

A Republic in the Ranks: Loyalty and Dissent in the Army of the Potomac

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Review

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Fry, Zachery A. *A Republic in the Ranks: Loyalty and Dissent in the Army of the Potomac*. University of North Carolina Press, 2020. Illustrations, tables, endnotes, bibliography, index. \$45.00. ISBN 978-1469654454

American politics is supposed to be about separation -- separation of powers, separation of church and state, and particularly separation of the military from civilian political process. One look back at that series of ‘separations’ reminds us how often separation gets breached in practice, and never more so in the civil-military category than during the Civil War. This should not necessarily be a surprise. The Civil War was an overtly political war, fought over political issues (as opposed to a war of conquest and annexation, like the Mexican War, or national tetchiness, as was the War of 1812). Moreover, Civil War soldiers were overwhelmingly freshly-recruited civilians (rather than long-service professionals). They saw no reason to leave civilian politics – which, as Donn Piatt wryly observed, had for “an American citizen all the fanaticism of religion and all the fascination of gambling” -- behind them.¹ And yet, studies of the politics of the Civil War military are maddeningly thin. Partly, this occurs because we *assume* a separation of the civil from the military and therefore blind ourselves to the political when it stands before us in uniform. Partly, this is because the overall political history of the war itself has suffered such heavy side-lining. Although Rachel Shelden, in a recent article in *Civil War History*, optimistically claims that the “political history of the period is thriving,” much of her optimism depends on eliding the *political* into the *economic*, the *cultural* and the *demographic*.² At no point does she even notice that the Civil War *military* might have exercised a spasm or two of the political.

But it did, and Zachary Fry’s *A Republic in the Ranks* is one of a handful of recent books which is making increasingly clear how very politicized the Union armies, and es-

¹ Piatt, *Memories of the Men Who Saved the Union* (New York: Belford, Clarke & Co., 1887), 141.

² Shelden, “The Politics of Continuity and Change in the Long Civil War Era,” *Civil War History* 65 (December 2019), 319-41.

pecially the Army of the Potomac, really were. In many respects, the Army of the Potomac was the creation of George McClellan, and the Army showed its filial respect by an allegiance and enthusiasm for McClellan which lasted (albeit in declining degrees) throughout the war and even into the post-war period. (McClellan remained a popular guest at Potomac reunions). Part of that respect was, in turn, molded by McClellan's politics, which were those of a moderate Democrat with no enthusiasm for emancipation and little but contempt for the Lincoln administration. As Fry shows, however, McClellan's political influence faded with the Army, and largely because the Army's junior officer cadres became increasingly Republicanized over the course of the war. "The army's most politically active men...were captains, majors, and colonels who jumped at the opportunity to foster Republican support among the rank and file." It was from these junior officers that "soldiers imbibed the rhetoric" of Republicanism, "taking their cue from the father figures of the unit and the consensus on loyalty they viewed emerging around them." (82-3)

Taking its first bearings from McClellan, the Army of the Potomac originally saw its chief mission as the suppression of a treasonous insurrection, which not only reflected McClellan's politics but also McClellan's determination to control the flow of political information into the Army. (17, 26-28). McClellan's dominance reached its peak, ironically, at just the moment Lincoln dismissed him in November, 1862, and Fry illustrates in unnerving detail how prevalent talk of an military coup against the Lincoln administration was in the Army. (60-63). Loyalty to McClellan only begins to ebb in 1863, when Joe Hooker takes command and deliberately sets out to extirpate McClellanite influence in the Army. But Hooker's disaster at Chancellorsville, and the Army's victory at Gettysburg under a McClellanite commander, George Meade, briefly set back the campaign of Republicanization. (103-04) The most vehemently Republican units – the 1st, 3rd, 11th and 12th Corps, which had been formed from John Pope's highly Republican Army of Virginia in 1862) were either folded into existing 'Democratic' units like the 2nd, 5th and 6th Corps, or else conveniently shipped west to fight under Grant at Chattanooga. (108)

Still, McClellanite Democrats were their own worst enemies. When Democratic senior officers in the Army of the Potomac (which in this case means corps and division commanders) attempted to gin-up a "memorial" to honor McClellan after Gettysburg,

soldier reaction was decidedly unenthusiastic. (111-17) And after McClellan endorsed a Copperhead candidate for Pennsylvania governor, the Army's enthusiasm for Little Mac chilled, not so much because of a newfound love for Lincoln or emancipation, as for their disgust at the Copperheads' anti-war rhetoric, which they interpreted as a personal repudiation of themselves as soldiers. (125-26) Copperhead dominance of the 1864 Democratic Convention became the kiss of death for Democrats in the Army, and when McClellan accepted the Convention's nomination, the Army's affection for McClellan dissipated. (159, 162). The final proof of the Army's Republicanization lies for Fry in the 1864 soldier vote: of 164 surviving regimental voting returns in the Army of the Potomac, 130 gave majorities to Lincoln (71 of them by "more than three-quarters" majorities). (179)

