



*Braxton Bragg: The Most Hated Man of the Confederacy* by Earl J. Hess.

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This superb study of Braxton Bragg is very aptly subtitled. A punch line of many a joke at conferences and Civil War roundtables, Bragg has fared poorly in both the war's historiography and its popular memory. The conventional image of the general is of an obtuse, irascible, cold-hearted, and incapable officer who, more than any other Rebel leader, doomed the Confederacy. He poisoned relations within the western Confederate high command and stymied the South's war effort on both the strategic and tactical levels. While some of this rings true, the prolific Civil War historian Earl Hess has now given readers a more proficient, nuanced, and, indeed, human Braxton Bragg.

To claim that Bragg was the most capable of all the Army of Tennessee's commanders seems like faint praise, but Hess marshals considerable evidence that the general was an excellent administrator, devoted and brave Southern patriot, and skilled tactician. Granted, he lost more battles than he won, but Hess reminds us that he was commander of the army when it reached its organizational and tactical apex. Bragg managed to reinvigorate that army after its bloody defeat at Shiloh (6-7 Apr. 1862) and led it to "its most impressive tactical victories ... on October 8 at Perryville, December 31 at Stones River and September 20 at Chickamauga" (276). Hess backs up his assertions with compelling statistics, noting that Bragg was responsible for 75 percent of the army's tactical successes and only 28.5 percent of its failures. Such numbers lead him to the bold, sure-to-be-controversial, yet reasoned claim that "the Army of Tennessee was Bragg's Army" (276).

While the general was far from a flawless field commander, Hess argues that his wartime failures were more personal than military. It was, he posits, Bragg's stubborn recalcitrance and poor relations with his subordinates and the Southern press that, more than anything else, damaged his reputation. Like many of the South's generals, he proved to be a poor politician. He rarely courted Southern newspaper editors and proved remarkably clumsy when he tried to.

Bragg was burdened with several insubordinate, incapable, and intemperate lieutenants. Men like Leonidas Polk, William J. Hardee, John C. Breckinridge, and Daniel Harvey Hill consistently breached military protocol or performed poorly. Bragg was typically unforgiving and vindictive in punishing his subordinates' transgressions. After the Battle of Chickamauga (18-20 Sept. 1863), for example, he waged war on his subordinates more than on the Yankees. Hess rightly holds the general himself partially responsible for the decline in his wartime popularity, effectiveness, and credibility.

Hess's systematic, clear, balanced, and cogent assessment of Bragg's generalship seamlessly blends narrative and analysis. Using his own pathbreaking research on infantry tactics, he reevaluates Bragg's abilities in the context of the existing historiography. The result is a discerning and persuasive account of the course of the war in the West. For example, despite Bragg's tactical victory at Perryville, the Kentucky Campaign as a whole was a Confederate failure. Moreover, Hess shows, Bragg was partly responsible for this; he failed to grasp the enemy's intentions and lost effective control over some of his subordinates. However, other generals, namely Polk and Edmund Kirby Smith, also sabotaged the Rebel invasion of the Bluegrass State. Most of the blame, argues Hess, falls on Confederate president Jefferson Davis, who failed to place Bragg in explicit command of the expedition. Civil War military

operations were convoluted and often confused; Hess demonstrates that explanations for their results are legion.

The author meticulously charts Bragg's popularity among Rebel soldiers and on the Confederate homefront. At no point was the general universally condemned. He always had his supporters, whether in the wake of Perryville, Stones River, and Chickamauga or after his appointment as Jefferson Davis's military advisor. This means that Bragg's image as scapegoat and pariah was, at least in part, a postwar construct.

Hess maintains that Jefferson Davis's stalwart faith in Bragg reflected a genuine appreciation for his abilities, even though the men's relationship prior to the war had been contentious and did not evolve into friendship until the conflict's final stages. Besides Davis, Bragg's wife Elise was his primary source of strength. Their letters reveal a loving husband, ailing patriot, and stubborn commander who always held his army's rank and file in higher regard than his generals.

The author states plainly in his introduction that he has written not a traditional biography, but a close examination of Bragg's wartime career. He devotes few pages to the general's life before or after the Civil War. While this may disappoint some readers, Earl Hess has fully achieved his stated goal. Thanks to this brilliant biography, Braxton Bragg will no longer remain a dehumanized, "almost ... cardboard figure among Civil War enthusiasts and even among some professional historians" (xi).