

## WARRIOR GENERALS

COMBAT LEADERSHIP IN THE CIVIL WAR<sup>1</sup>REVIEWED BY MAJOR JOHN M. BICKERS<sup>2</sup>

*“The tens of thousands of books written about the Civil War can daunt the researcher.”*<sup>3</sup>

Thomas B. Buell, author of *The Warrior Generals: Combat Leadership in the Civil War*, does not note them, but two other perils face such a researcher. Faced with yet another addition to those tens of thousands, a reader must inevitably ask what this book contributes. Specifically, one is bound to ask why this book was written, and how it differs from its myriad predecessors.

Buell answers the first question boldly. The quality of existing scholarship disturbs him: “[M]uch of the war’s history is biased and distorted.”<sup>4</sup> With an unfortunate tendency to broad generalization, he argues that the “misconceptions are pervasive and widespread, even among those who are in a position to know better.”<sup>5</sup>

To right wrongs is a noble but difficult goal. A brief, narrative-heavy book will not end the battles that rage about the meaning of the Civil War. In his attempt to do just that, Buell adopts an unusual style for illuminating the war. He focuses on the lives and careers of six generals, three from each side. By limiting his inquiry to six men, Buell presents a microcosm of the conflict that he hopes will shine light into the darkness of historical error.

He chose his subjects well. In Ulysses Grant and Robert E. Lee, he has the obligatory presence of the senior military commander of each side. In the slightly less well-known George Thomas and John Bell Hood, he

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1. THOMAS B. BUELL, *THE WARRIOR GENERALS: COMBAT LEADERSHIP IN THE CIVIL WAR* (1997).

2. Judge Advocate General’s Corps, United States Army. Written while assigned as a student, 47th Judge Advocate Officer Graduate Course, The Judge Advocate General’s School, United States Army, Charlottesville, Virginia.

3. BUELL, *supra* note 1, at 445.

4. *Id.* at xxviii.

5. *Id.*

adds officers at the tactical level who rose to operational command by the war's end. In the still less notorious Francis Barlow and John Gordon, he presents men without military background who rose to senior tactical commands on the basis of amply demonstrated ability.

To bring them into more stark relief, Mr. Buell then assigns these men to archetypes. Lest the reader misidentify them, he identifies the generals both in the introduction and in the captions to a series of portraits that open the book. Thus Grant becomes the Yeoman, while Lee is the Aristocrat; Thomas is a Roman, and Hood a Knight-Errant; and Barlow, the Puritan, squares off against Gordon, the Cavalier.

This series of mini-biographies provides *Warrior Generals* its greatest strength, and, paradoxically, its predominant weaknesses. Buell worked hard with original source documents to paint pictures of these six men, yet scholarly flaws haunt the book. He spends considerable effort to revise commonly held views, but he frequently misfires or overstates his case. His archetypes serve as effective and illuminating guides for the war, but several of them fit their subjects only through procrustean manipulations. Finally, these archetypes never illustrate anything important about the nature of leadership.

Buell researched diligently to construct his portraits. Yet that very research left him vulnerable to conspicuous errors and an undue trust in self-serving statements. Researchers must always account for the bias of their original sources. As an example, Gordon needed to obtain supplies for his hungry soldiers during the 1863 Pennsylvania offensive. *Warrior Generals* uncritically repeats the southern general's report that "under the orders of the Confederate commander-in-chief both private property and non-combatants were safe," and that his men would "give any price" for the bread, milk, and other supplies they needed from the local citizens.<sup>6</sup> Buell fails to note that the Army of Northern Virginia possessed no money of any value to the local citizenry. Gordon's men "paid" for supplies from Pennsylvania farmers with useless Confederate bills. Not the goodness of Gordon's soldiers, but the fear they inspired, was responsible for this commerce.<sup>7</sup>

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6. *Id.* at 226.

7. Professor Michael Jacobs, who taught chemistry and mathematics at Pennsylvania College in Gettysburg, described the Confederate looting of the countryside: "They there reenacted their old farce of professing to pay for what they took by offering freely their worthless Confederate scrip, which they said would, in a few days, be better than our own currency." RICHARD WHEELER, WITNESS TO GETTYSBURG 88 (1987).

