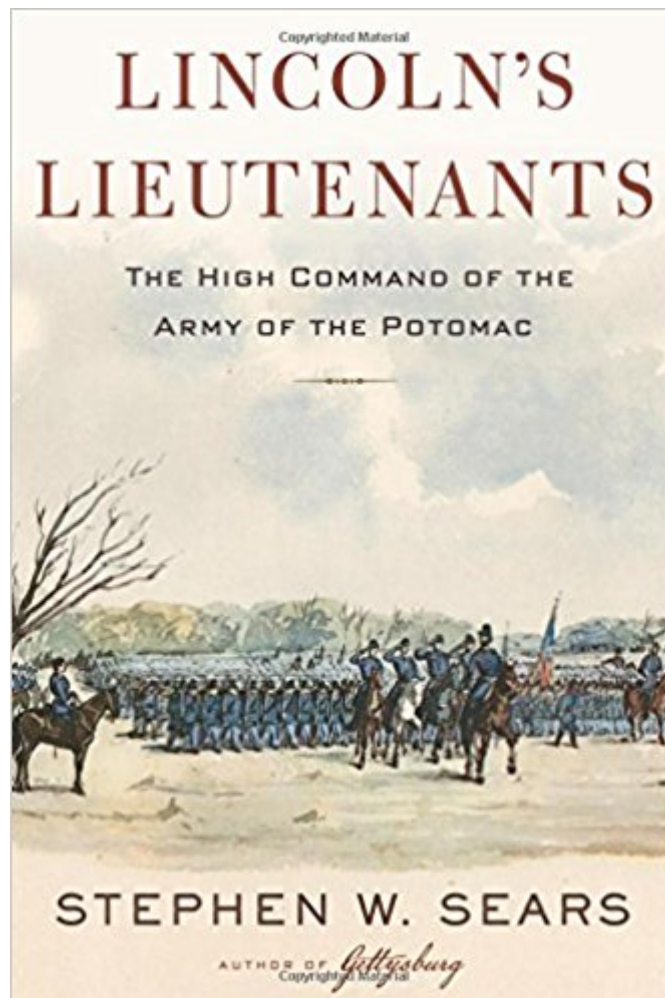




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Lincoln's Lieutenants: The High Command Of The Army Of The Potomac



Synopsis

From the best-selling author of *Gettysburg*, a multilayered group biography of the commanders who led the Army of the Potomac. The high command of the Army of the Potomac was a changeable, often dysfunctional band of brothers, going through the fires of war under seven commanding generals in three years, until Grant came east in 1864. The men in charge all too frequently appeared to be fighting against the administration in Washington instead of for it, increasingly cast as political pawns facing down a vindictive congressional Committee on the Conduct of the War. President Lincoln oversaw, argued with, and finally tamed his unruly team of generals as the eastern army was stabilized by an unsung supporting cast of corps, division, and brigade generals. With characteristic style and insight, Stephen Sears brings these courageous, determined officers, who rose through the ranks and led from the front, to life.

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Customer Reviews

“A masterful synthesis...a narrative about amazing courage and astonishing gutlessness. It explains why Union movements worked and, more often, didn’t work in clear-eyed explanatory prose that’s vivid and direct.” —Chicago Tribune

“A monumental group biography reminds us that the outcome of the war was not a foregone conclusion.” —The Wall Street Journal

“Massive, elegant study...a staggering work of research by a masterly historian.” —Kirkus, STARRED

STEPHEN W. SEARS is the author of many award-winning books on the Civil War, including Gettysburg and Landscape Turned Red. A former editor at American Heritage, he lives in Connecticut.

