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Larry J. Daniel, *Battle of Stones River: The Forgotten Conflict between the Confederate Army of Tennessee and the Union Army of the Cumberland*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 2012. Pp. xiii, 313. ISBN 978-0-8071-4516-6.

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In *Battle of Stones River*, historian Larry Daniel<sup>1</sup> recounts one of the Civil War's decisive engagements. Though his narrative will challenge readers unfamiliar with the niceties of Civil War tactics and military organization, he is commendably methodical in arguing for the political and diplomatic significance of the battle. He gives close attention to the role that politics played in the fortunes of the military leaders he examines, highlighting, in particular, the animosities and suspicions the two opposing commanders—Confederate Gen. Braxton Bragg and Union Maj. Gen. William Rosecrans—had to contend with, both in the ranks and in the wider civilian world. Daniel's explication of the inherently political nature of military conflict is the strength of his book.

There are some drawbacks here, however. First, the author should have provided more vivid recreations of the maneuvers he describes or at least simplified their narratives. Ten of the book's twelve chapters amount to a protracted, monotonous rehearsal of movement and countermovement. The following account of a confrontation between Brig. Gen. Thomas Wood and Col. Samuel Beatty on the morning of 31 December 1862 is typical.

McCown, under orders from Hardee, gave Ector's and McNair's brigades little time to rest. The physical stress proved too much for McNair, who, sick and exhausted, could no longer keep up. Brigade command fell to twenty-nine-year-old Colonel Robert W. Harper, a former Little Rock attorney and plantation owner. The Texans and Arkansans pushed across the Wilkinson Pike at quick time, swinging right (northeast), with Harper to the right of Ector. McNair's division would soon crash into Rosecrans's last defensive line along the Nashville Pike. Morton's Pioneers lay seventy-five yards in advance of and parallel to the Nashville Pike and the Three Mile Marker, with the First Battalion on the left, the Third Battalion in the center, and the Second Battalion on the right. (140)

To be clear, the problem here is not with Daniel's scholarship: his reconstruction of the engagement shows an adept use of a wide variety of relevant primary and secondary sources. Furthermore, he punctuates his narrative with keen analyses like the following, on Bragg's disposition before the battle: "The army commander was discovering the inherent weakness of Murfreesboro as a point of defense—multiple approaches (at least five of them) making the enemy approach anybody's [sic]<sup>2</sup> guess" (41).

Daniel sees his concentration on the politics behind the Battle of Stones River as setting his book apart. As compared with other historians (he mentions James Lee McDonough and Peter Cozzens), he claims to give "more detail ... [on] the role of politics, so that the reader can understand not only what happened but why it happened and why it mattered so much" (xii). To that end, he sets the stage for his narrative by pinpointing the political imperatives confronting each general: "Bragg needed to counter the loss in Kentucky<sup>3</sup> and permanently reclaim Middle Tennessee. As for Rosecrans, he had to undermine the growing antiwar movement, undercut a 'Tennessee argument' for British intervention, and recoup Union morale after the

1. Among his previous books on the Civil War is *Days of Glory: The Army of the Cumberland, 1861-1865* (Baton Rouge: LSU Pr, 2004).

2. Reversed apostrophes are a distracting oddity throughout the book.

3. This refers to a joint invasion of Kentucky by Bragg and Gen. Edmund Kirby Smith in August 1862, which had faltered because Kentuckians did not flock to the Confederate ranks. See William C. Harris, *Lincoln and the Border States: Preserving the Union* (Lawrence: U Pr of Kansas, 2011).

stunning loss at the Battle of Fredericksburg” (xiii). The outcome of the war, Daniel suggests, hinged upon the two armies confronting each other in Middle Tennessee.

