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Lawrence A. Kreiser Jr., *Defeating Lee: A History of the Second Corps, Army of the Potomac*. Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 2011. Pp. xx, 387. ISBN 978-0-253-35616-1.

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Defeating Lee explores the successes and failures of the Second Corps, one of the central units of the Army of the Potomac during the American Civil War. Lawrence A. Kreiser Jr. (Stillman College) has produced another superb narrative,¹ which will engage specialists and scholars but also appeal to general readers and Civil War buffs alike.

The book joins many other fine histories that chronicle the experiences of military units during the Civil War.² These earlier volumes mostly explore units smaller than the army corps, such as brigades and regiments, or analyze the exploits of larger units, such as armies, effectively skipping over analysis of army corps.³ Kreiser aptly explains his approach:

Near the end of the Civil War, Major General Winfield Scott Hancock, the longest-serving commander of the Second Corps and one of the most respected officers in the Union army, assured his men that their battlefield sacrifices would not be forgotten. "The gallant bearing of the intrepid officers and men of the Second Corps on the bloodiest fields of the war," Hancock proudly declared, "[has] won for them an imperishable renown and the grateful admiration of their countrymen. The story of the Second Corps will live in history, and to its officers and men will be ascribed the honor of having served their country with fidelity and courage." Hancock was wrong. Although the formidable reputation of the Second Corps receives mention in studies of the Union war effort, much of its history and accomplishments has suffered neglect. By analyzing the contributions made by soldiers of the Second Corps to defeating General Robert E. Lee and his Army of Northern Virginia, this study seeks to make good on Hancock's promise. (xii-xiii)

The book's content is varied and engrossing. It examines the Second Corps from multiple perspectives. For example, Kreiser highlights the ethnic identity developed in certain portions of the unit, most notably the Irish Brigade led by Thomas Francis Meagher, as well as the character of such distinctive components of the unit as the Philadelphia Brigade. He also emphasizes the political homogeneity of the Corps, noting that most of the soldiers were Democrats who "fought primarily to preserve the Union" (22).

The main purpose of *Defeating Lee* is to illustrate the important role the Second Corps played in ensuring Union victory in both the eastern theater specifically and the war more generally. The Second Corps was the largest in the Army of the Potomac and, as Kreiser compellingly argues, the most distinguished. Its glory rests upon two primary distinctions. First, it participated in most of the significant engagements in the eastern theater: the Peninsula Campaign, Antietam, Fredericksburg, Gettysburg, Bristoe Station, the Overland Campaign, Petersburg, and Appomattox. Almost constantly engaged in battle, the Corps saw both vic-

1. See his *The Civil War and Reconstruction* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2003), co-authored with Ray B. Browne. He has also co-edited (with Browne) the primary source anthology *Voices of Civil War America: Contemporary Accounts of Daily Life* (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood, 2011).

2. E.g., Alan T. Nolan, *The Iron Brigade: A Military History* (NY: Macmillan, 1961); Joseph T. Glatthaar, *The March to the Sea and Beyond: Sherman's Troops in the Savannah and Carolinas Campaigns* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State U Pr, 1985) and *General Lee's Army: From Victory to Collapse* (NY: Free Press, 2008); Richard M. McMurry, *Two Great Rebel Armies* (Chapel Hill: U North Carolina Pr, 1989); Earl J. Hess, *Lee's Tar Heels: The Pettigrew-Kirkland-MacRae Brigade* (Chapel Hill: U North Carolina Pr, 2002); Steven E. Woodworth, *Nothing But Victory: The Army of the Tennessee, 1861-1865* (NY: Knopf, 2005); and Jeffrey D. Wert, *The Sword of Lincoln: The Army of the Potomac* (NY: Simon & Schuster, 2005).

3. The only previous history of the Second Corps is Francis A. Walker's *History of the Second Army Corps in the Army of the Potomac* (NY: Scribner's, 1887).

tory and defeat, from the trauma of storming Marye's Heights at Fredericksburg to the elation of repelling Pickett's Charge at Gettysburg. Second, and consequently, it sustained the highest losses of any federal corps. Roughly 40 percent of all soldiers who ever served in it were killed, wounded, or missing-in-action.