My first Civil War books read --- many years ago --- were Catton's trilogy on the Army of the Potomac (AotP). That probably started me on my long odyssey of CW reading, and I've read a lot on this hard luck army and its travails since then. As far as dedicated AotP histories, Catton's texts have largely been superseded as "serious" history due to their anecdotal style and lack of footnotes, along with the utterly awful / nonexistent maps, but there has been no real replacement of impeccable quality either. Jeffrey Wert's "Sword of Lincoln" of 2005 (for instance) was also a disappointment, as though it had better maps and was scholarly in its apparatus, was also a rehash of everything else I ever read on the AotP, and had very little new to add. If every page reminds one of Shelby Foote's first volume of his civil war history from 1958, why bother trudging on through a "new" book? Enter Stephen Sears, who has written several excellent campaign histories of the CW Eastern Theater (Antietam, Peninsula, Chancellorsville, and Gettysburg) as well as much about General McClellan. Besides being very, very old at this point, Sears has also covered a lot of background details about the AotP in his other books. Could he add anything new to this endlessly rehashed subject? In a word, yes. Sears focuses more on high command interactions, personalities of the generals and their staffs, and the institutional structure of the AotP. This sort of material is usually the background to campaign studies, but here Sears inverts the usual approach and the campaigns are instead background to the institutional history. This may sound dull, but it is not, as Sears is graceful and highly skilled writer, and his campaigns and battles material is well done and, of course, occurs frequently enough to make things interesting. More significantly, Sears makes the info on the generals seem fascinating - between flamboyant characters like Sickles and Kearny, intriguing failures like Sigel and Heintzelman, and McC's cadre of sycophants like Porter and Franklin, Sears has an eye for telling detail and interesting (well-documented!) anecdote. Sears also ranges into interesting topics like the reasons why McClellan -- a cavalry officer -- presided over such an awful cavalry arm when he was commander in chief - and contrasts Union and Confederate handling of artillery organization. To a CW reader like me who has been hearing peripherally about these matters in numerous campaign studies, it's intriguing to finally get the full story covered with all the details illuminated. What you won't find in here: life in the trenches stuff - no snippets or quotes about the grunt's eye view of battle experiences. Sears (and many other writers) does this sort of thing in the battle and campaign books. I was fine with this, as there are soooo many other

places to hear about that subject. Sears also does not go into the Southern side of things to any great level of detail, so there are no comparisons between AotP leaders and various Southern generals. Again, this is fine as far as I am concerned, as this is not the main purpose of the book. Criticisms? Only one, but an important one. The maps... The stumbling block of all too many otherwise decent CW books again raises its ugly head. The maps here are nicely done visually and include every town name, road, river etc, which is rare and good, BUT... no troop movements or even starting formation locations are shown. The troop movements mentioned in the texts have to be puzzled out by the reader, and if you don't know that the Union was moving in x direction at a given battle, it can be hard to figure out what is going on. This is no minor omission, as part of Sears' theme is that Howard was a good general because he did Z at C battle, while Keyes was not so good because he did Y instead. if you can't track the maneuvers on the map, it makes it tough to see Sears' points. I am tempted to take a star off for this but did not do so for two reasons. First, I assume most persons reading a 900 page history on the AotP are probably pretty familiar with the CW, and so can probably follow along on the maps from memory, or can dig out other books and use those as references. Secondly, this was an advance reading copy, so the maps might be modified between this version and the actual printing. I hope that happens as better maps would make this more enjoyable to a wider audience. All in all, I learned a lot from this volume, and feel Sears has outdone himself here. This is his longest book by far, and his readable style, fair-minded objectivity, and ability to master a huge amount of material and convey it to the reader without making the process a dull slog remain fully intact. As mentioned, Sears is advanced in years at this point (84 years old at time of writing) so this may be his last book. I hope not, as I always hoped for one or more Overland Campaign studies from him, but if this is indeed his swan song, he is ending his career on the highest possible note. For new CW readers, I will say only that this is a fine book for anyone with an interest in the subject as long as they have a reasonable familiarity with the overall subject of the Civil War in the East. I would not recommend coming to this large detailed volume "cold", that is with no prior reading done on the war. Maybe read McPherson's "Battle Cry of Freedom" first and then come here if you are an utter novice. TLDR: not necessarily for amateurs, and needs better maps, but experienced CW readers will love this, and the story of the tragic AotP is an utterly fascinating one. Sears is maybe the finest CW writer alive at present, and he does a great job telling an important and interesting story here.

