



The Sword of Lincoln: The Army of the Potomac

Jeffry D. Wert

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The Sword of Lincoln is the first authoritative single-volume history of the Army of the Potomac in many years.

From Bull Run to Gettysburg to Appomattox, the Army of the Potomac repeatedly fought -- and eventually defeated -- Robert E. Lee and his Army of Northern Virginia. Jeffry D. Wert, one of our finest Civil War historians, brings to life the battles, the generals, and the common soldiers who fought for the Union and ultimately prevailed. The Army of the Potomac endured a string of losses under a succession of flawed commanders -- McClellan, Burnside, and Hooker -- until at Gettysburg it won a decisive battle under a new commander, General George Meade. Within a year the Army of the Potomac would come under the overall leadership of the Union's new general-in-chief, Ulysses S. Grant. Under Grant the army would finally trap and defeat Lee and his forces.

Wert's history draws on letters and diaries, some previously unpublished, to show us what army life was like. Throughout the book Wert shows how Lincoln carefully monitored the operations of the Army of the Potomac, learning as the war progressed, until he found in Grant the commander he'd long sought.

Perceptive in its analysis and compellingly written, *The Sword of Lincoln* is the finest modern account of the army that was central to the Civil War.

The Sword of Lincoln: The Army of the Potomac Details

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Dave says

A solid history of the Army of the Potomac's journey through the Civil War. Jeffry Wert does an excellent job of using firsthand accounts from participants on a broad range -- from famous generals down the common private. It's worth noting that Wert not only does a good job of recounting the various campaigns the army fought, but also of the quieter periods and how the men in the ranks felt about their army, their cause and their country. My only complaint is that it seems the last year of the war receives lesser treatment than the previous three years, making it feel a little like the book ends in a hurry. This aside, ""Sword of Lincoln"" is a readable and engaging look at one of America's most famous fighting forces.

Dave says

Well-written overview of the operations of the Army of the Potomac.

Mark says

A very focused look at the U.S. Civil War from the standpoint of Abraham Lincoln's relationship with the Union Army of the Potomac and its generals. I've read quite a few good books on the Civil War, and while this one is not a comprehensive look, it succeeds in giving an all-important fresh outlook on well-covered ground. This is a must for the history aficionado or Civil War buff.

Doug May says

I learned a lot about battlefield tactics. There are some interesting portrayals of generals in here . If you're looking for an entry into civil war battles this is it . Probably not my cup of tea but it is interesting to note

Eric Bittner says

Very good. Lots of insight into the problem of poor leadership that plagued the Army of the Potomac, and the incredible bravery and resilience of the common soldiers in the army. Lots of first-hand quotes from letters and diaries of both officers and men. The book is very limited in scope, as events in other theaters of the war are barely mentioned, and only then if they had some bearing on the fighting in Virginia. Still, as a one-volume narrative of the Civil War in Virginia, this book will be hard to beat. Now I want to find a similar book that instead focuses on Lee's Army of Northern Virginia.

Casey says

Just finished The Sword of Lincoln: The Army of the Potomac by Jeffry D. Wert. Good book, a different perspective, through the eyes of the rank and file of the Army of the Potomac. Some of the battle descriptions, from their viewpoint, were very different than the information found in most references of the Civil War Virginia battles.

R.K. Byers says

I didn't realize that those guys had LOST so much! 2-12-1 and to STILL win the war? whew!

