A Republic in the Ranks: Loyalty and Dissent in the Army of the Potomac by Zachery A. Fry.


Review by Robin S. Conner, Georgia State University (rconner@gsu.edu).

In *A Republic in the Ranks*, military historian Zachery Fry (US Army Command and General Staff College) has penned a welcome corrective to the traditional depiction of the Union Army of the Potomac as a bastion of Democratic party politics. Other historians have made the same case by focusing on the Army's senior leadership, principally Maj. Gen. George B. McClellan and senior officers and corps commanders with firm ties to him and the Democratic party. Fry argues that things were different among junior officers and enlisted men. Over time, the political influence of company officers—lieutenants, captains, and majors—who led them into combat radicalized the rank and file in favor of the Republican party and its agenda, which included emancipation and harsh treatment of the Confederate population. This explains why the soldier-vote within the Army of the Potomac went so strongly for Abraham Lincoln in 1864, helping to ensure his reelection.

That soldiers’ votes helped carry Lincoln to victory has long been established, but Fry adds nuance to this account by studying the decisive effect of military service on the course of events. Specifically, he elucidates the “political awakening” of men who, despite the heated politics of the 1850s, had been rather politically naïve. They enlisted out of patriotism, but it was war itself that exposed them to the complex political issues at stake and solidified their ideological commitment to the Cause. Junior officers—older, more educated men with “more mature political sensibilities” (1)—played key roles in “teaching civic virtue and educating their men politically” (30).

Based on the evidence of newspapers and regimental resolutions (and disputing Jonathan White’s recent work), Fry maintains that “soldiers’ private writings, public declarations, and voting tabulations from elections previous to 1864 all indicate a consistent, energetic, and willing shift toward Republican ideology as the war progressed” (9).

The book centers on “crisis points” (11) that show this evolution in soldiers’ political consciousness. Chapter one concerns the aftermath of McClellan’s failed Peninsula Campaign. His setback outside Richmond and the horrific conditions of his subsequent withdrawal prompted the stirrings of political engagement. Men already politically aware “filtered their experiences on the Peninsula through the lens of partisanship” (37). Enlisted men, meanwhile, began to question their leadership. They did not (yet) fault McClellan—the cult of personality he had inculcated through propaganda and censorship still held sway. Instead, they blamed the politicians back home for mismanaging the whole affair.

Chapter two examines the fallout from of the battle of Antietam and McClellan’s firing, a period coinciding with the 1862 midterm election. By this time, Maj. Gen. John Pope’s Union Army

of Virginia, with its strongly pro-Republican orientation, had been absorbed by the Army of the Potomac. Fry argues that Pope’s veterans leavened the ranks with Republican fervor and constituted “the Army of the Potomac’s principal Republican core, a loyal opposition to the Democratic political culture desperately maintained by McClellan and his chief subordinates” (57). These “pockets of Republican loyalty” (69) solidified just as McClellan’s dismissal and FitzJohn Porter’s court-martial roiled Army Democrats. These and other controversies alienated ordinary soldiers from politicians, but did not induce them to air their political opinions. This was, at least in part, owing to many soldiers’ lack of a formal political voice: most Union states—particularly those with Democratic legislatures—still forbade absentee ballots for soldiers. As the war wore on, these “Democratic prohibitions on soldier voting prodded previously apolitical young men in the ranks into the waiting arms of the Republican party” (52).

Soldiers did not stay silent for long, however. In chapter three, Fry describes January through April 1863 as “the critical refining moment in the army’s political education” (70). Democrats at home, emboldened by their 1862 midterm successes and angered by emancipation, conscription, and battlefield failures, grew antagonistic toward the administration. Republican Joseph Hooker’s elevation to command of the Army of the Potomac only furthered their outrage. Democrats, especially in the lower Midwest, increasingly espoused antiwar views and denounced Lincoln’s alleged overreach in ever more vehement language.

Copperheadism at home elicited a backlash from men at the front and moved them toward the Republican agenda. Fry locates the crux of this shift in competing notions of “loyalty.” Democrats and Regular Army types, McClellan among them, “professed loyalty to a Constitution that restrained the chief executive, one which supported a view of states’ rights and limited federal interference” (5). Republicans, by contrast, contended that “true loyalty in this time of war meant obedience to the administration” (78). By 1863, this position also meant support for emancipation and hard war. Unlike Democrats, who initially eschewed overt political expression within the Army because it smacked of inappropriate partisanship, Republicans “believed soldiers should guide the national dialogue, not refrain from it as dispassionate servants” (4).

In early spring 1863, the Army of the Potomac was positioned to accept the Republican brand of loyalty; this entailed readier acceptance of emancipation and harsher fighting. And Copperheadism disgusted men who had bonded under the shared hardships of combat at Antietam, Fredericksburg, and the Mud March, and confirmed their existing conviction that politicians back home were the true cause of the Army’s woes. Hooker’s reforms that spring included expansion of his men’s access to Republican newspapers and writings, and the curbing of Democratic, anti-administration publications. Led by their junior officers, units issued regimental resolutions denouncing these measures, often in statements read aloud by their officers while the men paraded at regimental headquarters in a show of assent. The resolutions were then forwarded to state legislatures and newspapers at home. The rank and file “no longer accepted that they were silent servants of the republic. They were now its guardians, cloaked in righteousness and armed with an obligation to lead by political example” (98).

