


2007

The Business of War: Military Mobilization and the State, 1861-1865

Harold S. Wilson
Old Dominion University

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.odu.edu/history_fac_pubs

 Part of the [Military History Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Repository Citation

Wilson, Harold S., "The Business of War: Military Mobilization and the State, 1861-1865" (2007). *History Faculty Publications*. 15.
https://digitalcommons.odu.edu/history_fac_pubs/15

Original Publication Citation

Wilson, H. S. (2007). The business of war: Military mobilization and the state, 1861-1865. *American Historical Review*, 112(3), 854-855. doi:10.1086/ahr.112.3.854

Rose's phrase—buttressed the dominant white view) but also “Yankees,” who were rendered in a similar collection of subhuman images. Thus did a culture under siege define its own version of whiteness. Frost's examples also extend out to the frontier (where the “Chinee” received much the same treatment accorded to blacks east of the Mississippi), and to the question of women's rights in California (though the argument is rather thinner in this chapter than elsewhere). Overall, her book makes a valuable contribution to a number of critical conversations. By showing how whites used the strategy and lexicon of the freak show to shore up their own identity against imaginary racialized creations, Frost provides a revealing perspective on the needs of the dominant group at a time when the ground below it was shaking.

LEONARD CASSUTO
Fordham University

MARK R. WILSON. *The Business of War: Military Mobilization and the State, 1861–1865*. (Johns Hopkins Studies in the History of Technology.) Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press. 2006. Pp. xii, 306. \$45.00.

This is essentially an institutional study of the Union Quartermaster Department in the American Civil War, and its central thesis is that “modern American business and government were shaped directly and indirectly by a military model of administration that had been on display in 1861–1865” (p. 4). While Mark R. Wilson convincingly argues that northern leaders such as Quartermaster General Montgomery Meigs and his regional quartermasters skillfully waged war by exploiting Union advantages in technology and production to devise a vast bureaucracy that employed over one hundred thousand civilian workers, he is less convincing in showing that the lessons of this military economy were taken as a model by later Populist and Progressive reformers and Gilded Age business leaders. Certainly the North's military bureaucracy was prodigious; it made or procured one billion rounds of ammunition, one million horses and mules, six million woolen blankets, and ten million pairs of trousers, but such an outpouring was accompanied by an exhaustive internal debate between those who advocated a mixed economy based on government manufacturing at depots, or “quartermaster entrepreneurialism,” and those who supported “the political power of the producerist vision of military economy,” a free market supply system supported by laissez-faire Republicans (p. 173). Based principally on state and national archives and on Harvard's business collections, this work makes an excellent contribution to the general understanding of Union military institutions and supplements standard studies by Fred A. Shannon and Russell F. Weigley.

Established in 1818 and administered for forty-two years by Brigadier General Thomas S. Jesup, the Union Quartermaster Department was staffed by men trained at West Point and seasoned at isolated outposts across the western frontier. Following the bombardment of

Fort Sumter, the Union encountered an entirely different set of logistical problems from those of the Mormon War or the war with Mexico. The first challenge to the federal military bureaucracy was the northern states, which quickly sallied into the field of production, making contracts with local producers, sending agents abroad, and establishing state-run factories with men, women, children, and prisoners as workers. In efforts rapidly to equip state troops, state quartermasters rushed into production with little method, consistency, or quality control. States competed with federal depots for contracts with large firms like Brooks Brothers. Convinced that states were guilty of favoritism, nepotism, and overpricing of shoddy merchandise, in the fall of 1861 Meigs ordered all state production to cease. In remarkable contrast to the Confederate experience, Meigs succeeded. With the field cleared, Meigs established regional depots, and as needed, dozens of sub-depots. Three depot quartermasters, originally commissioned in 1838, dominated Union purchasing: Thomas Swords (Louisville and Cincinnati), George H. Crosman (Schuylkill Arsenal, Philadelphia), and David H. Vinton (New York) collectively expended \$267 million or almost one-third of the department's Civil War budget. Quartermasters, believing that the depots produced goods of superior quality at lower prices, took a broad view of their responsibilities and authority. An estimated twenty-five percent of domestic war production came from the depots themselves. Quartermasters, generally employing relatives of soldiers, packed pork, made bread and furniture, built ships, and manufactured military equipage. In general, their civilian employees and some national Democratic leaders favored this method. Ad hoc labor organizations, desperate for well-paying jobs and suspicious of corruption and collusion at the higher levels of government, also were champions of depot manufacturing and the mixed economy.

However, most military supplies in the war were secured from private businesses. Recovering from the Panic of 1857 and suffering from the loss of their southern trade, northern businesses greatly needed the patronage of the War Department. The prevailing free-market ideology of the Republicans and cash flow problems at the government depots forced quartermasters to turn to the private economy. Quartermasters had a limited allotment of cash or greenbacks, their vouchers or individual credit had a limited appeal, certificates of indebtedness or federal notes were heavily discounted by brokers, and federal bonds were very long-term obligations. Only large businesses could accept the certificates, the most common form of payment, and they raised their bids accordingly to account for anticipated losses. Contrary to Jacksonian economic thinking, contracting was thrust into the hands of a small number of major manufacturers and jobbers, some of whom made substantial profits. Jay Cooke was a large buyer of vouchers and certificates at a ten percent discount. A solitary firm or a small cluster of companies were major contractors for Union horseshoes, rubber

blankets, wagons, powder, heavy ordnance, fire arms, and clothing. One-fifth of all military clothing came from two jobbers. The resulting scandals strengthened the public outcry for more depot manufacturing.

