
Hagerman, Edward. *The American Civil War and the Origins of Modern Warfare: Ideas, Organization, and Field Command*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988.

Ben Sorensen

Edward Hagerman, an Associate Professor of History at York University and an expert in the vagaries of tactics and strategy as well as the general workings of supply and entrenchment, wrote many works on military strategy. However, in *The American Civil War and the Origins of Modern Warfare: Ideas, Organization, and Field Command*, Hagerman took his expertise to extraordinary levels in his assessment of Civil War generalship. In this book, he made daring assessments and findings, and gave credit where many other historians often avoid giving praise.

The premise of his book was to survey and analyze the tactics, organization, and strategies of the armies of both the North and the South, and discern the origins of each. One could argue that the first twenty-seven pages of the book contain the most important segment, because in this section he points out the French origins of modern American military practice. Hagerman looked to Napoleon Bonaparte, Antoine-Henri Jomini, and Alfred Thayer Mahan for the foundations of American military strategies. He claimed, and then reinforced, that the American military practice (by virtue of American military writers) “that began to emerge in the 1830’s modified the French influence in response to peculiarly American circumstances, technological change, and the lessons of a number of indecisive wars.”¹

Some reviewers found this book to be unfocused, because the author did not recall his original intent. In his attempt to prove the French origin of American military tactics and document its modification to American necessity, they thought he made the book disjointed in its flow.² Although Hagerman required the reader to keep the principle of the book in mind, it closely follows the original premise, and he drew each argument towards his final point. The book certainly could benefit from tying his arguments more actively with his premise throughout his survey, but his points are no less valid.

When dealing with General George B. McClellan, historians normally lionize the general as a strategist and organizer, but often excoriate his tactics in

accordance with previous assessments from even the Lincoln Administration. Hagerman daringly broke from the standard historiography to show that McClellan had more than just organizational talent; he was the first modern general. Regarding military logistics, Hagerman not only stated, “McClellan’s modification of this system indicated that he sensed the problem,”³ but he also proved that McClellan did not adopt a Prussian system that may have been more effective in solving the difficulties that McClellan faced.⁴ Hagerman cited McClellan’s deep modifications in the artillery⁵ and his innovative use of the telegraph⁶ and semaphore signals to prove that McClellan was a more of a visionary general than contemporary Civil War historians readily admit.

Hagerman was fair in his assessment of McClellan’s personality and about his removal from command, but he still maintained that McClellan’s “military actions are consistent with the arguments he presented in his conscientious official correspondence and reports.”⁷ Here, in dealing with McClellan, Hagerman took his most daring historiographical stand that other historians typically have not readily accepted. He presented McClellan as a visionary in spite of McClellan’s personality flaws of arrogance and timidity. Hagerman focused on McClellan’s faithfulness to the ideas of entrenchment and turning maneuvers rather than the method of frontal attack preferred by other Civil War generals, ideas that would end up winning the war for the North.

Hagerman assessed the other generals of the Civil War by showing that subsequent generals were the beneficiaries of the tactics and organization that McClellan began.⁸ He showed how turning movements and entrenchment, as well as the innovative use of artillery, clearly gave the Union Army an advantage over the Confederate Army. He assessed Lee as a Southern warrior, who based his tactics on élan rather than strategy,⁹ and espoused his views on how the Confederacy forced its army to use antiquated tactics against the more forward thinking army of the North.

In an effort to tie in his premise of the Civil War as the first modern war, he asserted near the end of this book that “the German armies of World War II . . . except for the panzer and other elite motorized units, moved with horse-drawn transportation, were the descendants of Sherman’s army marching through Georgia and the Carolinas.”¹⁰ Hagerman did not elaborate on this topic to prove this point and aided the reader in understanding and drawing a similar conclusion. He also, on the same page, asserted that Sherman influenced the works of B. H. Liddell Hart on strategy and maneuver, again without much elaboration.¹¹ He left the reader feeling

as though he wanted to end the book at all costs.

Taken as a whole, Civil War historians could find the information presented in this book as well as Hagerman's new arguments indispensable. He explored new ideas in Civil War historiography that students of the war can only hope other historians will refine over time. His research was impeccable, but his execution was slightly wanting. Overall, however, this book should be in the library of every military historian.

Notes

1. Edward Hagerman, *The American Civil War and the Origins of Modern Warfare: Ideas, Organization, and Field Command* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 3.

2. Martin Van Creveld, review of *The American Civil War and the Origins of Modern Warfare: Ideas, Organization, and Field Command* by Edward Hagerman, *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 507 (January 1990): 161-162; Robert Mayberry, review of *The American Civil War and the Origins of Modern Warfare: Ideas, Organization, and Field Command* by Edward Hagerman, *The International History Review* 11, no. 4 (November 1989): 737-740.

3. Hagerman, 34.

4. *Ibid.*, 38.

5. *Ibid.*, 39.

6. *Ibid.*, 40.

7. *Ibid.*, 65.

8. *Ibid.*, 70.

9. *Ibid.*, 108.

10. *Ibid.*, 293.

11. *Ibid.*