

Lincoln Love

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SOME RECENT BOOKS ON THE CIVIL WAR (CONTINUED)

By Mark E. Neely, Jr.

To military historians, the books discussed thus far, with the exception of the work by Beringer et al., do not focus on war itself, but there is no dearth of military history. Among those books of military history I have been able to read from the bumper crop of recent years, I have noticed two themes or trends. One is methodological and might be described as the application of the "new military history" to the Civil War, more often described, as Marvin R. Cain put it, as writing a Civil War "Face of Battle." What many military historians have been attempting to do is to write about the American Civil War as John Keegan wrote about British military history in *The Face of Battle*, attempting to see warfare not from the distant and bloodless perspective of general headquarters but from the fragmented and bloody perspective of the common soldier. The diaries and letters of Civil War soldiers are being pored over, and the writing of regimental history, at one time the archaic work of garrulous veterans, has taken on new life. Summarizing the insights gained from such works as Gerald Lindermann's *Embattled Courage: The Experience of Combat in the American Civil War* and Joseph A. Frank and George A. Reaves' "*Seeing the Elephant*": *Raw Recruits at the Battle of Shiloh*, one would characterize the Civil War soldiers' experience this way: they entered their regiments believing in the efficacy of personal courage, they

found combat so frightening as to undermine such confidence, they were hardened by experience, and they eventually performed creditably in part because their regiments had been raised in or near their home towns and they feared the shame of returning as cowards. Close-order fighting, in which soldiers often physically touched their comrades in the ranks, helped sustain them as well. After the war, they tended not to dwell on the most unpleasant aspects of their military experience when reminiscing.

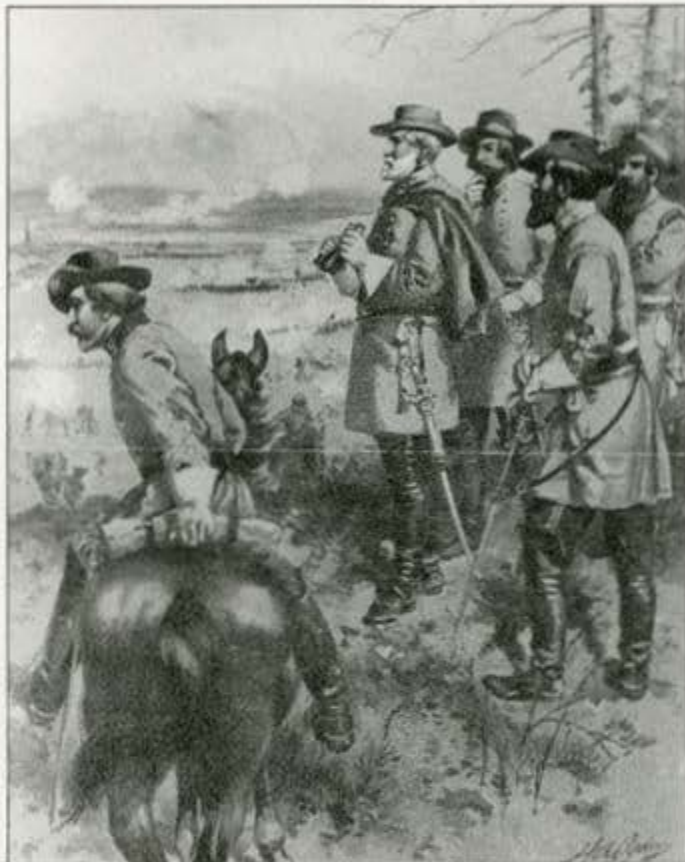
Occasionally, studies of common soldiers degenerate into fragmented anecdotalism and mere affirmation of common sense (of course soldiers were scared in battle, one might respond). Some of these studies suffer from a debilitating methodological error: they are written as though the war were fought by one great cohort of young men who enlisted in 1861, fought and gained experience, and were mustered out in 1865 — whereas, in fact, individuals came and went in enlistment periods ranging from three months to three years, were wounded, paroled, returned, captured, and so forth. The transmission of the lessons of combat experience in this crazy-quilt scheme is not easy to trace.

Nevertheless, good studies of combat are available. Two of my favorites (very different in thrust) are *The March to the Sea and Beyond* by Joseph Glatthaar and *Battle Tactics of the Civil War* by Paddy Griffith.