Small—but distracting—errors abound. In one instance, Buell identifies both Joseph J. Reynolds and John F. Reynolds as the commander of the Army of the Cumberland's Fourth Division at Chickamauga.<sup>8</sup> Joseph commanded the division; John had died two months earlier at Gettysburg.<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, Buell attempted to inoculate himself from charges of slipshod scholarship with this rather remarkable manifesto:

My approach to research on a given topic is to identify the *valid* sources of information, examine all of those I can readily access, and then draw reasoned inferences and conclusions from the data. My research on a topic ends under one or more of the following conditions: (1) when *credible* multiple sources repeat themselves; (2) when *my intuition* tells me what to believe if sources are contradictory; (3) when I have a source which *I have come to consider as so consistently reliable* that I can use it repeatedly to the exclusion of others. I do not consult additional references ad infinitum simply because they exist, especially if I feel that I have learned what I need to know. I say this because some scholars find fulfillment in the act of research alone, and seem always in search of yet one more reference before they feel their study to be complete. In such cases nothing gets written.<sup>10</sup>

This paragraph will probably not protect his work from criticism.

Although the great purpose of *Warrior Generals* is worthy, Buell does not fulfill it. He sets out to rectify errors and correct myths. The myths that particularly interest him are that the eastern theatre was more important than the western, that Lee was a great general, and that his Roman, Thomas, was slow and defensively oriented.

Indeed, much Civil War literature treats the events in Virginia, Maryland, and Pennsylvania as the most important of the war. Perhaps, as Buell argues, scholars have neglected the western campaigns.<sup>11</sup> This book, however, does nothing to remedy that situation.

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8. BUELL, *supra* note 1, at 254, 267.

9. WHEELER, *supra* note 7, at 126 (1987).

10. BUELL, *supra* note 1, at 445-46 (emphasis added).

11. The current trend for Civil War historians does seem to flow in the opposite direction. For an example of overemphasis on the western theater, see Peter A. Young, *Rethinking the Civil War: Winning it in the West*, *ARCHAEOLOGY*, July/Aug. 1998, at 2.

Buell fails to solve the problem because he divides the war into segments: 1861 and 1862 form a section, then 1863, followed by 1864, and finally a “Finis” section that recounts the final months. Within each segment, the author considers the East first. The very size of these sections defeats Buell’s purpose. The reader travels from the dawn of the war to Antietam before first encountering events in the West. Subconsciously, the reader must conclude that Virginia was preeminent.

This may not be a coincidence: Buell’s “myth” may be historically correct. The eastern focus accounts for the military principle of centers of gravity. Centers of gravity are those points at which a force must defeat its enemy to win the conflict.<sup>12</sup> Early in the war, each side believed its capital was its center. Later, Grant came to view the Army of Northern Virginia, which operated only in the eastern front, as the South’s center of gravity.<sup>13</sup>

Buell’s failure to recognize the importance of centers of gravity leads to the harsh and sometimes unfair criticisms that make up the second, and most visible, revision of conventional wisdom in his book. He hopes to humble Robert E. Lee. Buell sharply identifies the problem: virtually all biographies of Lee are hagiographies.<sup>14</sup> To counter the bias he sees in these works, Buell finds fault with Lee’s organization of the force, his logistical operations, and his planning of offensives. Oddly, he neglects the one extraordinary facet of Lee’s character that even detractors must acknowledge: his enormous ability to lead soldiers.

Buell argues that Lee did not organize his force for success because he only planned for the short term. Believing in the superiority of Southern infantry, Lee kept as many men in ranks as possible by sacrificing staffs, engineering, communications, and intelligence. His cavalry never fought in a combined arms organization.<sup>15</sup>

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12. “Joint doctrine defines a center of gravity as: ‘That characteristic, capability, or locality from which a military force, nation, or alliance derives its freedom of action, physical strength, or will to fight.’” THE JOINT CHIEFS OF STAFF, JOINT PUB. 1, JOINT WARFARE OF THE U.S. ARMED FORCES, 11 Nov. 1991, at 34 (quoting THE JOINT CHIEFS OF STAFF, JOINT PUB. 0-1, BASIC NAT’L DEFENSE DOCTRINE).

13. Thus McClellan aimed his 1862 Peninsular Campaign at *Richmond*; Grant’s Overland Campaign of two years later bypassed Richmond because he was aiming at *Lee*. See BUELL, *supra* note 1, at 299.

14. *Id.* at 448.

15. *Id.* at 96.

