

Leonidas Polk: Warrior Bishop of the Confederacy

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Review

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Horn, Huston. *Leonidas Polk: Warrior Bishop of the Confederacy*. University Press of Kansas, 2019. HARDCOVER \$39.95 ISBN 978-0-7006-2750-9

General Leonidas Polk has become one of the “whipping boys” over the years for many of the failures of the Confederacy’s Army of Tennessee in the Western Theater. His name alone conjures up inside jokes among seasoned military historians of the Civil War, and all too often this important leader is depicted in serious analyses of the Western campaigns as an incompetent fool. When portrayed alongside the fractious Braxton Bragg, under whom he served and with whom he engaged in bitter quarrels, and juxtaposed against Federal luminaries U.S. Grant and William T. Sherman, Polk generally receives poor marks as a commander. Some of those criticisms, flung by scholars who have studied the Western Theater in depth, such as T. Harry Williams, Thomas Connelly, Grady McWhiney, Steven Woodworth, and Peter Cozzens, are well-deserved. Others, as Huston Horn successfully proves in his new biography of the general, are not, or should be reconsidered in light of the historical context. Hopefully, after perusing this impressive book, many readers will agree with him.

To underline the significance of Polk to the outcome of the war, it is helpful to remember that he served from the beginning of the conflict until his death by Union cannon fire in June 1864, attaining the rank of Lieutenant General—equivalent, therefore, in command authority to the likes of Stonewall Jackson and James Longstreet. He held that position, serving as a corps commander, for over half of his Confederate career, and earlier on wore major general’s stars. By virtue of this high rank and length of service, he was massively influential in how events along the Mississippi River and in Tennessee transpired, participating in or overseeing just about every major operation except the Vicksburg campaign. A friend of both Albert Sidney Johnston and Jefferson Davis, both of whom sought and received his advice, Polk was also well-placed to

influence national policy and early theater strategy as well as battlefield tactics. Moreover, as a bishop of the Episcopal Church before the war, he was a famous personage in the antebellum South, and beloved by many in North Carolina, Tennessee, and Louisiana, states where he grew up and held clerical posts. For these reasons alone, relegating the general to comic relief is a mistake. He was undoubtedly one of the major historical players west of the Appalachians.

According to Horn's scrupulous and exhaustive research, Polk did not always play the bumbler. One striking example, often used by previous authors to demonstrate his idiocy, involved the violation of Kentucky's neutrality in 1861 by rebel forces. The traditional explanation is that the general arrogantly and on his own volition violated guidance from the president to strictly observe that neutrality. It claims his unauthorized movement from northwestern Tennessee to Columbus, Kentucky—a decisive point overlooking the Mississippi that could interdict river traffic—where he built a powerful bastion bristling with cannon, forced Kentucky into the arms of the Union, and thereby enabled the subsequent capture of Forts Henry and Donelson and the early occupation of most of Tennessee by Federal armies. However, like other historical episodes that have often been pinpointed to prove Polk's imbecility, such as his "failure" to heed Bragg's orders in the Perryville Campaign of fall 1862 or his tactical performance at the Battle of Stones River a few months later, the truth is stranger, more complex, and frankly more interesting than the previous overgeneralizations. Certainly, in each of these critical events the warrior bishop made mistakes, but so did Davis, Johnston, Bragg, and other generals with whom Polk had to cooperate. In the Columbus, Kentucky affair, for instance, Horn clarifies the difficulties he encountered in reining in the bumptious Gideon Pillow, who pre-empted his superior without orders and started the entire problem, and how Davis offered unclear and conflicting guidance to Polk during the crisis. Too, even readers well-versed in the Perryville and Stones River campaigns should be enlightened by the author's careful reconstruction of the often confusing collection of dispatches and reports that fluttered between Polk, Bragg, and William Hardee. Horn makes a strong case for the salience of time and terrain in Polk's decision-making, as well as misinformed orders from Bragg that must have appeared nonsensical. In later chapters, we learn of similar and other extenuating circumstances in the Tullahoma, Chattanooga, Chickamauga, and Atlanta campaigns, and come to grips with the historical truth that Polk and his army also faced formidable Union opponents. In essence,

the author reminds us, it was not all Polk's fault, and indeed, as George Pickett once quipped, the Yankees had something to do with it.

That said, Horn does not fall into the hagiographic or Lost Cause traps, and fairly criticizes Polk when such censure is due. The general's often naïve grasp of theater-strategic and operational realities; his frequent preoccupation with punctilious details at the expense of the big picture; his recurrent lateness in execution; and waffling back and forth between resigning his commission and remaining in the army—all of these and other foibles repeatedly come to light and help us understand Polk not as an easily lampooned buffoon, but instead as a complicated, flawed human being who genuinely tried to do the best job possible given the conditions facing him. Rather than attempting to resurrect Polk's reputation, Horn offers us a balanced, nuanced, and complete biographic analysis.

Because of its comprehensiveness at 428 pages of text, reading the book is a substantial undertaking, and those exclusively interested in Polk's Civil War service will have to wait until page 146. Part of Horn's excellence as a biographer, though, is his detailed account of the general's prewar life; themes he introduces in the earlier chapters, based on troves of archival letters, return later during the wartime chronicle and help us understand why and how his subject behaved in certain situations. Thus, readers should at least skim through the antebellum years lest they jump into the war minus the necessary background that Horn painstakingly extracts from original sources previous scholars failed to notice. Overall, the book is impeccably researched, well supported by primary sources and nicely nested, both in the text and the notes, in the secondary literature. The author additionally succeeds in narrating Polk's life within the historical context he would have known, and conscientiously avoids passing presentist judgments on him or other notables. At times this erudition borders on the frustrating, as one might like to see more of Horn's actual opinion on a given decision or event rather than a discussion of others' analyses, but like a good scholar he wishes to remain as objective as possible.

Bereft of maps, the book is not well suited for readers totally unfamiliar with the Western Theater, and the normally solid, well-constructed prose occasionally lapses into the verbose, using words that Horn, as a journalist-turned-scholar, probably never employed in his previous publications. Yet these are truly quibbles compared to the immense value Horn has given us in this landmark study of one of the most important Confederate military leaders. *Leonidas Polk:*

Warrior Bishop of the Confederacy will stand for years both as the definitive work on the South's clerical general and as a model of good Civil War biography.

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