Jerome says

Wert's book is a fast-paced, engagingly written one-volume account of the Army of the Potomac from the beginning of the Civil War until General Robert E. Lee's surrender of the Army of Northern Virginia at Appomattox in April, 1865. This book is valuable for several reasons. As with any important historical event, the meaning and significance of the Civil War is something that each generation and each reader must discover afresh for themselves. Wert's account, even if it were found to include no additional factual information, encourages reflection on the Civil War, particularly on the role of the Union's most famous army, and on other histories of the conflict. Furthermore, Wert's account has a specific focus. Wert discusses the special difficulties that plagued the Army of the Potomac over the course of the Civil War, explains the sources of these difficulties, and shows how the Army ultimately overcame them. It is actually an inspiring story, showing the value of persistence, commitment, and effort finding a goal, struggling to achieve it, and working to overcome adversity. This approach to the Civil War is convincingly presented here. Wert's heroes are the fighting soldiers in the Army of the Potomac as opposed, in general, to their frequently blundering leaders.

The Army's original mission was the defense of Washington D.C. That mission, and the proximity of the Army to the capital city, made the Army of the Potomac unduly visible and susceptible to political influence. Wert shows the importance of these factors to the performance of the Army of the Potomac in the field. The initial leadership of the Army, in particular the controversial General George McClellan, had a limited view of the aims of the conflict. McClellan did an outstanding job of drilling and training the Army and of instilling a spirit of cameraderie in the troops. But McClellan fought the war simply as a means of bringing the South back into the Union. This outlook, perhaps, was as responsible for his timid, cautious approach as a commander as was his view of military strategy.

The author spends a lot of time talking about the origins of the army, and especially George McClellan. Wert's view of McClellan is more or less the consensus these days: a good organizer combined with a weak personality who feared defeat so badly he could never risk enough to ensure victory. Various early war characters from the army are brought to life, including Heintzelman, Kearny, Isaac Stevens, Israel Richardson, Joseph Hooker, Fitz-John Porter, and so forth. As the book progresses, they're replaced by such individuals as Winfield Hancock, John Gibbon, George Meade, and eventually Philip Sheridan and George Custer. The author does a good job of laying out how these personalities interacted, and how they fought the various battles that the army participated in. He also lays in quotations from various junior members of the army, skilfully weaving what they thought of the army's leaders into the account of those leaders and their

actions during the war.

Wert shows how McClellan's approach to the conflict, military and political, influenced the views of his successors as commanding generals: Pope (commander of the Army of Virginia) Burnside, Hooker, and Meade. Leadership of the Army had a cautious, defensive spirit and was subject of political interference. President Lincoln took an active role with the Army and his specific decisions and criticisms were sometimes merited, but sometimes not.

Wert gives a well-paced account of the major battles of the Army, including First Bull Run, the Seven Days, Second Bull Run, Antietam, Fredricksburg, Chancellorsville, Gettysburg, the Overland Campaign, Petersburg, and Appomattox. In spite of the defeats or unsatisfactory results of most of these battles, Wert shows how the soldiers in the Army maintained their spirit, resiliency and sense of purpose. Although they faced many hardships and crises, the troops sensed that their mission was greater than their leaders. They held on and continued against a spirited and well-lead opponent and ultimately were successful. One major turning point occurred following the Battle of the Wilderness when, after a dreadful two-day battle on the field on which Chancellorsville had been fought, U.S. Grant (commander of the entire Union forces who became the de facto commander of the Army of the Potomac) turned the Army towards the South to pursue Lee's Army rather than retreat northward as had been the practice of his predecessors.

Wert offers clear and short accounts of the major battles of the Army of the Potomac without becoming bogged down in the detail of more lengthy histories. His purpose is less to explain military history than to show the spirit of the troops and the actions of their leaders. Wert drives home well the hardships of the campaigns -- the sickness and unsanitary conditions of the camps, the terrors of battle, the long night marches -- and the determination of the troops to surmount them. His account of the overland campaign in the summer of 1864, Wilderness, Spottsylvania, North Anna, and Cold Harbor, is especially compelling.

Edie says

No single volume can provide a truly adequate history of the Army of the Potomac through the entire Civil War. I'd like to give this volume 3 1/2 stars. The prose is quite readable, but the notes, bibliography and index take up 138 of the 559 pages, so the text is actually much shorter than it appears. The maps of the areas of operation and battlefields are skimpy. This is a slightly more than adequate introduction to the subject, but Bruce Catton's trilogy of the Army of the Potomac {Mr. Lincoln

I finished reading this book while traveling to the Grand Canyon.

