north, and second, that the experience of occupying and plundering Virginia towns and farmland gave Pope's men more direct, radicalizing contact with slavery. In Pope the Army of Virginia found a leader who turned a blind eye to raiding, belittled conservative West Point dogma, and applauded the harsh punishment of disloyalty wherever it

could be uprooted.

The Army of Virginia stands in stark ideological contrast to the Army of the Potomac, Matsui argues. Whereas Pope encouraged plunder and emancipation, loyalty to the Democratic Party “extended from the top down in McClellan’s army, from generals to regimental and company officers to the common soldier” (6). The Army of the Potomac, Matsui declares, had experienced nothing like the Army of Virginia’s “double disadvantages” of an aggressive enemy and hostile population (48). Indeed, the author states, the radicalism pervading Pope’s subordinates and staff officers made them far likelier than counterparts in Little Mac’s army to trust escaped slaves as intelligence sources. In making this larger argument about the institutional and political divide, Matsui adds a fresh dimension to the debate over political dysfunction in the Army of the Potomac, highlighting that the eventual transfer of Army of Virginia forces into McClellan’s ranks injected radicalism into an otherwise conservative organization. But his emphasis on Democratic allegiance in the Army of the Potomac may be overstated. In mid-1862, it could well be argued, the vast majority of Army of the Potomac enlisted men were still political neophytes with little of the partisan maturity gained through the tribulations of 1863 and 1864. He asserts that Pope’s army was the “harbinger” of hard war and, after their transfer to McClellan’s ranks, “the vanguard of the pro-emancipation and punitive turn of the overall Union war effort” (3). This last statement is perhaps more asserted than proven. Additional work remains to be done on the relationship between Army of Virginia veterans and Army of the Potomac rank and file as the war progressed and the battle with Copperheads at home reached a crescendo.

Perhaps the most innovative aspect of Matsui’s book is his emphasis on the brigade as the “fundamental political unit” of the Army of Virginia. His work dovetails with Gerald Prokopowicz’s *All for the Regiment* in highlighting the importance of lower-level unit cohesion to organizational and political culture. Matsui offers a brilliant metaphor for describing the political debate within specific regiments, identifying the field officers as a veritable Senate, the company-grade officers as the House of Representatives, and the enlisted men as the vast constituency. Historians would do well to utilize this model in analyzing the Civil War volunteer army as a hybrid of military and social hierarchy.

Matsui’s source base is a commendable blend of diaries and letters from across the north, collections representing each significant demographic subset

within the Army of Virginia. He does rely heavily on accounts from men in shoulder straps (a common flaw, to be fair), which leads him to the questionable assertion that Louis Blenker's German-American division stood firm in its belief that "slavery must be destroyed to preserve the Union, thus enabling Confederates to combine nativism with racism" (12). As historian Christian Keller and others have noted, the presence of Republicans in high command among German-American contingents did not necessarily translate into widespread abolitionism in the rank and file. Nonetheless, like Steven Ramold's *Across the Divide*, Matsui's *First Republican Army* offers a considerable degree of nuance in its differentiation between anti-slavery sentiment and racial egalitarianism in the army.

Matsui's *First Republican Army* stands out as an especially promising example of the intersection between military history and political culture. His work adds to our understanding of the Union army's central role – and John Pope's – in heightening the Civil War's destructiveness and revolutionizing southern society.

Zachery A. Fry is an assistant professor of history at the United States Military Academy, West Point. His research focuses on the political culture of the Army of the Potomac and the issue of loyalty in the Civil War.