

Book Reviews

The Business of Civil War: Military Mobilization and the State, 1861–1865. By *Mark R. Wilson*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006. xii + 306 pp. Index, notes, bibliography, illustrations, maps, tables. Cloth, \$45.00. ISBN: 0-801-88348-2.

Reviewed by Michael S. Green

With all that has been written about the Civil War, especially the rich literature on its battles and those who fought them, few historians have tackled the question of how the federal government operated the Union army. Mark Wilson has taken on that challenge, and the results will be useful to students of the era, of the government and its bureaucracy, of the military, and of the evolution of business.

Wilson writes, “Despite its evident significance, the North’s procurement project has long been something of a mystery. . . .” He announces his intention to challenge “the common assumption that the Union’s procurement project was part and parcel of a ‘spoils system’ in which elected officials used government jobs and contracts to reward party faithful” (p. 1). In this book, Wilson shows that the North’s supply system was managed by a military bureaucracy that was relatively independent of party politicians and their patronage networks, forming “a mixed military economy” (p. 2). Wilson focuses on the Quartermaster’s Department, whose members, under Montgomery Meigs’s leadership, dealt with large amounts of money as they obtained the supplies that did a great deal to make the North’s victory possible. They formed an important group, in many ways separate from the rest of the government: career army men, loyal to the Union but often not to parties, and with a greater interest in running a well-oiled military machine than in expanding capitalism.

It turned out that the quartermasters managed both to run the military machine and to expand capitalism. The Civil War clearly was a precursor of the Gilded Age, an era whose length, breadth, and even existence have been debated by historians. The war promoted the expansion of the national state, the government bureaucracy, and, along with the enactment of the Homestead Act and the construction of the transcontinental

railroad, paved the way for western growth, land speculation, and big business. These developments affected political outcomes, but Wilson suggests that politics may have been less responsible for these changes than historians have argued.

Wilson marshals an impressive array of evidence to support his various conclusions. He traces state procurement practices for supplying the army during the war's first year and describes the problems associated with turning control over to the federal government. He explains how the prewar evolution of the Quartermaster's Department enabled it to function so well over the course of the war. He shows the department's commitment to acting according to what its members deemed best for the North, and not necessarily for Republican or business interests, and he describes how both sides dealt with that approach. He weaves labor and women's history into the narrative, examining wage laborers, male and female, their work for the Quartermasters, and the role played by middlemen. In his concluding chapter, he explores the long-term impact of the Civil War and the quartermasters on the civil service, compares U.S. and European developments, linking them to a variety of topics, including literature and the emergence of the professional classes. He argues that "modern America, as a child of the Civil War, had . . . been shaped by a partial militarization of business and government" (p. 225).

To criticize such an extensively researched book of neglect hardly seems fair, especially when the overlooked topic might seem to be off the subject, but the book suffers from its avoidance of political issues. While Wilson points out that the Quartermaster's Department tried to steer clear of politics, politics was unavoidable. In the same way, the issue of politics, both popular and military, is critical for Wilson to clinch his argument, given that so many historians have emphasized their importance. How the department functioned, or failed to function, in the war's first year, when state procurement officials predominated, may have contributed to the failings of Secretary of War Simon Cameron, whom Abraham Lincoln eventually cashiered partly for toadying to the Radical Republicans behind his back, partly over corruption within his department. Similarly, the department's subsequent success may have resulted in part from the fact his replacement was Edwin Stanton, a dedicated administrator who was capable of playing politics without having ambitions of his own. Wilson refers to allegations of

corruption in procurement and supply in St. Louis, but he does not delve into the controversy over General John C. Frémont's management of that theater, nor does he explore how the complaints that arose over the connections of Mayor George Opdyke of New York City to an arms factory may have been related to political in-fighting involving Opdyke. These matters occurred, even if they ultimately had no impact on the quartermasters, and they should be mentioned, if only to demonstrate that the quartermasters did not feel their effects, for good or for ill.

These omissions, however, are minor, and they do nothing to diminish Wilson's achievement. *The Business of Civil War* is indispensable reading for both scholars and lay readers who want to understand how the army functioned during the Civil War.

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