

THIS MIGHTY SCOURGE: PERSPECTIVES ON THE CIVIL WAR¹

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“There is a whiff of armchair generalship, or Monday-morning quarterbacking, in the writings of Civil War historians (myself included) who have never been in combat.”³

I. Introduction

In *This Mighty Scourge: Perspectives on the Civil War*,⁴ James M. McPherson, presents a collection of essays, both old and new, covering a broad range of topics dealing with the Civil War.⁵ McPherson’s collection tackles topics as diverse as: the causes and strategy of the war; analysis of the myths surrounding Harriet Tubman, John Brown, and Jesse James; and the revisionist history campaign that McPherson coins the “Lost Cause Textbook Crusade.”⁶ *This Mighty Scourge* allows even the Civil War neophyte⁷ to quickly come up to speed on the issues that have framed the debate surrounding the Civil War and its aftermath more than one hundred and fifty-six years ago. Remarkably, McPherson manages to accomplish this without sacrificing any of the scholarship for which he is admired.⁸ Seeming to argue that the Civil War was one of the only truly just wars of modern times, *This Mighty Scourge* offers contemporary relevance for the military reader and policymaker alike. The book manages to showcase McPherson’s analytical methodology in a way that will stimulate scholarship and understanding in a reader’s mind.⁹ Despite McPherson’s assertion that he may be prone to armchair generalship or Monday-morning quarterbacking,¹⁰ *This Mighty Scourge* is a work that is unpretentious and generally even-handed, though some may see it as being tinged with a Northerner’s bias. It offers enlightened insight sure to promote further scholarship and greater understanding of the Civil War.

¹ JAMES M. MCPHERSON, *THIS MIGHTY SCOURGE: PERSPECTIVES ON THE CIVIL WAR* (2007).

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³ MCPHERSON, *supra* note 1, at 117.

⁴ McPherson, award-winning author and the George Henry Davis 1886 Professor of History Emeritus at Princeton University, won a 1989 Pulitzer Prize for his work *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era*. The Pulitzer Prizes, <http://www.pulitzer.org/index.html> (follow “1989” hyperlink) (last visited Mar. 4, 2008). In 1998, McPherson won the Lincoln Prize, for his work, *For Cause and Comrade: Why Men Fought in the Civil War*. Lincoln Prize, http://www.gettysburg.edu/about/offices/provost/cwi/lincoln_prize/lincoln_prizepastwinner.dot (last visited Mar. 4, 2008). McPherson also won a 1965 Anisfield-Wolf Book Award, for his work, *The Struggle For Equality: Abolitionists and the Negro in the Civil War and Reconstruction*. The Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards, <http://www.anisfield-wolf.org/Winners/PastWinners/default.aspx?FilterLetter=M> (last visited Mar. 4, 2008). On 16 July 2007, McPherson was named the first Pritzker Military Library Literature Award winner for lifetime achievement in military writing, Pritzker Military Library Literature Award, <http://www.tawanifoundation.org/LTA/index.html> (last visited Mar. 4, 2008). In addition to these award-winning books, McPherson is the author of numerous books and articles on the Civil War. Meet James McPherson, <http://www.neh.gov/whoware/mcpherson/meet.html> (last visited Mar. 4, 2008).

⁵ MCPHERSON, *supra* note 1, at xi–xii. McPherson informs the reader that he originally published chapters 2, 3, 7, 9, 10, 12, and 15 in the *New York Review of Books*, but that he dramatically altered and revised their format for this book. McPherson also says that he originally published chapters 1, 4, 5, 8, 13, and 14 in various periodicals or books between 1998 and 2005. McPherson is publishing chapters 6, 11, and 16 for the first time in *This Mighty Scourge*. Ironically, *This Mighty Scourge* is largely a collection of McPherson’s book reviews, making this book review a book review of other book reviews.

⁶ *Id.* at vii.