Chapter four details how men reacted to the news that McClellan, their respected former chief, had endorsed the peace Democrats’ platform. Summer and fall 1863 had seen the cataclysmic clash at Gettysburg, draft riots at home, and the first influx of conscripts into Union ranks. Rioters and undisciplined draftees stoked soldiers’ ire by threatening to undermine the Army’s

sacrifices on the battlefield. Meanwhile, Democrats ran a host of antiwar candidates in gubernatorial and other state races. In response, even moderates and “expedient” Democrats in the ranks shifted toward the Republicans. McClellan’s final apostasy destroyed “any hope” (127) that anti-administration views might regain momentum in the ranks.

Open public criticism of McClellan by soldiers and officers accelerated in spring 1864. In chapter five, Fry shows that this was but one flashpoint among many. Scholars like James McPherson and Jonathan White have contended that the decision to reenlist was a gauge of soldiers’ ideological commitment to the Cause. Fry concurs but identifies specific factors at play. For example, reenlistment rates were far higher for cavalry and artillery units than for the infantry regiments, which shed the most blood. Infantrymen were as dedicated as men in other branches, but they felt they had done their bit, or were too physically and psychologically exhausted to soldier on. Demobilized Army of the Potomac veterans continued the struggle back home by joining paramilitary political clubs and clashing in the press and on streets with their peers across the political divide. Even the men who had not reenlisted “were as committed to the administration as their comrades still toughing it out” (170).

In chapter six, Fry argues that the 1864 soldier vote demonstrated just how far the troops had been radicalized in favor of Republicans and Lincoln’s administration. By 1864, the army’s makeup had changed due to expired enlistments, heavy combat casualties, high turnover within the junior officer corps, and waves of new recruits. These were not the same men who had adored McClellan in 1862 and they despised his and the Democrats’ peace platform. Soldiers, officers, and even entire units condemned Democrats in editorials, direct complaints to elected officials, and ultimately with ballots cast in November 1864.

The author’s detailed analyses of extant electoral returns from the Army of the Potomac shows that regiments from every state but New York voted overwhelmingly for Lincoln. Indeed, Pennsylvania’s and Maryland’s Republican soldier vote proved instrumental in overcoming a “razor thin” home vote (176). As against Jonathan White’s recent analyses of voter participation levels, Fry insists they were high, especially considering that men under twenty-one (19 percent of the force) could not vote and five states still did not permit absentee ballots.

In a brief epilogue, Fry makes the case for a long Civil War incorporating Reconstruction by showing how veterans’ partisan activism continued into the postwar era. Men who had put their lives on the line to uphold the Republican agenda were horrified to see it undermined in short order by Pres. Andrew Johnson’s administration. They announced their loyalty once more by “marching, shouting, and even brawling with political opponents”; only U.S. Grant’s admonishment quelled “the possibility of further unrest from the mobilized veterans” (190).

Rather than writing an operational history, Fry has skillfully linked battlefield developments to political currents in the ranks and on the home front. The loss of Republican commanders at Gettysburg and the political attack on Maj. Gen. George Meade for failing to pursue and crush Lee’s forces after the fight are examples of how politics and combat intertwined. Fry carefully reveals how partisan politics suffused the Army from the outset: officers’ commissions depended on demonstrating their fealty to partisan governors and other elected officials. Though Fry concentrates on the rank and file rather than senior leaders, one wonders how much deeper political infighting ran than is commonly thought, and the extent to which it affected military effectiveness.

4. See, too, his valuable Appendices D, E, and F.
Fry’s book suggests fruitful avenues for further investigation. Do its conclusions, for example about soldiers’ political maturation and culture, apply beyond the Army of the Potomac? John Matsui (see note 2 above) has depicted a much more radical Army of Virginia. And, too, the Armies of the Tennessee and the Cumberland had to contend with considerable Confederate partisan warfare in the West. The Army of the Potomac comprised mostly regiments from the east (New York and Pennsylvania, especially). Other Union forces contained many regiments from the lower Midwest: Indiana, Illinois, Ohio—the hotbed of Copperheadism. If Fry is correct that soldiers’ burgeoning political consciousness led them to repudiate such sentiments in their home states, that may imply an even more profound Republican radicalization within these armies.

The author rightly observes that soldiers did not abandon their newfound political allegiance when the guns fell silent. And scholars of the Lost Cause\(^5\) have shown that Confederate soldiers carried on their political fight long after the war’s end. Why then did Union men not do the same? And did their wartime political awakening shape their postwar political activities?

Zachery Fry’s fine contribution to the mounting literature on the political culture and ideological evolution of Union soldiers cries out for similarly deep dives into the political culture and voting practices of their Confederate counterparts. That said, all students of the Civil War and nineteenth-century American politics will find *A Republic in the Ranks* to be an engaging and perceptive study of Civil War soldiers’ motivations and political behavior, as well as the civil-military relations that underlay the Union war effort.

---