The mixed results of these Quartermaster Department experiments should generate caution regarding their long-term influence on the American narrative. Militating against the general adoption of an ethic of public entrepreneurialism was the rise of substantial business interests that generally saw government as an antagonist, and the creation of a competing Confederate military tradition in which statist control of the economy reached unprecedented, and uncomfortable, levels.

HAROLD S. WILSON
Old Dominion University

JANE E. SIMONSEN, *Making Home Work: Domesticity and Native American Assimilation in the West, 1860–1919*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. 2006. Pp. xii, 266. Cloth \$59.95, paper \$22.50.

In 1999, President Bill Clinton made a highly publicized stop at the home of Geraldine Blue Bird on the Pine Ridge Indian reservation. He discovered that Ms. Blue Bird was caring for twenty-eight adults and children in a four-room house with no plumbing. The visit triggered an outpouring of generosity (which included a new mobile home) and provided evidence that the “deliberate, arduous, and often self-conscious production of domesticity”—the subject of Jane E. Simonsen’s book—is an enduring feature of relations between Native Americans and their disposers.

The book contains six chapters that examine the cross-cultural “contact zone” created when domesticity—described here as “an imperial construct used by the white middle class to uphold its power in a diversifying and expansionist nation” (p. 3)—was imagined, imposed and resisted in Indian communities. Rather than track a single organization or institution, Simonsen traces the meaning of “domesticity” in Indian-white relations between the time in the Civil War era when writers and reformers imagined domestic reform as the key to integrating indigenous peoples into the nation and the second decade of the twentieth century, when a combination of white indifference, Native resistance, and social transformation had hardened racial and cultural hierarchies and Indian leaders like the artist Angel DeCora had emerged to complain that whites, “softened and perverted thro’ artificial living,” could not appreciate the cultural achievements of indigenous peoples (p. 212).

Simonsen’s narrative begins with Caroline Soule, an easterner who relocated to Iowa in 1854 where she composed a sentimental novel, *The Pet of the Settlement* (1860). Soule’s tale describes a Winnebago prophet who converts to Christianity, marries an Indian girl, and inherits property from a white woman, raising them “into the middle class culture of security, access to property, and familial inheritance.” Simonsen’s point is

that Soule’s vision was part of mid-century “cultural work” that linked child rearing to nation building and promoted women’s domestic labor as an essential element in the development of the frontier. From Soule, Simonsen moves on to debates within white society over the value of domestic labor (in which Indians provide a useful illustration of the value of white women’s labors and the consequences of societies that ignore domestic “civilization”), and to the history of the domestic agenda of the Women’s National Indian Association. The latter group—which preceded the Indian Rights Association—originated the use of model cottages as “object lessons” in the assimilation project. Together, these chapters trace how “white, middle-class women exported domesticity to the West” (p. 14).

In the final three chapters of her book Simonsen shifts the focus from the white imagination to the realities of tribal life by examining three instances of attempted domestic reform: Alice Fletcher’s allotment of the Nez Percés, the career of the Arikara social worker Anna Dawson Wilde, and the art and commentary of DeCora, a Winnebago woman who taught at Carlisle in the decade prior to World War I. Here the story becomes more complicated as Indian people resist the domestic institutions being forced upon them (the background to Simonsen’s Nez Perce chapter) and even begin to talk back. As part of Dawson Wilde’s story, Simonsen presents a critique of this highly celebrated “model Indian” (one of the first children brought to the Hampton manual labor school in 1878) penned by Ella Ripley, a Mandan who lived at the Fort Berthold reservation while Dawson Wilde was field matron there. Ripley cut to the heart of the matter, attacking Dawson Wilde for relying on “expertise” rather than community and kin relationships in her social work. Ripley’s commentary not only “exposed Dawson Wilde’s professionalized, systematized version of domesticity” (p. 176), but it revealed the extent to which domestic reform ignored issues of power, colonialism, and the denigration of tribal traditions.

DeCora provides a fitting subject for Simonsen’s closing chapter. Frequently ignored by historians or marginalized as simply an “Indian illustrator,” DeCora is revealed here as an articulate commentator on the cultural politics surrounding her work as an art instructor at Carlisle. The image of DeCora stocking her classroom with ethnographic books from the Smithsonian while urging her uniformed and incarcerated Native students to “recall . . . the days of the old life” in order to produce “genuine, legitimate Indian work” (p. 209) contrasts sharply with Soule’s fictional Winnebago minister. The steady theme that unites the book, however—that domesticity was a “contact zone” and battleground between colonizers and colonized—links these images and illuminates this period and topic in a new and exciting manner. This book does not add new data to an old story; it tells a new story in a new way.

FREDERICK E. HOXIE
*University of Illinois,
Urbana-Champaign*