⁷ Sam Allis, *An Eye-Opening March Through the Civil War*, B. GLOBE, Mar. 5, 2007 (reviewing JAMES M. MCPHERSON, *THIS MIGHTY SCOURGE: PERSPECTIVES ON THE CIVIL WAR* (2007)), available at http://www.boston.com/news/globe/living/articles/2007/03/05/an_eye_opening_march_through_the_civil_war/. I took Allis’ term, “Civil War neophyte,” from his review. *Id.*

⁸ See Christopher Phillips, *A Noted Historian’s Thoughts on the Civil War*, CIV. WAR BK. REV., Spring 2007 (reviewing JAMES M. MCPHERSON, *THIS MIGHTY SCOURGE: PERSPECTIVES ON THE CIVIL WAR* (2007)), available at http://www.cwbr.com/cgi-bin/dbman/cwbr/cwbr.cgi?db=cwbr&uid=default&bool=and&keyword=&ISBN=&Title=&Auth_1=&Publisher=&Reviewer=Issue_date=Spring+2007&Record_type=---&sb1=12&so1=descend&view_records=View+Records&nh=14&mh=1. McPherson does a great job documenting the book with 502 endnotes. McPherson’s use of endnotes caused him to become a little sloppy in his citations. In particular, McPherson often presented multiple quotes or thoughts in a single paragraph and ended the paragraph with a single endnote that included all the cites. This is confusing in his larger paragraphs, and a cleaner technique would have been to endnote each quote or thought separately. Also, only approximately 5% of the 502 endnotes were textual endnotes. More textual footnotes would have been helpful to flesh out some of McPherson’s more generalized assertions which he left uncited.

⁹ MCPHERSON, *supra* note 1, at ix.

¹⁰ *Id.* at 117.

II. A Unique Format

In the preface, McPherson frames his thesis that the Civil War was one of the only truly just wars of modern times by using prescient quotes from British pacifist John Morley in 1917 and from President Lincoln in 1865.¹¹ McPherson then explains that he will prove his thesis with essays that address the questions of:

Why *did* the war come? What were the war aims of each side? What strategies did they employ to achieve these aims? How do we evaluate the leadership of both sides? Did the war's outcome justify the immense sacrifice of lives? What impact did the experience of war have on the people who lived through it? How did later generations remember and commemorate that experience?¹²

To this end, McPherson organizes his sixteen essays into five sections, grouping them in a way that roughly answers each of these questions. His essays ultimately lead readers to conclude that the Civil War was, as McPherson asserts, most likely a just war.¹³

McPherson focuses heavily on strategy and leadership throughout the book. The book is effectively organized and McPherson breaks the monotony of the leadership and strategy essays with lighter fare such as essays concerning the mythical characters of the war, the effect of the war on those who lived through it, and the way that some Southerners came to remember and commemorate the experience.¹⁴ This somewhat wandering format, and McPherson's compilation of sixteen disparate essays written over the course of several years, succeeds because the book provides readers with the prospect of a new and discrete topic in each chapter. This format makes it easy to read in short stints and suitable as a student text, or perhaps even useful in a unit's long term officer professional development program.

III. A Genius for Promoting Scholarship and Understanding

In his preface, McPherson states, "Old or new, my conclusions suggest additional questions that I hope readers will ponder, perhaps arriving at judgments different from mine."¹⁵ With this assertion, he suggests that one of his goals for this work is to advance scholarship and understanding.¹⁶ While McPherson does this throughout the book, nowhere in the book is this more apparent than in the chapter entitled "Brahmins at War."¹⁷ This chapter is typical of the other chapters in *This Mighty Scourge*, in that it raises thought-provoking questions in the reader's mind. The chapter details the sacrifices made by many Harvard alumni who joined the war effort before the draft, and who had the means to purchase exemptions even after the draft began.¹⁸ McPherson describes many of these men as descendants of the Revolutionary War generation, who when faced with the destruction of the nation for which their fore bearers had so greatly sacrificed, found themselves experiencing "hereditary, even proprietary feelings."¹⁹ McPherson also describes in them the "noblesse-oblige conviction that the privileged classes had a greater obligation to defend the country precisely because of the privileged status they enjoyed."²⁰

¹¹ *Id.* at ix.