Kreiser structures *Defeating Lee* chronologically, campaign by campaign, through four major phases. Phase one extends from the original organization of the Second Corps in 1862 through its initial combat experiences in both the Peninsula and the Maryland Campaigns. Phase two carries the story from utter defeat at Fredericksburg through the pinnacle of glory at Gettysburg. Phase three details the constant cycle of fighting and rebuilding between Bristoe Station and Stevensburg, leading into the Overland Campaign and ultimate victory during the Petersburg and Appomattox Campaigns. Phase four considers the postwar experiences of the Second Corps soldiers as they viewed the conflict through the analytical lens of memory, seeking to understand, define, and memorialize their ordeal.

Kreiser mounts three main arguments. First, that ideology motivated Second Corps soldiers to fight in order to preserve the Union.⁴ He stresses here that the high casualties suffered by the Second Corps did not deflect soldiers from their commitment to the Union. Observing that more than five thousand men of the Second Corps were killed, wounded, or missing-in-action at Antietam, Kreiser writes, "That soldiers were talking about fighting and dying for the 'good cause' in the wake of the bloodiest single-day battle fought in the Civil War indicates that they remained in the ranks for more than just their comrades" (64).

Second, Kreiser contends that the Second Corps was a most effective fighting unit that contributed mightily to Union victory, as evidenced by its battlefield successes, especially at Gettysburg. The "soldiers of the Second Corps drew [immense pride] from the Union victory at Gettysburg. The fighting in Pennsylvania demonstrated that the Army of the Potomac could defeat Lee and his Army of Northern Virginia" (122).

Third, Kreiser maintains that the men of the Second Corps fostered and articulated a unit pride based on shared combat experiences, a pride symbolized by the unit's distinctive badges. When Joseph Hooker replaced Ambrose E. Burnside as commander of the Army of the Potomac following the Fredericksburg Campaign, he instituted a series of reforms, including the creation of distinctive corps badges "to make lag-gards easily identifiable on the march and the battlefield" (94). Hooker assigned the Second Corps a distinctive trefoil which gained in popularity and prominence in step with the Corps's battlefield exploits. As Lt. Col. Richard Thompson exclaimed, the "2nd Army Corps to which I am proud to belong has, during the last week, now more bright laurels.... Our badge is a Club and 'clubs are trump'" (136-37).

All Kreiser's arguments are supported by substantial and wide-ranging research. He draws on many primary sources, including letters from privates and generals alike recounting their experiences. The book's final section, on postwar memories, is particularly useful and intriguing.⁵ Detailed appendices provide worthwhile information, such as the organization of the Second Corps down to individual regiments and batteries. They also meticulously document unit leadership, numbers of men present for duty at various times, and figures for soldiers killed, wounded, and missing for every engagement. The work also benefits from extensive endnotes and a comprehensive bibliography.

Defeating Lee is especially valuable for the light it sheds specifically on the army corps, an organizational framework that has been underappreciated in the literature. But more in-depth treatment of the new opportunities and the challenges that the corps system posed for commanders in both the Union and the

4. For additional analysis of soldiers' motivations in the war, see Gerald F. Linderman, *Embattled Courage: The Experience of Combat in the American Civil War* (NY: Free Press, 1987); James I. Robertson Jr., *Soldiers Blue and Gray* (Columbia: U South Carolina Pr, 1988); James M. McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 1997); and Aaron Sheehan-Dean, *Why Confederates Fought: Family and Nation in Civil War Virginia* (Chapel Hill: U North Carolina Pr, 2007).

5. Other valuable works on the American Civil War and memory include Carol Reardon, *Pickett's Charge in History and Memory* (Chapel Hill: U North Carolina Pr, 1997); Gary W. Gallagher, *Lee and His Generals in War and Memory* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State U Pr, 1998); David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge: Harvard U Pr, 2001); Alice Fahs and Joan Waugh, eds., *The Memory of the Civil War in American Culture* (Chapel Hill: U North Carolina Pr, 2004); and Anne E. Marshall, *Creating a Confederate Kentucky: The Lost Cause and Civil War Memory in a Border State* (Chapel Hill: U North Carolina Pr, 2010).

Confederate forces would have strengthened the work. In particular, further exploration of the underdeveloped staff system of the time would have helped explain the difficulties that commanders encountered in adapting the corps system to their purposes. Also needing contextualization is the question of why the army corps system was such a crucial innovation in the first place. What exactly did such concepts as dispersal, concentration, and coordination contribute to the operational possibilities inherent in the corps system? These minor issues aside, *Defeating Lee* is an innovative and valuable addition to the historical literature on Civil War military units. Kreiser set out to make good on Hancock's promise. He accomplished that and much more.