

Civil War Supply and Strategy: Feeding Men and Moving Armies

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Review

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Hess, Earl J. *Civil War Supply and Strategy: Feeding Men and Moving Armies*. Louisiana State University Press, 2020. HARDCOVER. \$50.00 ISBN 9780807173329 pp. 448

In recent years the breathtakingly prolific Earl J. Hess, has, it seems, singlehandedly redefined Civil War military history. His latest effort *Civil War Supply and Strategy: Feeding Men and Moving Armies* builds on themes developed in his recent work, *Civil War Logistics: A Study of Military Transportation* (2017) and even on points highlighted in his thoughtful biography of Braxton Bragg: in the Civil War mastering logistics and supply contributed significantly to the United States victory. Conversely, Confederate inability to do so contributed mightily to defeat. Potentially yawn-inducing subjects such as logistics and supply are, in the capable hands of Professor Hess, nothing short of fascinating.

The book is arranged in largely chronological order with chapters devoted to major campaigns and special topics, such as “Feeding the Army of Northern Virginia,” supported by useful maps and illustrations. By the author’s own admission, he devoted considerably more attention to the Western Theater than to the East or the Trans-Mississippi and much more to the efforts of the United States than to the Confederacy. While the war traditionally is studied in an East-to-West context, Hess argues convincingly for the importance of understanding its North-to-South dynamics as well, meaning the great differences in campaigning in the Upper South versus the Lower South. It was, in short, easier to move and support armies in the Upper South—Kentucky, Tennessee, and Virginia—where navigable rivers and more serviceable railroad networks facilitated supply and movement. The lack of such assets in the Deep South limited US strategic goals in the region and offered the Confederacy a good deal of security for much of the war. The Appalachian Highlands presents significant obstacles, especially for advancing US forces.

When possible, both combatants preferred to rely on existing means of movement and supply, but this often presented challenges and limited operational options. Subsisting an army off the land in hostile territory was difficult and risky, but as General Bragg's 1862 Kentucky Campaign demonstrated, it was doable. During the 1864 Atlanta Campaign, William T. Sherman relied on a tenuous rail that stretched back to Louisville and required constant maintenance and thousands of detailed troops to guard, but was still barely able to supply his army group and its thousands of animals. Once he captured Atlanta and set his sights on Savannah, he determined to break from the established lifeline on his March to the Sea and did so with notable success—an approach he continued on his advance into the Carolinas.

There were many ways to supply field armies, but the United States proved much better at it. The attention to procurement, logistics, and distribution evolved during the conflict. For the armies of the United States, the painstaking and expensive management of supply and logistics—including a willingness to take control of civilian rail and shipping companies—was absolutely key in achieving victory. The great military depot developed at City Point, Virginia, that supported General U.S Grant's operations at Richmond and Petersburg was perhaps a crowning achievement and testament to the US commitment to logistics and supply. Nothing quite like it had ever existed in war. Men like Montgomery Meigs, Rufus Ingalls, and Daniel McCallum as well as countless quartermaster and commissary officers and railroad men were unsung heroes behind the United States war effort. For a variety of reasons, not the least of which were complicated political considerations, the Confederate government never fully measured up in the critical areas of supply and logistics and frequently worked at cross-purposes. According to Hess, “the difference is stunning.” (361)

Just as his award-winning *Civil War Infantry Tactics: Training, Combat, and Small-Unit Effectiveness* (2015) challenged many enduring yet often inaccurate beliefs about the conflict, *Civil War Supply and Strategy* brings long overdue and much needed attention to logistics and supply and their monumental importance. As Hess states, the oft-repeated declaration that the Civil War was the first modern war does not hold up in many respects, but with regard to logistics and supply, especially as managed by the government and officers and men in the armies of the United States, the war produced a true evolution and demonstrated the potential of railroads and general industrial might as well as human ingenuity in wartime. According to Hess, “Without the protomodern logistics-and supply system, the North could not have won the war . .

. Civil War logistics and supply were among the most important factors in determining the outcome of the conflict.” (363)

As usual, Hess navigates complex subjects deftly, producing an accessible volume that scholars and enthusiasts alike will find useful in forming a greater understanding of the conflict. Like *Civil War Logistics* it illuminates topics that are easily ignored and too often neglected, yet are absolutely essential elements of warfare. Backed by impressive primary sources and Hess's always thorough research, *Civil War Supply and Strategy* is an immensely informative and rewarding study and a tremendously important contribution to Civil War historiography.

David Coffey is professor of history and chair of the Department of History and Philosophy at the University of Tennessee at Martin. His books include Sheridan's Lieutenants: Phil Sheridan, His Generals and the Final Year of the Civil War and Soldier Princess: The Life and Legend of Agnes Salm-Salm in North America, 1861-1867. His most recent work is In Harm's Way: A History of the American Military Experience, with Gene Allen Smith and Kyle Longley.