Many authors have continued to keep an eye on headquarters, stimulated perhaps by the abiding interest of Civil War Round Tablers in rating the war's commanders,



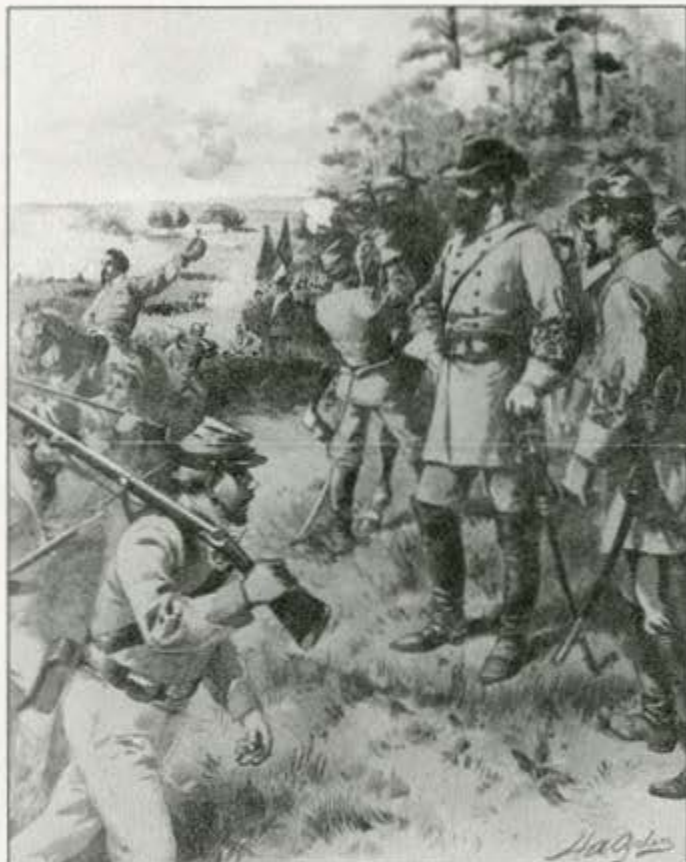
A common soldier of the Civil War.



Reputation falling?

Spotting trends here is not easy, but Robert E. Lee's reputation has certainly been bruised by Alan T. Nolan's *Lee Considered*. Conversely, the focus of work in progress suggests that the war's hard fighters are now more in vogue. The University of North Carolina Press is preparing an edition of William T. Sherman's selected correspondence, and John F. Marszalek is preparing a study of Sherman. On the other side, James Robertson is at work on a biography of the Confederacy's most uncompromisingly fierce general, "Stonewall" Jackson. The able military historian Charles Royster has written a book that focuses on both Sherman and Jackson.

Explicit in many of the works mentioned here, and implicit in most of the remainder, is the modern grand-strategic paradigm of the war. It informs our era's ultimate book of Civil War synthesis, the masterful *Battle Cry of Freedom* of James M. McPherson. This survey will surely stand up for a long, long time, because so many of its conclusions are correct — on prisons and on medicine, for example, not to mention its overall emphasis on the idea that the war's outcome was not inevitable but hinged instead on daily battlefield events and on political and diplomatic efforts and decisions.

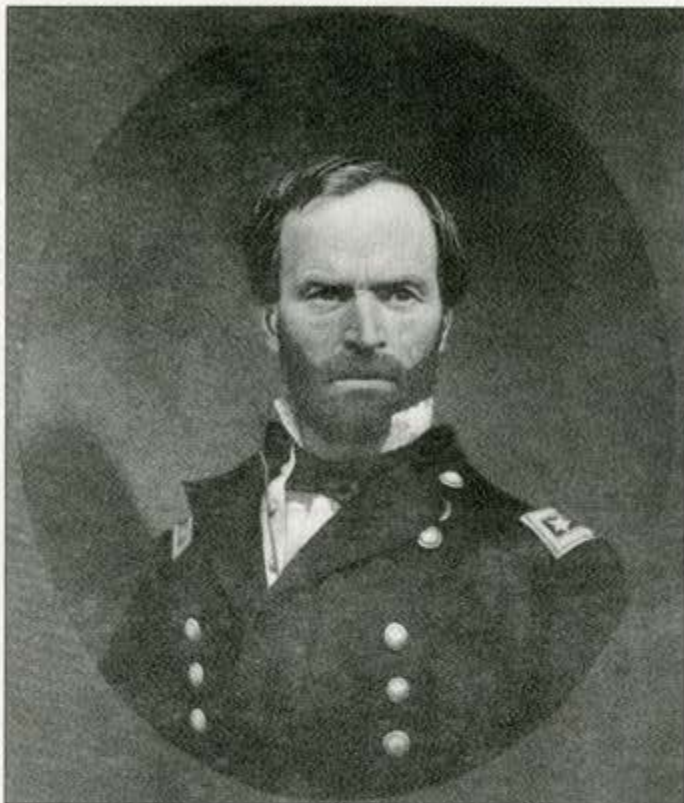


Reputation rising?

