
The Union Army, 1861–1865: Organization and Operations is exactly what its title describes, and more. In his introduction Frank J. Welcher states that his “single aim” is to provide “a complete and continuous account of the organization of all Union military divisions, departments, armies, army corps, divisions, and brigades, and the numerous special commands that were in existence during the war” (p. xiv). The “special commands” range from the military response to the New York draft riots to the Invalid Corps (Veteran Reserve Corps). The author also, under the rubric of “operations,” gives extensive narrative accounts of campaigns and battles.

Welcher, an emeritus professor of chemistry at Indiana University and Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis, begins his monumental work with a general description of the constitutional and statutory command structure of the nation’s military system in 1861 and ends with detailed reports of Union military forces and operations from Aenon Church to Yorktown. The arrangement is alphabetical rather than chronological or geographical. Each entry is more than a listing of the officers and the units under their command; Welcher also provides a blow-by-blow account of all military actions. In these accounts the author necessarily abandons his position of disinterested objectivity and offers personal interpretations.

The Union Army, 1861–1865, is volume one of what is apparently planned as a two-volume work. It covers only the eastern theater of operations. It contains no maps, no footnotes, no bibliography, and no index. These omissions will be more of a handicap to the student or buff than to the scholar. Welcher used the 128 volumes of the Official Records as his basic source of information. The Union Army invites comparison with Fred A. Shannon's The Organization and Administration of the Union Army (1965), but the two works are quite different; Shannon's opinionated narrative analyzes process, while Welcher describes structure.

Only intensive use by many different scholars can evaluate the reliability of The Union Army. This reader, for example, discovered that Welcher has General Charles Stone released from confinement August 6, 1862, while Mark M. Boatner's Civil War Dictionary (1959) gives the date as August 16. Although the high price may limit Welcher's book largely to libraries, all students of Civil War history will find volume one of The Union Army an invaluable reference. Welcher claims that his massive study is a special kind of history, different from others. It is. Its perspective
repays the browser as well as the person seeking specific information.

William L. Burton is professor of history, Western Illinois University, Macomb. His most recent work is Melting Pot Soldiers: The Union’s Ethnic Regiments (1988).


Those who lived though the 1960s and 1970s witnessed a stunning example of a small, undeveloped agricultural nation holding at bay a huge, well-developed industrial state and ultimately securing the right to pursue its destiny undisturbed by its erstwhile tormentor. How did the Vietnamese supply the means of over-balancing the material superiority of their enemy? The answer is manifestly complex, but clearly the most formidable obstacle against which American policy shattered was the resolve of the Vietnamese simply to fight on. They were borne up by some inner resource, some nonmaterial dimension of the nation itself. While not unique in history, the historic proportions of the Vietnamese example will unavoidably force historians to seek explanatory paradigms for analyzing and understanding wars characterized by a similarly disproportionate disposal of force.

The authors of The Elements of Confederate Defeat undertake to explain the reasons for the defeat of the southern Confederacy. In this volume they reaffirm an argument developed at great length in their earlier study, Why the South Lost the Civil War (1986). Indeed, readers of the present work will find entire chapters carried over from the earlier publication. In both works the authors contend that the South was defeated because it lacked the necessary morale and the will to pay the price that victory demanded.

The argument is an interesting one, but it is slippery at best. It rests principally upon three considerations: nationalism, what might be called “double-acting” religious perceptions, and a paralytic sense of guilt over the institution of slavery. The South did not develop a true sense of nationalism, the authors argue. Religion, which initially explained defeats by the well-worn “time-of-testing” twist, moved gradually to interpreting suffering as punishment for sins and finally resolved itself into a view that Union successes represented God’s condemnation of the Confederate cause. The institution of slavery, despite protestations to the contrary, suffused the southern mentality with a sense of guilt that