*Warrior Generals* subjects Lee's logistics to a withering fire as well. The seceding states had less industry and wealth than those that remained loyal to the Union. Buell punctures the myth, however, that the United States won the war solely because of an advantage in materiel. Although the Confederacy had less to give, Lee neither asked of what they had nor did he organize what he received. In his first Civil War campaign, fought in what became West Virginia, Lee never sought supplies.<sup>16</sup> In his last, he was cornered at Appomattox Court House while trying to retrieve an ill-placed supply train on his way to a rendezvous with the forces of Joe Johnston.<sup>17</sup> At every campaign Lee's men went short of food, shoes, and equipment.

Buell especially faults Lee's weak mapping activity. Although Lee fought primarily in his home state, his forces were often mapless and lost. The Confederacy employed fewer cartographers than the Union. Lee exacerbated his difficulties by employing his mapmakers almost exclusively to make reports after battles, rather than to plan before them.<sup>18</sup> Even when the Army of Northern Virginia sat for months near what would be significant battlefields, such as Fredricksburg and the sites of the 1864 Overland Campaign, the United States Army consistently had the better maps.

In his attacks on Lee's offensives, Buell reveals something of his own view of military art that reappears with the treatment of each leader at the operational or strategic level: his dislike of the offensive. Buell takes Lee to task both for the 1862 invasion that culminated prematurely at Antietam,<sup>19</sup> and for the one the following year whose high water mark occurred at Gettysburg.<sup>20</sup> He argues that Lee had no business putting an army with questionable logistical support into hostile territory, and that by doing so he merely wasted the lives of men he led.

In Lee's defense, this is not only hindsight: it is unhelpful hindsight. True, the Union victory at Antietam allowed President Lincoln to publish the Emancipation Proclamation. True, also, the following year's triumph at Gettysburg provided a vital morale boost throughout the North. To

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16. *Id.* at 49.

17. *Id.* at 420.

18. *Id.* at 212. Oddly, for an author so focussed on the role of the cartographer, Buell provides the reader with very few maps. Readers will quickly find themselves grabbing for a survey of the war just to follow the events on its maps.

19. *Id.* at 107-8.

20. *Id.* at 223.

claim that the campaigns were wrong because they ended in defeat, however, offers nothing positive. A fair critique would compare Lee's invasions to a better alternative. Buell does not do so because he simply does not believe in offensives. Lee took and lost two gambles. Their loss does not mean they were not worth taking.

George Thomas, on the other hand, never took any operational gambles. Buell lauds his Roman for his staff coordination, his logistical skills, and his emphasis on map-making. He rejects utterly the standard charge laid against Thomas: that he was ponderous and defense-oriented. Buell shares Thomas's rage over Grant's 1864 demand that he leave his Nashville defenses and attack.<sup>21</sup> Oddly, the reader understands why Grant insisted. Earlier, *Warrior Generals* recounts the Confederacy's use of its interior lines to transfer Longstreet's Corps from the front of an idle Army of the Potomac to reinforce the Army of Tennessee. That Corps then played the critical role in the battle of Chickamauga.<sup>22</sup> Grant must have realized that an idle Thomas would allow Hood to reinforce either of the other two major Confederate armies in the field. To end the war, Grant had to attack relentlessly on all fronts. This dire need to keep all northern forces moving at once contrasts sharply with Thomas's petulant refusal to attack.

Buell's defense of Thomas at his worst moment stems from the archetype itself. Having committed to the notion of Thomas as Roman, Buell must defend his decisions. But Thomas was no Roman: he had neither that society's cultivated stoicism nor its brutal savagery.<sup>23</sup> Twice the national authorities asked him to take command on the eve of battle. Twice he refused. Buell argues that this shows both an unwillingness to disrupt a unit during a time of crisis and a deep loyalty to his commanders.<sup>24</sup> That same behavior, however, demonstrates that Thomas was willing to put his own views ahead of those of higher headquarters. His refusal to accept the tendered commands left inferior officers in leadership positions, and cost his men dearly in blood. Despite having rejected it when initially offered, Thomas raged about promotion by the national government later than he felt he deserved.<sup>25</sup> One subordinate referred to Thomas as "morbidly sen-

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21. *Id.* at 399.

22. *Id.* at 258.

