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Reviewed Work: Mr. Polk's Army: The American Military Experience in the Mexican War

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interpretation is a sad legacy of people like Simms that should not be swept under the rug.

Similarly, Guilds has high praise for William Gilmore Simms's portrayal, in the *Sack and Destruction of the City of Columbia, S.C.* (1865) of the arrival of General William T. Sherman and his Unionist troops. Simms, who had fled to Columbia as a safe haven from his plantation and who compared Sherman's forces to Huns and Vandals, presented a vivid and potent—but extremely one-sided—picture of the Yankees, who, in addition to other depredations, supposedly prevented local firemen from putting out the fire that ravaged the city. This legend of the ruthlessness and indifference of the Yankees to human suffering played a powerful role in the origins and perpetuation of the “Lost Cause” mythology that united white southerners for generations to come in romanticizing the Old South and the Confederacy, especially its military leaders. This mythology provided the intellectual and moral basis for the racist and reactionary regimes that ruled the South for so many years after the Civil War.

Marion Brunson Lucas, in *Sherman and the Burning of Columbia* (1976), developed a much more balanced and multi-causal explanation of the events surrounding the burning of Columbia that repudiates the Yankees-blocking-the-firemen story and places Simms's other allegations in a broader context. Lucas's work had been widely accepted as the definitive study of this topic. Nevertheless, Guilds completely ignores Lucas's book and makes extravagant claims about Simms as a historian. According to Guilds, Simms's “presence in the city and credibility as a historian lend substance to his depiction” (31). Based on this line of thinking, Guilds concludes that Simms “is particularly valuable in his importance to both historians and literary scholars” (35).

It seems obvious that Guilds has fallen into a prevalent pitfall for scholars who spend many years working on one subject: batten down the hatches and defend your man against all comers

Robert M. Saunders is an independent scholar who has just published a book entitled *Power, the Presidency, and the Preamble: Interpretive Essays on Selected Presidents of the United States* (2001).

Mr. Polk's Army: The American Military Experience in the Mexican War. By Richard Bruce Winders. (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 1997. Pp. xvi, 284. Illustrations. Paper, \$17.95.)

Texas A&M Press has recently issued Richard Bruce Winder's 1997 study of America's Mexican War army in paperback. In *Mr. Polk's Army*, the

author deals with two main topics: the partisan politics of military appointment and the democratic spirit of the American troops led by James K. Polk's many appointees.

Winders is clearly most interested in the relationship between partisan politics and the officer selections of the Polk administration. The author reminds us early that the secretary of war, William Marcy, had previously gained national notice with an 1832 Senate speech vigorously asserting that "to the victor belong the spoils" (16). The book then proceeds to develop in great detail the evidence for a similar emphasis upon partisan advantage in the 1846-1848 officer corps.

Once he has built his case for Democratic leadership of the officer corps, Winders makes a more impressionistic case for democratic spirit among the enlisted men. This is clearly the topic Winders most enjoyed researching. His narrative quickens and his examples sparkle as he draws upon both major and minor campaigns from Texas to California to illustrate common behavioral features of the enlisted soldier. Concentrating upon recruitment, training, and camp life, the book argues for an egalitarian spirit in everything from discipline to costume. Combat, which might serve as a test of such ideals as courage, loyalty, and initiative is, however, largely ignored.

Winders's army is no monolith. Both regulars and volunteers fought in the war, and the author makes a clear and lucid explanation of the background and organization of each group. He points out that the war benefited each in quite separate ways. For the regulars, the war allowed a purge of many tired, overage generals and the recruitment and training of more motivated enlisted men. For the volunteers, many of whom never saw battle, the war offered an initial burst of excitement that often yielded to boredom and indiscipline.

Winders's army is also transitional. In detailing its weaponry, dress, organization, drill, and tactics, he portrays an institution abandoning the memories of the War of 1812 era for a more fluid, industrial, and irregular style that will look fairly familiar to Civil War buffs. But no such transition appears in such matters as diet, camp sanitation, and medical expertise, and the author offers a case that the Mexican War may, proportionate to numbers committed, have been the deadliest of America's wars. If Polk raised a winning army, he raised it at a high price.

Contemporary perceptions of ethnicity often color our view of the war, particularly with regard to the role played by Irish immigrants. Winders acknowledges such issues as the American treatment of the Irish deserters who were punished for joining Mexico's San Patricio battalion. His main focus, however, is upon attitudes of U. S. soldiers toward the Mexican people themselves. It comes as little surprise to learn that views of

American political, cultural, and racial superiority enjoyed wide support among the troops. Such views go far to explaining the widespread indignities heaped upon civilians in the occupied regions.

Winders relies extensively upon published sources, paying less attention to manuscript letters and diaries. At times the result is more a picture of what officers thought about the men's behavior than it is of what the men thought of themselves. Given the tendency of many officers, especially regulars, to differentiate themselves from the soldiers they lead, this can result in a more traditional overview than Winders intended.

Winders also might have been more convincing in his treatment of the common soldier if he had more clearly distinguished between the two main armies of the war. By comparing the one raised in 1846, which served under Taylor in northern Mexico, with the other raised in considerable part in 1847, which served with Scott in central Mexico, Winders might have highlighted considerable differences. He would certainly have had a better chance to evaluate the performances of the two very individual Whig generals, Zachary "Rough and Ready" Taylor and Winfield "Fuss and Feathers" Scott. From this, Winders might have built a stronger answer to the question of how any Whig general could derive a strong military performance from an army that he pictures in political dissonance with their commanders. The differences might also lead to a review of the fighting styles of the two armies. Winders does not treat operations and combat in detail, and thus avoids the "face of battle" approach in his study. But it would be interesting to ask if Taylor's improvisational victories, such as Buena Vista, reflect the qualities of a body of troops different from those that Scott led on the road to Mexico City.

Certainly two types of democracy—political and social—sit uncomfortably in separate chapters of the book, and probably sat as uncomfortably with many of the men. It's hard to find the same kind of rough affection for many of Polk's appointed officers as the men clearly had for the Whig generals, Winfield Scott and Zachary Taylor, who were so often the target of Polk's suspicion and concern. It's also hard to understand from Winders's analysis why Franklin Pierce, alone among Polk's appointees, was able to transfer his wartime performance into a successful presidential bid. Much of the problem probably lies in Winders's sources, which stress the accounts of officers and the diaries of literate volunteers. It's hard to hear the inarticulate, but this book certainly shows us that such questions are rewarding to ask.

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