



Practical Liberators: Union Officers in the Western Theater during the Civil War by Kristopher A. Teters.

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In *Practical Liberators*, historian Kristopher Teters (Western Governors Univ.) undertakes an ambitious study of officer attitudes and motivations regarding race and the end of slavery. He challenges the existing scholarship holding that Civil War Union officers did not lead a moral crusade to end slavery and only adopted emancipationist policies “after its necessity became an inescapable conclusion for them.... Failing to look at how emancipation happened in the field, some historians have reached dubious conclusions about the beliefs of the Union army and how emancipation actually unfolded” (4).

At the heart of the book lies a key question: how did so many Union officers hold positive opinions of individual African Americans, yet retain an overall negative perception of Blacks as a race? Teters suggests that wartime experiences did little to alter peacetime attitudes regarding race.

The fact that a good many western officers ... opposed emancipation in late 1862 and early 1863 is not surprising. Almost all these officers came from the Midwest, which had long been divided on the slavery question. The Democratic Party, fierce in its anti-emancipation stance, was especially strong in lower portions of the Midwest. Indeed, in the 1860 presidential election, 43 percent of the Midwest's popular vote went for the Democratic ticket. Politically, many officers were Democrats and generally unsympathetic to emancipation. The Midwest was also a region that manifested an especially virulent racism. Midwesterners feared massive numbers of black people entering their states, taking their jobs, and degrading their society. In the end, this officer opposition highlighted how the army was not quite ready to follow Lincoln in adding emancipation as a war aim. Attitudes lagged behind policy. (73)

Union officers even went so far as to use the coded language of their Confederate counterparts, for instance, by using “servant” to designate African Americans who aided the Union army in camp. In effect, by “using the same name for black people as slave owners did, Union officers were clearly implying that their servants should be subservient, docile, and most important, never treated as their equals” (83).

However, once the Emancipation Proclamation was passed (1 Jan. 1863), Union officers understood the connection between liberating slaves and ending the war by crippling the Confederate economy. Hence, liberation was a means to an end, not an instrument of social revolution. Emancipationist actions by Union generals across the Western Theater were meant to both control Black labor and reinforce preconceived notions of the proper social station of African Americans. Ironically, this transformed the Union army into a force for liberation. General William T. Sherman best exemplifies this status of “reluctant emancipator”; the thousands of slaves he freed saw him “as a man sent from God to liberate them” (151-52), even as he persisted in his unrestrained personal racism.

The tension between emancipationist war aims and officers' racial attitudes became even more pronounced in the debate over whether to enlist Black soldiers.

Black men in uniform seemed in some sense equal to their white comrades in arms, and this galled many white officers. It was one thing to free the slaves but quite another to see them serving alongside white men. Additionally, if black troops put their lives on the line in war, would they not be entitled to certain social and political rights in peace? The logic seemed clear enough, and most officers did not yet envision black people at the ballot box or in the halls of Congress. In short, the issue of black soldiers touched racial concerns and fears more closely than emancipation had. (81)

For many White Union officers, putting blue uniforms on Black bodies opened a Pandora's box of issues extending far beyond the battlefield, threatening to upend the racist social order at home.

The ending of slavery, of course, empowered Blacks in society. Union officers had not in general intended this. It was a consequence of their desire to defeat the Confederacy. In short, the war was a limited "transformative moment for the North. While it had pushed Northerners to emancipate the slaves, it did not make them into racial egalitarians. No group better illustrates the limits of revolutionary change than the Union officers who fought in the western theater" (157).

Teters compares his study to several well known works in the field. For instance, he notes that his conclusions regarding officer attitudes are similar to those found in books by James McPherson¹ and, especially, Gary W. Gallagher,² who more closely agrees with his argument that Union officers saw emancipation merely as a means to end the war. On the other hand, Teters challenges studies by Chandra Manning³ and James Oakes,⁴ who argue, respectively, that officers viewed emancipation in moral terms and that emancipation was a major war aim from the beginning. Given the academic nature of his work and its likely audience, I would have preferred to see a fuller discussion on how it fits (or not) with the relevant historiography, perhaps through an expanded introduction or an epilogue.⁵

These reservations aside, *Practical Liberators* does many things well. Its analysis of the emancipation policies and racial attitudes of Union officers is well structured and compelling, though skewed toward higher-ranking officers and prominent individuals. Teters also clarifies the relations among several diverse topics, notably (a) policy directives from Washington and their implementation in the field, (b) diverging personal beliefs regarding the necessity of emancipation, and (c) complex attitudes towards race and the role of Blacks in both the army and society. Gone are any misperceptions of some universal Union soldier who proudly carried the banner of progressivism and equality into the war since the first shots at Fort Sumter.

1. *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 1997).

2. *The Union War* (Cambridge: Harvard U Pr, 2011).

3. *What This Cruel War Was Over: Soldiers, Slavery, and the Civil War* (NY: Knopf, 2007).

4. *Freedom National: The Destruction of Slavery in the United States, 1861–1865* (NY: Norton, 2012).

5. For Teters's historiographical discussion, see: 167–68n2, 168n3, 176n1, and 190n1.