In it, we learn of the defensive posture of most of the generals for the Union army, who were unwilling to commit to offensive action, and thus often failed to win, but simply avoided losses. This made the war much longer than it would have been with more aggressive generals on the Union side.

There is little information about the confederate side, and almost nothing about anything other than the army of the Potomac.

This is a detailed book for those who are into the details of the civil war. For the rest of us, it is interesting,

but I kept wanting to get to the punch line.

Francisco Montoya says

Great book for the avid military historian. Describing the transformation of the Army of the Potomac from an army of conscripts to an army that would be equal to professional armies around the world. Also discusses the change in warfare from Bull Run to Appomattox and how the Union and Confederate Armies changed with it.

Joey Muenich says

I am not a reader of Civil War histories, although I have enjoyed historical fiction. I tend to follow other threads to new books and genres.

Lincoln in the Bardo was a recent read that highly influenced my decision to pull this off the small, used bookstore shelf.

The prose are wonderful and mingle personal words from 1860's letters home that add a humanity of these soldiers. I wanted a broader understanding of the time. I was not disappointed.

I can hardly wait for my pop to read it so we can discuss it. The great sources list will surely excite him.

Steve says

A good overview of the Army of the Potomac that was part of the Union Army that fought the Confederates during the Civil War. It describes the battles that were fought as well as the leadership of the generals who led the men in battle.

Jacob says

The Sword of Lincoln is a competent Civil War history but breaks little ground for anyone who qualifies as a Civil War buff and isn't accessible and broad enough to be an introduction to the conflict. The book focuses exclusively on the Federal Army of the Potomac which the author, Jeffry D. Wert, calls "America's most star-crossed army [who] would be cursed, even damned, with the burdens of defending Washington, inept leadership, and a splendid opponent." (3) In the same line, he quotes military historian Williamson Murray, who said that "The Army of the Potomac had a record of unambiguous failure matched by no other unit of equivalent size in the history of the United States Army." (414) Murray said the army only won two major battles, lost twelve, and drew one (Antietam) during the course of the conflict. The book looks in more depth at the reasons for the army's failures and how it eventually got to Appomattox.

The book's many pages describing the battles are good enough, but nothing special. The book has only about a dozen maps, but they're not as helpful as they could be and none show theater-level features. The book also has problems in the picture department. It features 20 pictures between pages 178-179 and then the same exact 20 pictures again between pages 370-371. I'm guessing that the book was supposed to have a different second set of images; as it is, the book lacks images of George McClellan, Joseph Hooker, and Ambrose

Burnside, an otherwise inexplicable omission (there are no images of Confederates).

The book is good when describing the evolution of the army and when analyzing the army's ever changing commanding generals and their relationship to President Lincoln and the political situation in the North. The army did not start off very auspiciously; when they first showed up in Washington to defend the capital they completely lacked discipline. (Wert doesn't mention this, but some Massachusetts troops being bivouacked in the Senate chamber bayoneted Jefferson Davis's desk; it still bears the marks today.) After their first combat at the Battle of Bull Run, William Tecumseh Sherman opined that "Our men are not good soldiers. They brag, but don't perform, complain loudly if they don't get everything they want, and a march of a few miles uses them up. It will take a long time to overcome these things, and what is in store for us in the future I know not." (28) The early officers weren't any better. The first commanders were basically just guys who happened to be at hand at the time—one guy tapped to command a division hadn't been in the military for 30 years, but happened to be in Washington at the time. This basically doomed the Union forces to lackluster and incompetant leadership until better commanders, like Sherman and Grant, could rise up. Unfortunately, while Wert points out that the Army of Northern Virginia had much better leaders almost from the start, he fails to address why they ended up with so much abler commanders.