¹² *Id.*

¹³ *Id.* at 221. McPherson brings this point home with his analysis of President Lincoln's dramatic expansion of presidential war powers during the Civil War. In this chapter, McPherson presents an "end justifies the means" approach to his resolution of whether the Civil War was a just war. He lays out the instances during the war in which President Lincoln clearly violated the plain language of the Constitution. *Id.* at 210–11. He addresses President Lincoln's dramatic curtailment of civil liberties through the suspension of the writ of habeas corpus, the declaration of martial law, the arrest of antiwar activists, and the use of military tribunals. *Id.* at 213–17. McPherson then concludes with a parable from President Lincoln that he uses to show that the reunification of the nation and abolition of slavery formed the basis of a just war. *Id.* at 221. This chapter, more than any other, offers the most contemporary relevance in light of current events. Compare *id.* at 209–21, with THE 9/11 COMMISSION REPORT: FINAL REPORT OF THE NATIONAL COMMISSION ON TERRORIST ATTACKS ON THE UNITED STATES 393–95 (n.d.) (suggesting that a shift in power and authority to the government requires an enhanced system of checks and balances to safeguard civil liberties).

¹⁴ See MCPHERSON, *supra* note 1, at 21–39, 87–106, 145–66.

¹⁵ *Id.* at ix.

¹⁶ *Id.*

¹⁷ *Id.* at 145–53.

¹⁸ *Id.* at 146–47. McPherson mentions that ninety of the five hundred seventy-eight Harvard men that fought in the Civil War were killed. *Id.*

¹⁹ *Id.* at 147 (quoting CAROL BUNDY, *THE NATURE OF SACRIFICE: A BIOGRAPHY OF CHARLES RUSSELL LOWELL, JR., 1835–1864*, at 314 (2005)).

McPherson's genius for furthering scholarship and understanding reveals itself in this chapter because at a time when the nation is again at war, this book causes the reader to ask, whether these hereditary, even proprietary feelings, and noblesse-oblige convictions still exist among this nation's privileged classes, and if not, the consequences this holds for the nation. Nagged by this question, many readers may seek further insight, and in doing so, would learn that recent enlistment data from elitist, Ivy League Universities may suggest that these feelings and convictions no longer exist in the nation's privileged classes.²¹ As for the consequences this holds, they remain unknown, but through this research process, the reader discovers McPherson's skill for promoting scholarship and understanding.

IV. A Compelling Analytical Methodology

This Mighty Scourge showcases McPherson's analytical methodology. Throughout his work, McPherson dismantles widely held conceptions on the causes of the war,²² legends or myths surrounding Civil War figures,²³ and the legacy of General Sherman.²⁴ McPherson's consideration of these topics is interesting, and his analytical methodology is persuasive. In the majority of his chapters, McPherson sets up his analysis by presenting the counterargument to his argument, then masses his sources to respond with an argument supported by compelling research that reveals a depth the reader would expect from an author of McPherson's stature.²⁵ Much like his explanation for Union victory in chapter two, McPherson uses numbers and resources in concert with his "will and skill" to produce compelling conclusions.²⁶ McPherson's methodology is persuasive because it illustrates how he has really thought through his analysis and mustered compelling facts in support of his conclusions. Unlike the works that McPherson critiques in chapter eight on the Lost Cause Textbook Crusade, whose authors at times make broad and meaningless assertions unsupported by fact,²⁷ *This Mighty Scourge* proves McPherson's competency to speak with authority on these issues. Amazingly, Professor McPherson convincingly does so in only two hundred and twenty-one pages of very easy reading.