23. EDITH HAMILTON, *THE ROMAN WAY*, 154-56, 204-5 (1932) (discussing Roman savagery and stoicism, respectively).

24. BUELL, *supra* note 1, at 185, 275.

25. *Id.* at 407.

sitive.”<sup>26</sup> Some Roman generals doubtless behaved in this way—but that is not the Roman archetype.

Therein lies the great weakness of the model. Lee was certainly an aristocrat, and Grant’s dogged determination qualifies him for the title yeoman. The other men do not fit Buell’s archetypes. Gordon appears, at first glance, every inch the cavalier. Fiery politician and proselytizer for slavery, he became the dashing, self-made leader of a dying cause. Yet Buell also faithfully records Gordon’s religious fervor—a wrathful, righteous rage that ran from his near fatal wound in the Bloody Angle at Antietam. Such pious fury does not fit easily within the cavalier ideal. Likewise, Hood always viewed himself as a knight-errant. In pursuit of equal measures of righteous goals, personal glory, and fair maidens, the “Gallant Hood of Texas” studiously cultivated this chivalric view of himself. The wounds he suffered and defeats he led stripped from him the veneer of nobility. By the end of the war a brutal and brooding Hood stares out at us from *Warrior Generals*, blaming others for his failures and hating the misfortune that left him broken physically.

Barlow is the strangest of all. Although he shared their geographic origin, he was less a Puritan than many another senior officer of his generation. The Puritans sought to reform state as well as church;<sup>27</sup> Barlow, obsessed with the magnificence of his own performance as an officer, grouched, “I hardly think this disgusting country is worth fighting for.”<sup>28</sup> The Puritans’ Calvinist tradition provided a wellspring for abolitionism and racial equality;<sup>29</sup> Barlow in his conversations relied on racial slurs.<sup>30</sup>

Two scenes especially reveal this odd man from New England. The first occurred on the sixth of the Seven Days, fought near Richmond in 1862. As the Army of the Potomac began its retreat, Barlow marched his men away. He wished one of his now-wounded officers well, before abandoning him to the enemy. Astonishingly, Buell is neither reproachful nor embarrassed.<sup>31</sup> An equivalent scene involving Lee is unimaginable.

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26. *Id.* at 408.

27. MICHAEL HALL, *THE LAST AMERICAN PURITAN* 13-14 (1988). The title refers to Increase Mather.

28. BUELL, *supra* note 1, at 63.

29. JAMES BREWER STEWART, *HOLY WARRIORS* 20-21 (1976).

30. BUELL, *supra* note 1, at 208.

31. *Id.* at 84.

The second incident took place after the death of his adoring wife, Arabella. She, like Fanny Gordon, had followed her husband from battle to battle, and nursed him back to health after he was critically wounded. After her death, a friend described that Barlow would soon marry “some young woman, who will share his glory.”<sup>32</sup> A Puritan would not leave a close friend with such an impression.

These archetypes, then, are helpful, but have limitations. Ultimately, Buell never uses his six subjects to investigate the question that lurks just beneath the surface of *Warrior Generals*: What makes a senior leader successful in combat? He discusses six wildly different men: they have different backgrounds, different goals, different styles, and even different value systems. Lee had a courtly, non-confrontational style. Grant impressed his men with the sheer force of his will. Thomas planned steadily and carefully. Hood charged to the front, ever the paladin on his steed. Gordon the orator harangued his men to greatness. Barlow ruled through fear and violence, alternately praising his men and intimidating them. These men had little in common: yet all were successful leaders. Even Hood, militarily the most dramatic failure in the group, did not fail because his men would no longer follow him. Indeed, his failure is the more poignant because his men were perfectly willing to immolate themselves pointlessly at his command.

Yet not all leadership styles are effective. There wander through *Warrior Generals* some officers who could not lead: men like McDowell, Bragg, and Burnside. Something these men had—or lacked—made their men distrustful, unconfident, or openly rebellious. An archetypal study might provide great insights into why such differing styles can be effective, and why others cannot. Buell could have used his considerable research and writing abilities to illuminate the nature of leadership. Sadly, he chose to expend energy instead debunking the “myths” of the importance of the eastern theater, and of the relative talent of Lee, Thomas, and the others. These disputes are unquestionably interesting, but ultimately trivial. The misfortune of *Warrior Generals* is that a work that could have cast much light instead produces mostly the heat of controversy.

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32. *Id.* at 343. Barlow remarried three years later.