The author does a good job examining the strengths and weaknesses of George McClellan and his successors, like Joseph Hooker and George Meade. His analysis is fair, and he pays due regard to their strong points, which were mainly apparent off the battlefield on the organizational and administrative side of things. One interesting revelation from the book concerns the endurance of the men's fondness for McClellan, even after he was dismissed for the second time by Lincoln. Even shortly after the Army of the Potomac won its greatest victory at Gettysburg rumors were easily spread within the army that "Little Mac" was coming back. Given how little regard history has for McClellan's leadership, this is surprising to a modern reader. Wert explains that the poor showing of McClellan among the troops when he ran against Lincoln for President in 1864 was due to a plank in the Democratic platform to negotiate with the South. A book exploring the exact feelings of the men in the ranks for McClellan could be quite interesting based on these points.

Lincoln, of course, had less and less patience for McClellan's reluctance to engage the enemy as the war went on. When McClellan used the excuse that the army's horses were too tired, Lincoln's reply is classic: "Will you pardon me for asking what the horses of your army have done since the battle of Antietam that fatigue anything?" The President took to calling the Army of the Potomac "General McClellan's body-guard." (177) After Lincoln visited the army after Antietam and judged that he was more popular with the men than McClellan, Lincoln had the confidence to dismiss him for good.¹⁷⁹ Wert, who calls McClellan "the most controversial commander" of the army, explores some of the other excuses and reasons that Mac had for his less than fierce leadership style but breaks no new ground there. What he does present that I found interesting concerns the president's view of the military situation:

Lincoln saw, however, that neither Burnside nor any other general in the army seemed to grasp a truth about Fredericksburg. There was, he told a secretary, an 'awful arithmetic' to the conflict. The disparity in casualties between the Federals and Confederates in the battle had been staggering. But in Lincoln's reckoning, if the two armies fought each other every day for a week and sustained a similar casualty rate, the Rebels would be wiped out, and the Army of the Potomac would still be 'a mighty host.' According to his secretary, the president asserted, 'No general yet found can face the arithmetic, but the end of the war will be at hand when he shall be discovered.'" (208)

It seems that most Civil War books have an inherent point of view that they're pushing, and this one isn't an

exception. Wert seems to strain to find praise to lavish on the Army of the Potomac, even when little is due. After their poor showing at Bull Run he says that from that battle “came the beginning of one of the army’s enduring characteristics—a resiliency in the aftermath of a defeat that approached defiance.” (28) Of course, the Union army had many advantages in recruiting and materiel that the Rebels didn’t have and it was those factors, more than the army’s “resiliance” that ultimately decided the war in the North’s favor, factors that Wert doesn’t examine in much depth, due to the level of his analysis. He also fails to really comment on the effect of men leaving the army at the expiration of their terms, which many men did in 1864 on account of their three-year enlistments. Fortunately for the North, many subsequently re-enlisted, but often only after returning home and being out of the war for months.

Those looking for a good overview of the Civil War obviously won’t find that here. This book focuses only on the Army of the Potomac and mentions other theaters and aspects of the war only in passing (and in a way that presumes some knowledge of the larger war). This book failed, for me, to sufficiently explain the political factors that weighed on the book’s subject, “Lincoln’s sword.” Northern sentiment is hardly touched on and the word Copperhead doesn’t even appear. The analysis is no more in depth than the claims that (1) Lincoln didn’t want Washington, D.C. to be captured and (2) Lincoln needed victories in the war to maintain public support for said war. The book’s observations and analysis of the Army of the Potomac is insufficiently skilled and insightful to make up for the book’s narrow focus. I’d recommend readers turn elsewhere for a good Civil War read.

John E says

Fine overview of the war in the East. Shows the problems faced by the men of the Army of the Potomac with leaders, politicians, and confederates. For more detail and more lyrical writing Bruce Catton's set is also recommended.