V. Contemporary Relevance

This Mighty Scourge offers contemporary relevance for the military reader and policymaker. It presents issues that are strikingly similar to those this nation faces in the Global War on Terrorism,²⁸ and presents their resolution through the lens of a far greater challenging period of the nation's history.²⁹ McPherson's analysis of superior and inferior strategic and operational leadership by Generals Grant, Lee, and Sherman,³⁰ and inspirational leadership by tactical leaders,³¹ provides

²⁰ *Id.*

²¹ See KATHY ROTH-DOUQUET & FRANK SCHAEFFER, AWOL: THE UNEXCUSED ABSENCE OF AMERICA'S UPPER CLASSES FROM MILITARY SERVICE— AND HOW IT HURTS OUR COUNTRY 43–51 (2006).

²² MCPHERSON, *supra* note 1, at 3–19. Here McPherson debunks the notion that state sovereignty was the precipitating cause of the war, showing instead that the expansion of slavery issue was the root cause of secession and that secession was the cause of the war. *Id.*

²³ *Id.* at 21–39, 87–92. Here McPherson proves through convincing evidence of individuals in circumstances similar to Harriet Tubman's, that the Harriet Tubman story is likely embellished; McPherson suggests through compelling evidence of John Brown's previous tactical prowess that John Brown likely planned for martyrdom; and McPherson provides strong evidence to debunk the myths surrounding Jesse James, suggesting that he was nothing more than a cold blooded killer. *Id.*

²⁴ *Id.* at 114–19, 123–29. Here McPherson proves that General Sherman was not "a ferocious ogre of vengeance and spoliation, [but rather,] he was actually sparing of the lives of his own soldiers, the enemy's soldiers, and of civilians." *Id.* at 116. Also that Sherman's destructive march from Atlanta to Savannah was not as destructive as widely believed. *Id.* at 129.

²⁵ See *supra* note 5.

²⁶ MCPHERSON, *supra* note 1, at 49. Here McPherson says that numbers and resources do not prevail in war without the will and skill to use them. *Id.*

²⁷ See generally *id.* at 93–106.

²⁸ See *supra* note 14.

²⁹ *Contra This Mighty Scourge: Perspectives on the Civil War* (CSPAN2 television broadcast July 28, 2007), available at <http://www.booktv.org/program.aspx?ProgramId=7943&SectionName=History&PlayMedia=No>. McPherson suggests that he is leery about drawing parallels between the Civil War and current events, saying that while Lincoln certainly trampled civil liberties then, it does not compare to what is going on at the detention facility at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. *Contra Lincoln, Congress, and 'This Mighty Scourge'* (NPR radio broadcast Feb. 3, 2007), available at <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=7146831>. McPherson suggests that any analogy between current events and the Civil War is superficial at best. *Id.*

ample vignettes ripe for discussion as military officer professional development topics. McPherson's analysis of Sherman's leadership will also provide military readers with a timely example of effective counterinsurgency strategy³² that could easily be something a military reader might find in U.S. Army Field Manual 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*.³³ McPherson's discussion of legal matters such as President Lincoln's suspension of the writ of habeas corpus, declaration of martial law, detention of antiwar activists, use of military tribunals, and general expansion of presidential war powers³⁴ provides Judge Advocates with similar opportunities for professional development, as well as potential teaching points for the commanders and Soldiers they support. Policymakers will likely draw insight from McPherson's discussion of the difficulties of extracting the nation from a war in which one of the nation's war aims is to effect a regime change in an enemy country, the necessity of staying the course in such situations, and the importance of honoring presidential promises.³⁵ Moreover, McPherson's work may help the policymaker to understand the genesis of some of the presidential war powers at issue today.³⁶

VI. Conclusion

This Mighty Scourge is an enjoyable and worthwhile read that achieves McPherson's goal of furthering scholarship and understanding of the Civil War and its aftermath. Its didactic nature makes it a useful read for the military reader and policymaker, and it will surely stimulate instructive debate among this ilk. At only two hundred and twenty-one pages, and with a compelling analytical framework, this work is an easy starting point for anyone seeking to further his knowledge of this important phase of American history. Add to this the book's contemporary relevance and it becomes even more appealing for anyone with even a passing interest in the Civil War.