In this contest, the personal popularity of each general figures importantly in Daniel’s account. In spite of “tak[ing] the western Confederate army as far north as it would ever go during the war,” Bragg’s inability to conquer Kentucky sent his popularity into “a decline from which it would never rebound” (9). But Confederate President Jefferson Davis kept the general in command despite opposition by the Richmond press and the Tennessee commander Lt. Gen. Leonidas Polk, who caused problems while serving under Bragg at Stones River. After the passage of the Militia Act—a de facto draft of 300,000 men—and President Lincoln’s announcement of the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation in September 1862 garnered support for the “Peace Democrats ... [,] another name had by now emerged [for command of the Union Army of the Cumberland], however, one outside the Army of the Ohio—Major General William S. Rosecrans, the victor of the Battle of Corinth. A war Democrat, he would also serve to strengthen Lincoln’s war coalition base” (11). Rosecrans’s burgeoning reputation and his ties to the Democratic Party influenced Lincoln’s administrative decision-making.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, “[w]hat the War Department hoped to have in Rosecrans was ... someone who could stop the bleeding, both politically and on the battlefield, with a resounding victory” (14).

If Bragg had to contend with unrest over the Confederate withdrawal from Kentucky, Rosecrans had to grapple with suspicions that his Catholicism led him to favor coreligionist staff officers. When Rosecrans censured Brig. Gen. John M. Palmer for failing to occupy Murfreesboro after an apparent Confederate withdrawal on 29 December, Palmer groused to his wife that Rosecrans was acting on faulty intelligence from Brig. Gen. David S. Stanley that would have imperiled the Union’s left column and “had covered for a fellow Catholic and Regular” (53). Likewise, Maj. Gen. Thomas L. Crittenden testified to the Committee on the Conduct of the War that Rosecrans had appeared inordinately excited during the battle and recklessly exposed himself to enemy fire (167). The carping and feuding among officers of both armies is on full display in *Battle of Stones River*.

The Union needed a decisive victory for two reasons: to forestall Britain’s possible intervention on behalf of the Confederacy and to compensate for Gen. Ambrose Burnside’s disastrous assault on Marye’s Heights at Fredericksburg in December 1862. General-in-chief Henry Halleck cabled Rosecrans immediately before the hostilities in Middle Tennessee, insisting that “[p]olitical and diplomatic considerations ... made an offensive imperative.... Tennessee is the only State which can be used as an argument in favor of intervention by England” (28). Furthermore, reports that Burnside had lost thirteen thousand men at Fredericksburg prompted such gloomy prognostications as the following, by one Robert Caldwell of the 21st Ohio: “We have received the news of the repulse of Burnside at Fredericksburg, and I am now confident if Rosecrans don’t move forward and gain a decisive victory at Murfreesboro<sup>5</sup> the cry of Foreign intervention will again be the cry” (29). Daniel’s incorporation of such primary accounts into his treatment of diplomatic and political matters redeems his sometimes tedious tactical narrative.

On the one hand, the outcome of Stones River was ambiguous. Both sides suffered heavy losses. Daniel puts Confederate casualties at 10,266 and the Union’s at 13,249. Furthermore, the complacency of Gen. Alexander McCook and of the entire Union right column led to a rout on the morning of 31 December that had to be checked by Brig. Gen. Philip Sheridan. Union officers also suspected that Confederate troops had severed the Army of the Cumberland’s supply line with Nashville. Nevertheless, the Confederates could not sustain the momentum gained during their surprise attack on the morning of the 31st—Daniel compares this to the Battle of Shiloh—and Bragg decided to withdraw his Army of the Tennessee from Murfreesboro on the morning of 4 January.

Daniel’s last chapter chronicles the political and diplomatic implications of this decision. Bragg’s initial communications with Richmond—sent immediately after the Union right crumbled early on the 31st—gave

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4. See James M. McPherson on Lincoln’s handling of “political generals” in “A. Lincoln, Commander in Chief,” in *Our Lincoln: New Perspectives on Lincoln and His World*, ed. Eric Foner (NY: Norton, 2008) 19–36.

