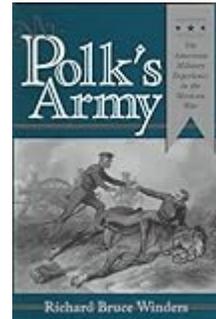


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Richard Bruce Winders. *Mr. Polk's Army: The American Military Experience in the Mexican War.* College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1997. xvi + 288 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-89096-754-6.



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Published on H-SHEAR (May, 1998)

The current observance of the Mexican-American War sesquicentennial has led to the a resurgence of interest in the conflict. Richard Bruce Winders' *Mr. Polk's Army* is among the best of these recent titles, and perhaps the most significant writing on the subject since K. Jack Bauer's 1973 book, *The Mexican War, 1846-1848*. As the title indicates, Winders' study is part of the "new" military history, which seeks to place the military experience within the broader scope of American society. He succeeds admirably in this effort, demonstrating that the American army reflected "the beliefs and values of the society from which it [was] drawn." As "[t]he product of Jacksonian America, Polk's army carried its view of democracy to the land of the Montezumas" (p. 13). These views included a certainty in the superiority of Anglo-Saxon culture and institutions, and a condescending attitude towards other governments, religions and ethnic groups.

Winders begins with a discussion of the war's background causes, as well as the Democratic-Whig infighting that marked the era. He then details the Regular Army's organization, from its staff offices (such as the Adjutant General, Inspector General, Commissary, Medical, and Ordnance Departments), to the artillery, cavalry, and infantry regiments of the line. The army's two principal commanders, Winfield Scott and Zachary Tay-

lor, "came to represent two different military styles" (p. 30). The aristocratic Scott strove to organize the American army along professional, European lines, while the more democratic Taylor was at least perceived as favoring a less formal organization with a freer, more aggressive style of warfare. "While the war would bring defeat to Mexico," Winders proposes, "it also would strike a serious blow at 'democrats' in the army and so further professionalize the military" (p. 31).

During the war, president Polk feuded with both of his commanders, arguing that neither was fit for command. Initially more supportive of Taylor, the president had a serious falling out with the general in the fall of 1846. A dispute over American strategy following the Battle of Monterey developed into an "intense hatred" (p. 33). The president could not remove Taylor, however, because of his even greater dislike of Scott. Well aware of the latter's presidential ambitions, he reluctantly selected Scott for command of the climatic campaign against Mexico City. To counteract the effect of Whiggish leanings among Regular Army officers, the president moved to appoint loyal Democrats as volunteer generals. Of thirteen volunteer general officers selected and confirmed during the war, all were Democrats. Some, including William O. Butler, James Shields, and Sterling Price performed capably, while others such as Gideon Pillow and Caleb

Cushing proved less successful. Overall, “[t]hese volunteer generals did not give Polk what he needed,” as they failed to rise above either Taylor or Scott in public prestige (p. 48).

After examining the army’s administration and command, Winders next focuses on the rank and file. In two chapters, he compares the Regular Army with the volunteers. The Regular Army entered the war with a shortage of both officers and enlisted men, which necessitated its expansion. Before the war, the public had a low opinion of the military, viewing the service as a refuge for failures and loafers. Many officers were old and ready for retirement, and few had experience commanding large bodies of troops. Maintaining a rigid separation from the enlisted ranks, they ruled with iron discipline, with few engendering the respect of their men. The enlisted ranks were comprised of a large percentage of foreigners. Most lacked formal or even much military education, and the majority were poorly motivated. Polk used the expansion of the army to appoint westerners and Democrats to the officer ranks in an attempt to “break the monopoly of the officer corps that West Point graduates had begun to develop” (p. 64). The expansion of the Regular Army and the appointment of new officers, “reshaped the image of the regular army, which emerged from the conflict with newfound confidence, born on the battlefield.” Polk’s attempt, however, “to diminish West Point’s influence failed, as the professionalism displayed by its alumni brought acclaim to the institution” (p. 65).

To supplement ranks of the Regular Army, over 70,000 volunteers enlisted during the conflict. These citizen soldiers compiled a mixed record of service. Only a minority served with the two main American armies, but regiments like the First South Carolina, the First Mississippi Rifles, and the Second Illinois Infantry fought well and suffered heavy losses. Many volunteers chafed at the restrictions of military life. “Reared in Jacksonian America,” Winders contends, volunteers “clung tightly to the privileges they had known in civilian life. The melding of democratic institutions and the army never was completed, as the ‘citizen’ never really became transformed into the ‘soldier’” (p. 87). Volunteer officers proved to be a particular concern. Though some had pre-war military experience, most received their commissions because of political connections or personal popularity. Consequently, discipline was more relaxed in volunteer units, and the level of training and drill generally inferior. Volunteer regiments also seem to have perpetrated far more crimes on Mexican property and civilians than their Regular Army counterparts. Future Union general

George Meade complained that while the regulars fought the Mexican army and government, the volunteers, “by their many outrages, carried the war to the Mexican people,” which hardened the war and incited hatred towards all Americans (p. 197).

Other subjects examined by Winders include the weaponry, uniforms, and equipment of the army as well as other factors that affected soldiers’ lives, such as rations, medicine, disease, leisure activities, and the relationship between the military and the Mexican civilian population. American weaponry was a mixture of old and new. Some percussion muskets were used in the war, but the overwhelming majority of foot soldiers fought with flintlocks. The field artillery batteries of the Regular Army represented perhaps the finest arm of the American service, while the mounted regiments were also well-equipped and armed. Soldiers, particularly volunteers, suffered from clothing shortages during the war. As might be expected, the rations provided to the men—consisting mostly of salted meat, hardbread, and coffee—elicited many complaints. Most troopers supplemented their rations by purchasing food through sutlers or from civilians. Disease proved even more deadly than might be expected. The Mexican-American War ranks as the deadliest in American history, with a mortality rate of 110 per 1,000. The great majority of these deaths were the result of diseases such as yellow fever and dysentery. The Sixth Illinois Infantry, for example, lost one man in battle and 296 to disease, and many units had similar records. Those wounded in battle also faced long odds of recovery, particularly if the wound was in the torso. Amputation remained the treatment of choice for extremity wounds that fractured bones.

In all, *Mr. Polk’s Army* provides readers with a well-written and well-documented overview of the American military experience in the Mexican-American War. Winders’ bibliography is extensive, although he does not utilize manuscript collections, particularly the letters and diaries of private soldiers, to the degree of James M. McCaffrey in his recent *Army of Manifest Destiny: The American Soldier in the Mexican War, 1846-1848*. Winders’ work, though, covers a much broader subject than McCaffrey’s, which focuses primarily on soldier life and attitudes. *Mr. Polk’s Army* contains little operational history, so readers looking for a summary of battles and campaigns will be disappointed. For those seeking, rather, to understand the character of the American army that fought the Mexican-American War, from the lowliest private to the commanding generals, Winders’ work is essential.

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Citation: David Coles. Review of Winders, Richard Bruce, *Mr. Polk's Army: The American Military Experience in the Mexican War*. H-SHEAR, H-Net Reviews. May, 1998.

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