³⁰ MCPHERSON, *supra* note 1, at 112. McPherson presents views on all the leaders. He notes that "Grant possessed that most uncommon quality, common sense." *Id.* He also states that "one of [Grant's] virtues as commander was the clarity of his orders and dispatches." *Id.* Of both Grant and Lee he says "Grant and Lee were the preeminent Civil War commanders because, more than any others, they were the ones willing to take the largest risks." *Id.* Of Sherman he says "Sherman's march from Atlanta to Savannah . . . has become the stuff of legend, but the campaign of his army northward from Savannah to North Carolina . . . was even more of a stunning achievement." *Id.* at 118. All of these basic skills, clear orders, calculated risk taking, and endurance, are valuable skills for any leader.

³¹ *Id.* at 150–52. Here McPherson describes Captain John Kelliher, a former boot maker with a battlefield commission, as being so badly wounded at Spotsylvania in May 1864 that "the surgeon who removed his lower jaw, one arm, a shoulder blade, a clavicle, and two of his ribs had no hope for recovery," yet Kelliher returned to his unit in November 1864 at the rank of major to command his regiment. *Id.* at 150. McPherson describes Colonel Charles R. Lowell, who when shot in the chest "refusing to go to the rear, Lowell had himself lifted onto a borrowed horse, so weak that he had to be strapped in the saddle," and yet he rode to the head of his unit to lead a counterattack, only to be shot and killed during the counterattack. *Id.* at 152. McPherson describes in each instance how these leaders suffered wounds that would have sent them home with honorable discharges, yet they refused to leave their units. These powerful examples of physical courage are instructive for any leader.

³² *Id.* at 125. In this chapter, McPherson discusses "'hard war' characterized by a military policy of 'directed severity.'" *Id.* at 124–25. McPherson quotes Sherman as saying, "No goths or vandals ever had less respect for the lives and property of friends and foes, and henceforth we ought to never hope for any friends in Virginia." *Id.* at 125 (quoting Letter from General Sherman to Ellen Ewing Sherman, July 28, 1861, in BROOKS D. SIMPSON, *SHERMAN'S CIVIL WAR: SELECTED CORRESPONDENCE OF WILLIAM T. SHERMAN, 1860–1865*, at 125 (Jean V. Berlin ed. 1999)). McPherson also quotes Sherman as saying "This demoralizing and disgraceful practice of pillage must cease." *Id.* (quoting Letter from General Sherman to General Stephen A. Hurlbut, July 10, 1862, O.R., ser. 1, vol. 17, pt. 2, 88–89). Finally, McPherson quotes Sherman saying "else the country will rise on us and justly shoot us down like dogs and wild beasts." *Id.* (quoting MARK GRIMSLEY, *THE HAND OF WAR: UNION MILITARY POLICY TOWARD SOUTHERN CIVILIANS, 1861–1865*, at 100 (1995)).

³³ U.S. DEP'T OF ARMY, *FIELD MANUAL 3-24, COUNTERINSURGENCY 7–21* (Dec. 2006) ("The principles of discrimination in the use of force and proportionality in actions are important to counterinsurgents for practical reasons as well as for their ethical or moral implications. Fires that cause unnecessary harm or death to noncombatants may create more resistance and increase the insurgency's appeal—especially if the populace perceives a lack of discrimination in their use.").

³⁴ *Id.* at 209–21.

³⁵ *Id.* at 167–83. This insight may be instructive at a time when there is uncertainty surrounding this nation's commitments overseas. *See, e.g.*, Dana Bash & Ted Barrett, *Democrats: Bush Troops Cuts Not New Iraq Plan*, <http://www.cnn.com/2007/POLITICS/09/12/iraq.congress/index.html> (last visited Mar. 4, 2008).

³⁶ *Id.* at 209–21; *see supra* note 14.