5. The Confederates, in keeping with their convention of naming engagements after the nearest town, spoke of the “Battle of Murfreesboro,” not Stones River.

the impression in the Confederate capital that the Army of the Tennessee had won a decisive victory. This made Bragg's retreat all the more disheartening. Daniel musters newspaper reports and personal correspondence to illustrate the crestfallen reaction of Confederate partisans. "There is no doubt that Gen. Bragg has in a great degree lost the confidence of the army and many think there was no reason for the retreat" (203), wrote Tennessean Frank Carter. Similarly, Patton Anderson wrote to his wife that "Gen. Bragg is more unpopular with the army than ever since he fell back from a victorious field. The victory was a much more decisive one than at Perryville, but I doubt if we reap any of the fruits beyond the artillery and other captured property we took away" (207).

Besides the pillorying of Bragg in the press and in personal correspondence, the aftermath of Stones River saw widespread disaffection among his general staff. Capt. Theodore O'Hara resented Bragg for cashiering him for drunkenness in 1861. As Maj. Gen. John Breckinridge's adjutant general, "O'Hara leaked a damaging account of the battle to a correspondent ... that became the basis of an article in the *Mobile Register*" and of Kentucky officers' opposition to Bragg's continued command. When Bragg canvassed his general officers regarding their opinion of his decision to withdraw from Murfreesboro, hoping for a vote of confidence, he received a discouraging response from all but Gen. Gideon J. Pillow, a political general who may, Daniel suggests, have been hoping to secure a command from Bragg (206).

Despite popular expressions of disapproval of his generals, President Davis's refusal to relieve them ensured the support of the Confederate government in Richmond. This personal victory encouraged Bragg to solicit statements regarding the Kentucky Campaign from staunch opponents Polk and Lt. Gen. William J. Hardee, who refused to comply and boasted he could "tear Bragg to tatters." Indeed, from a Southern perspective, one of the outcomes of Stones River was to expose fissures within the Confederate high command. "Bragg had seemingly won against the enemy within. In truth, Stones River had left the army's top command in shambles" (210).

From the Union perspective, the proximate result of the battle was Rosecrans's meteoric rise. "Never mind that the battle had ended in a tactical draw. Rosecrans possessed the battlefield; it was enough.... Rosecrans became the darling of the nation. His career soared, surpassing even Grant's."<sup>6</sup> Lincoln exulted, "God bless you, and all with you! Please tender to all, and accept for yourself, the nation's gratitude for your and their skill, endurance, and dauntless courage." In a letter to the general regarding the effect of his "victory" in tempering opposition to the Emancipation Proclamation, Lincoln wrote "I can never forget, whilst I remember anything, that about the end of last year and the beginning of this, you gave us a hard-earned victory, which, had there been a defeat instead, the nation could scarcely have lived over" (211).

Daniel's ultimate conclusion is that the Battle of Stones River secured Tennessee for the Union, precluding any possible "Tennessee argument" for British intervention. "The stock exchange and gold markets stabilized.... Politically the battle countered the loss at Fredericksburg and undercut the growing antiwar movement." Rosecrans's cavalry commander asserted that "The Battle of Stone's River saved the Northwest from falling under the domination of the peace or coward's party." Moreover, Daniel adds, "The Emancipation Proclamation, which went into effect on January 1, 1863, was ushered in by the Stones River victory rather than the Fredericksburg debacle." The Union victory also demonstrated that the Confederacy could not fight a war of attrition against the North. It "helped answer the salient question: would this become a war of southern attrition or northern will?" Daniel quotes the New York diarist George Templeton Strong in a fitting close to his book: "It [the battle] may have been indecisive, but our troops will stand the wear and tear of indecisive conflict longer than those of slavery, and can soon be repaired." "The South," Daniel concludes, "could not win such a war" (211).

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6. On Grant's strained relations with Rosecrans, see William C. Davis, *Crucible of Command* (Boston: Da Capo Press, 2014), with my review at *MiWSR* 2015-058.