Stephen W. Sears is one of the three or four most eminent Civil War authors active today. Among other books, he has written leading accounts of Antietam, the Peninsula Campaign,

Chancellorsville, and Gettysburg. My guess is that LINCOLN'S LIEUTENANTS is as close to an overall history of the Civil War as we are likely to get from Sears (he now is 84). It is a large (766 pages of text), knowledgeable, and immensely informative book, one that easily justifies his status as a leading Civil War historian. As an overall history of the Civil War, LINCOLN'S LIEUTENANTS is told through the prism of the Army of the Potomac (which started out as the Army of Northeastern Virginia). It covers what that Army did from its formation in June 1861 through Lee's surrender at Appomattox in April 1865. The focus of the book is on the Army's generals -- from the commanding generals (MacDowell, McClellan, Burnside, Hooker, Meade, and Grant) to the underlings who led the various corps and brigades -- and how they performed, both in battle and as a member of a military organization. The special slant of Sears's book is that he does not consider the performance of the high command solely in military terms. Rather, Sears expands his inquiry to consider the civilian and political factors that influenced the conduct of the generals of the Army of the Potomac, as personified by President Lincoln, the Cabinet (especially the Secretary of War), the Congress, and the press. "This meddling -- pervasive and never-ending -- led the Army of the Potomac's officer corps, all too often, to worry about the enemy in the rear as well as the enemy in front." Sears also considers how the various Union generals cooperated with and supported one another . . . or didn't. Sears provides detailed accounts of the many battles and campaigns waged by the Army of the Potomac, including First and Second Bull Run, the Peninsula Campaign, Antietam, Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville, Gettysburg, the Wilderness and Spotsylvania, Cold Harbor, and the siege of Petersburg. In each case, Sears's focus is on first-, second-, and third-level commanders. At the end of most of these discussions, Sears provides a report card of sorts on the Union command. There are heroes and there are duds. We all know that Grant was a hero. Sears's assessment of George Meade is more favorable and admiring than most that I have read. Another of his heroes is Henry Hunt, Chief of Artillery. The list of duds is longer. Heading it is George B. McClellan. I have never read a more unfavorable overall assessment of the Young Napoleon. It is now generally accepted that McClellan was predisposed to believing that his Army was outnumbered, that he was overly cautious, and that he often was childish and petulant. Though never quite so explicit, Sears presents McClellan as a coward, far too interested in staying out of harm's way. In addition, McClellan too often was a poor communicator during battle, and many of his tactical decisions were suspect. Worse, there were times when McClellan seemed to root for, and then savor, rival commanders in the Union Army coming to grief. I am left wondering whether any other major U.S. Army ever was led by a commander quite that bad. Shifting perspective to the civilian front, as Sears presents him, Secretary of War Edwin Stanton was a blackguard through and

through. The book includes over 150 black-and-white images. In my advanced reading copy, many of the reproductions of drawings or paintings are not sufficiently sharp, but I trust that will not be the case in the final published version of the book. There also are thirteen maps. Rather than containing schematic diagrams of the opposing forces, they are detailed maps of the relevant geography -- towns, villages, rivers and creeks, roads and railroads -- while several of them also add topographical features such as mountains and wooded areas. I found these maps quite useful. There is a mass of detail in *LINCOLN'S LIEUTENANTS*, so much so that it cannot be recommended to a novice reader on the Civil War. But for someone who already has a good understanding of the War and the major battles fought by the Army of the Potomac, it is a very rewarding book.

Great overview of the Army of the Potomac. I listened to the audio version of this book. I have previously read *Gettysburg* by Stephen Sears. Here are some of the points that I got out of this book:

1. The degree of crippling political machination within Lincoln's cabinet and numerous Generals within the Army of the Potomac.
2. The incompetence of Gen McClellan. While waiting on the Peninsula in front of ghost Confederate armies, the western Union forces have achieved victories at New Orleans, Island 10, Fort Henry and Fort Donelson.
3. Gen Burnside knew his level of competence. He was forced to take command after turning it down three times.
4. Gen Hooker's reorganization of the Army of the Potomac. Consolidation of the cavalry, centralized control of the artillery, creation of an intelligence branch.
5. Up until now, I always believed that Gen Hooker lost the Battle of Chancellorsville due to his incompetence. The outcome of the battle was determined by Gen Howard's inability to refuse his fight flank after being ordered three times.
6. The well deserved reputation of Hancock the Superb.
7. The extreme competence and professionalism of Gen George Meade.

Again, I listened to this book over several weeks on my commute to and from work.

This book is a really important addition to the never ending Civil War catalogue. It is a book that allows you to understand the political (both within and outside the army), training and logistical issues that affected the union efforts in the East during the Civil War. It puts a fair number of the failures and decisions that led to failures into a more understandable context. A really good and important book for those that are not satisfied with reading one or two books about the Civil War.

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