The decision that had to be reached in Washington before the North could win, McPherson and most other Civil War writers today would agree, was to fight the war as a modern "total war," to reject the old-fashioned standards of limited war, and to opt for commanders like Sherman and U.S. Grant who would fight with unlimited ferocity. The other great modern synthetic work, Phillip Paludan's *"A People's Contest": The Union and the Civil War*, likewise invokes the idea of total war but in a more hesitant fashion.

Let us hope that this hesitation constitutes the first crack in the modern monolith of "total war" interpretation, for this all-informing paradigm is surely a model on the verge of disintegration — like the Soviet Union a decade ago, a powerful presence that can, once questioned and scrutinized, simply crumble.

The effect of reading Civil War books has been to convince me of the opposite of their overt message, and I have written about this recently in *Civil War History* in an article entitled "Was the Civil War a Total War?" What is striking about that conflict, in which almost no civilians were killed, was its restrained conventionality and time-bound nineteenth-century nature. It hardly resembles twentieth-century warfare at all and was in fact the war that gave the world



Total war practitioner?

the codified rules of war that are winked at and ignored by the twentieth-century's ruthless commanders. Francis Lieber's *General Orders Number 100*, published for the Union armies in 1863, became the basis of the modern code of war.

Read these books and you will discover an irretrievable, antique, and romantic war. The Civil War, the political system that caused it, and the president who guided it are all more remote and inaccessible than ever to twentieth-century understanding. Whatever the nineteenth-century contained that led its citizens to devote themselves so passionately to formal public and political causes, that undergirded a better-than-80% voter turnout in the North in the election of 1860, that inspired 620,000 Americans to die for their nationalistic causes, that made Americans fight harder than ever before and harder than they would ever fight again, that seems past and gone, distant and difficult to understand. The Civil War seems a pre-modern conflict fought by eighteenth-century rules and techniques interpreted by Christian gentlemen raised in a long-lost agrarian society that instilled in them an unimaginable appetite for romantic self-sacrifice and individual heroism. ♣

MARY TODD LINCOLN'S SPIRIT PHOTOGRAPH

by Mark E. Neely, Jr.

Because Mary Todd Lincoln's spiritualism embarrassed her family, she played it down in her correspondence with non-spiritualists. Her son Robert feared that swindlers posing as spiritualists might defraud the desolate widow of her considerable wealth. However, when Robert had his mother declared legally insane in 1875, his lawyer chose not to emphasize Mrs. Lincoln's spiritualism as proof of insanity, probably because of a recent crusade against such practices led by Elizabeth Packard.

Thus Mary Todd Lincoln's spiritualism has long been obscured by powerful historical forces. It would probably



Mary Todd Lincoln and spirit.



William H. Mumler

be even less well known, were it not for the existence of a "spirit photograph" of Mrs. Lincoln. The silly portrait, in which Abraham Lincoln's ghostly hands appear smaller than Mary's, was reproduced in Catherine Coffin Phillips' biography of Cornelius Cole. The Lincoln Museum's example of Mrs. Lincoln's spirit photograph offers important new information, for the carte-de-visite bears a backstamp: "Specialty by Mumler, 170 West Springfield St., Boston, Mass." This surely referred to William H. Mumler, who in 1869 operated a photographic studio in New York specializing in spirit photographs. The city's mayor, however, suspecting fraud, caused a marshal to enter the studio under a false name, pose for a photograph, and then testify in court that the ghost that appeared in Mumler's portrait of him, was not recognizable. The resulting case led to an expose on the front page of *Harper's Weekly*. Apparently, it also led Mumler to leave for Boston, which he might have regarded as more spiritual territory than Manhattan. The fact that Mrs. Lincoln sent a copy of the photograph to Mrs. Cole, probably after the Mumler expose, testifies to the desperate widow's gullibility and potential as a victim of more serious spiritualist fraud. ■



Spirit photograph by Mumler.



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Editor Mark E. Neely, Jr.
Editorial Assistant Ruth E. Cook
Staff Writer Matthew N. Vosmeier