Or did they? Fry's principal antagonist in his Republicanization thesis is Jonathan White (in *Emancipation, the Union Army, and the Re-Election of Abraham Lincoln*, 2014). White acknowledges that 78% of the Potomac soldiers who voted in the 1864 presidential election cast ballots for Lincoln, but that was a percentage only of those who actually voted, and White suspects that officer intimidation had a great deal to do with discouraging substantial numbers of Democrats from even trying to vote. Fry's counter-argument is that the non-voters were more likely under-age (some 19% of the Army) or from states whose Democratic legislatures had not authorized soldier voting. (178) But that counter-argument does not exactly demonstrate that the voting tallies represent a political sea-change in the Army. As White noted, there is no way to determine whether a soldier's vote was Republican, or simply anti-Copperhead.³ Similarly, there is no way to determine whether the voting numbers show that Republican junior officers had triumphed in the arts of political persuasion, or merely that they made it clear to their enlisted personnel what vote would get them "cast for fatigue by a sergeant unkind."

Still, that point should not become a tree which causes us to lose sight of the forest. Fry has done a remarkable job of chronicling the political tides of the Army of the Potomac, and thus burying whatever we would like to believe about the recusal of military professionals from the political life of American society. A case in point is George

³ White, *Emancipation, the Union Army, and the Re-Election of Abraham Lincoln* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2014), 6, 11, 35.

Meade. Although Meade insisted over-and-over again that he was merely a soldier trying to do his duty amid the “headwinds” of political interference, the sheer volume of Meade’s protestations belies this. (117) As much as Civil War history buffs would like to have their generals nobly keep their noses clean and concentrate on strategy and tactics, Meade was clearly understood to be a Democratic loyalist, not only during the war, but even in his brief stint as a military governor in Reconstruction. The question then becomes to what extent his political loyalties affected his military judgment, a question which casts his decisions during and after Gettysburg in an entirely new light.

Fry is ambivalent about Meade’s “quixotic” behavior. At the same time as he credits Meade with “the good intention of professionalizing an otherwise amateur army,” his account of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War’s Meade hearings after Gettysburg shows how “more than any other episode...the Meade hearings smoked out conservatives and forced generals to choose sides in the political divide.” Even more damning is the attention Fry gives to the memoirs published while the war was still in process by Republican officers – Henry Nichols Blake, Alfred Castleman, Richard Eddy, William B. Armstrong – who were cashiered by Democratic superiors. (147-49) What nevertheless made the junior officer ranks a continual source of woe for Democratic senior generals was the fact that, in the Volunteer service, line-officer commissions flowed through state governor’s offices, and from 1864 onwards, those governors were mostly Republicans. Given the steady promotion by those governors of Republican officers, and the political follies of McClellan and the Copperheads, the Army of the Potomac would eventually become, if not a Republican engine, then certainly an instrument of no sympathy to Democratic politics.

What might have clinched Fry’s argument for a gradually-Republicanized Army of the Potomac would be identifying a post-war trajectory of Potomac veterans into Republican politics. But that, as Fry concedes in his epilogue, “is a difficult task.” (186) Andrew Johnson’s hapless attempt to foist a McClellan-compatible Reconstruction on the country triggered the formation of a series of robustly “loyal” Potomac veterans’ organizations – the Soldiers’ and Sailors’ National League, the Boys in Blue – who carried Republican officers into anti-Johnson political office. (Pennsylvania’s John White Geary is probably the most notable example). But there were almost as many Democratic political

clubs for Potomac veterans, too, and a number of prominent Potomac officers – George Custer, Solomon Meredith and Henry Morrow of the Iron Brigade – turned out to support Johnson’s bid to organize a new political party round himself in 1866. (189)

What is not in doubt from Fry, however, is the sheer fact of the Army of the Potomac’s politicization, something which he traces with great diligence in soldier letters and resolutions published in hometown newspapers. Whether we can measure it with any precision, based on voting numbers or re-enlistment statistics in 1864, will be a prompt for the statistically-minded to keep working. But it will also be a vigorous new reason to revive the political history of the Civil War, and to understand how in Civil war America “politics seems to enter into everything.”⁴

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⁴ *Urbana Clarion* (September 1, 1860), in Baringer, “Campaign Technique in Illinois in 1860,” *Transactions of the Illinois State Historical Society* (Springfield: Illinois State Historical Society, 1932), 266.