



*Courage above All Things: General John Ellis Wool and the U.S. Military, 1812–1863* by Harwood P. Hinton and Jerry Thompson.

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John Ellis Wool joined the US Army as a captain during the War of 1812. By 1861, he was the second highest ranking general line officer in the regular army, outranked only by Winfield Scott, who had joined the army in 1808 and fought alongside Wool in the War of 1812. Both men gained fame in the US War with Mexico and stood ready to save the Union in 1861 when the Civil War began. But Scott was quickly removed from command in favor of George B. McClellan and Wool was retired from active duty on 1 Aug. 1863. Wool is not exactly a household name, but, as *Courage above All Things* demonstrates, he was one of the more important generals in American history. The late Harwood Hinton spent five decades researching and writing this biography, which Jerry Thompson has now completed. The authors argue that Wool's military career spanned key moments in US history from the War of 1812 through Reconstruction.

John Ellis Wool was born in 1784 in Newburgh, NY, less than six months after the signing of the Treaty of Paris. At age twelve, he became an apprentice to a merchant in Troy, the beginning of his long association with the city. Like other young men, Wool realized the importance of political connections and joined the Troy branch of the Tammany Society. When Congress funded thirteen additional regiments in preparation for war with Great Britain, Wool sought and received a commission as a captain in the 13th Infantry Regiment commanded by Col. Peter Philip Schuyler. Wool fought alongside Winfield Scott at the Battle of Queenston in 1812 and served throughout the rest of the war. When the Treaty of Ghent brought the conflict to a close, Wool chose to remain in the army. This decision became a turning point in his life because

he had exchanged the menial tasks of a law clerk for the responsibilities of an army officer, and had served with distinction through three long years of campaigning. In army circles, the energetic New Yorker had gained a reputation for the training of soldiers, attention to detail, and devotion to duty. These qualities, indeed, made him just the right man for the peacetime military establishment. Wool's decision to remain in the army was the nation's gain, for ahead lay an illustrious career which mirrored not only the development of the military but also the fortunes of the young republic. (20)

Within the year, Wool became the inspector general of the Northern Division of the army. This arduous job required him to make annual visits to armories and garrisons from Maine to Michigan Territory. However, it also introduced him to leading military and political figures like Lewis Cass. When in Washington, DC, Wool spent considerable time on Capitol Hill hobnobbing with congressmen and kept Maj. Gen. Jacob Brown apprised of Congress's feelings toward the army. He also "raised concerns about the rusting and antiquated ordnance in scattered garrisons, and recommended that unserviceable items be sold and new weapons acquired" (43). He made a trip to Europe to examine European artillery and purchase new weapons for the United States. Although Wool could not secure new guns, due to international tensions and a reluctance to sell

weapons, his trip nevertheless “announced an increased desire by the United States to shake its colonial image, and militarily join the ranks of the ruling powers of Europe” (55).

In 1836, after he had been an inspector for twenty years, Wool’s duties began to change. In particular, the army

assumed new tasks on the frontier—tasks relating to the unsavory duty of Indian removals—and sent general officers from their desks in Washington to field commands. Wool was among those tapped to help expedite the removal of American Indians to lands west of the Mississippi. (61)

Wool’s instructions were to act as a federal policeman to keep order and encourage the Cherokee to move west. This command proved difficult because Wool sympathized with the Native Americans, not rapacious white robbers.

Shortly thereafter, Wool was sent to another trouble zone—the US/Canada border—and instructed to curb the activity of Canadian patriots. After some lobbying by his friends and by Wool himself, he was appointed Brigadier General on 1 Sept. 1841, in command of the Eastern Division.

Wool, like Winfield Scott, participated in the US War with Mexico. He initially directed the muster of recruits in the Ohio Valley and in the lower Mississippi states. However, in mid-June, he was ordered to proceed to San Antonio to organize a division for service with Zachary Taylor. Wool played an important role in the battle of Buena Vista. Specifically, he

urged Taylor to fall back twelve miles to a defensive position at Buena Vista. Here the artillery would be far more effective. Taylor, however, despite the decisiveness of his artillery in the battle of Palo Alto, placed no faith in such weaponry and remained bull-headed. Finally, Wool, his eyes flashing, declared that he would not see the army sacrificed. He would take full responsibility and personally lead the troops back to Buena Vista! Taylor reddened, blistered the air with profanity, and snapped at Bliss to order the army to retire to Buena Vista. (130)

Wool’s insistence on fighting at Buena Vista should not be understated and the battle added “fresh laurels to an already distinguished career” (151). He spent the rest of his time in Mexico on occupation duty and returned to Troy as a national hero whose “services in the war with Mexico had brought him enduring fame, made him one of the great military chieftains of his day, and enshrined his name forever in the annals of the republic” (176).

After Taylor became president, Wool continued his movement up the ranks. His friends attempted to win him the 1852 Democratic nomination for president as the favorite son candidate of the Hunkers—a faction of the New York Democratic Party. Had he been nominated, Wool would have run against Winfield Scott, the Whig Party nominee. But the nod went instead to Franklin Pierce, whose Secretary of War, Jefferson Davis, turned to Wool to command the new Department of the Pacific. Wool’s time on the West Coast proved unpleasant. He believed local officials sympathized with filibusters. He quarreled with Davis. He grew angered when territorial officials rushed volunteer companies into the field and branded their decisions unnecessary. In short, his years in this department were “arduous and turbulent” (278). Wool returned east in 1857 and spent the next four years engaged in routine command duties.

After the fall of Fort Sumter, Wool rushed to the colors and sought a field command. The early months of the war brought a chance for active duty and Wool was assigned to command Fort Monroe. Lincoln’s subsequent decision to appoint George McClellan to succeed Scott stunned Wool, who had assumed, based on his rank, that he would succeed Scott. When McClellan visited Wool in early April 1862, McClellan “viewed the precise old general as a relic from the past and a serious obstacle to his launching the Peninsula Campaign” (316). Ironically, as events proved, the biggest obstacle to winning the Peninsula Campaign was McClellan himself. Wool’s policies an-

gered people and the government dispatched him to Baltimore to command the Middle Department (Maryland, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Delaware, and Virginia's Eastern Shore). Here Wool clashed with radical Unionists, when he refused to "support their programs to suppress secessionists" (344). Wool's final assignment also provoked controversy. He commanded the Department of the East during the 1863 New York City Draft Riots. The government retired the seventy-nine-year-old Wool from active duty on 1 Aug. 1863. Wool spent the last five years of his life in various pursuits such as campaigning against McClellan in 1864 and worrying about the reconstruction of the Union. He died on 10 Nov. 1869 at his home in Troy.

John Ellis Wool does not have the same cachet as some of the other generals he served under and alongside during his fifty years in the US Army. Nevertheless, Hinton and Thompson prove that Wool's life and career are significant in their own right. They had an important bearing on the development of the United States in the period between the War of 1812 and Reconstruction. Well researched and eminently readable, this book will appeal to anyone interested in nineteenth century American history.