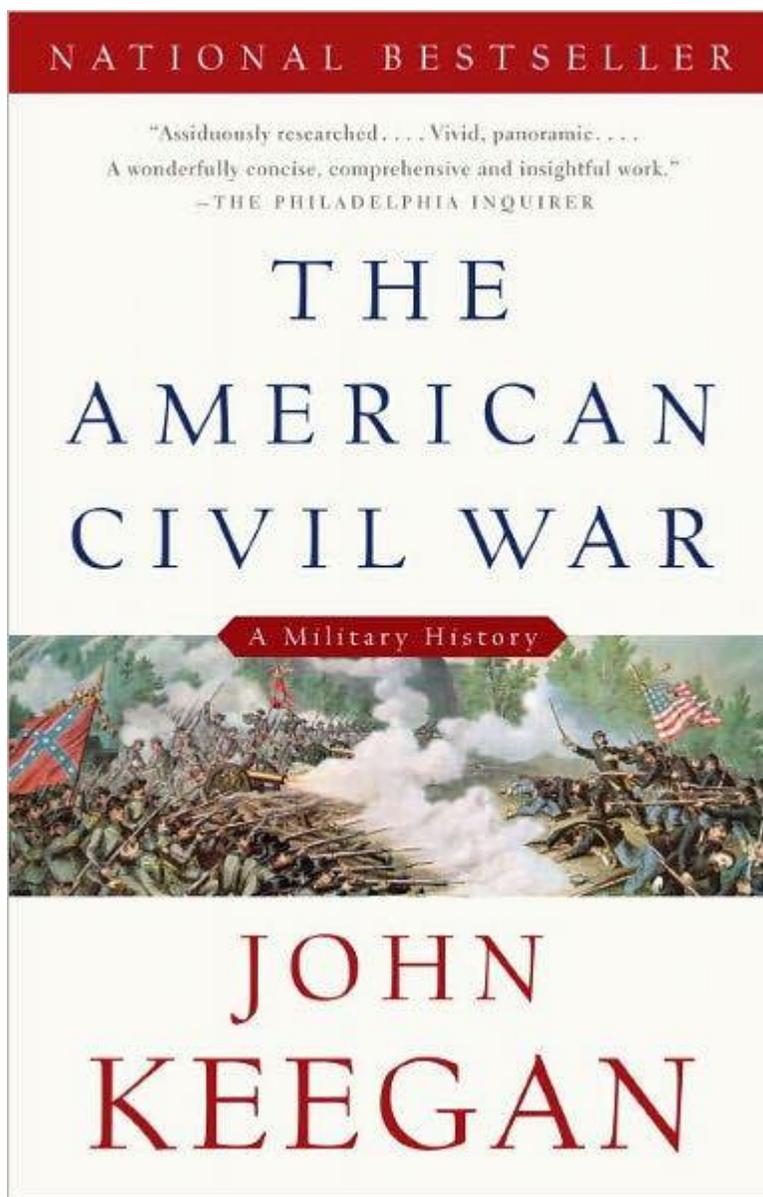


*The American Civil War: A Military History*  
by John Keegan



*Reviewed by Garry Victor Hill*

*The American Civil War: A Military History* by John Keegan

London; Hutchinson, 2009. Illustrated. 394 pages.

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John Keegan (1934-2012) was one of the twentieth century's foremost military historians, writing on conflicts from the Medieval era to the Iraqi War. This was his last published book. It has strengths and weaknesses, the main weakness being the length, something he almost certainly did not decide. Due to having only 394 pages, large sections must be barely mentioned. These essentially underwritten missing sections include the effects of disease, foreign volunteers and foreign trade, parole and bounty systems and conscription. Black Confederates and the war in the far west also remain unmentioned. The raids of Quantrill, Morgan, Mosby, MacAndrews, McNeill, Forrest and Anderson get little attention, if that. Several large battles do get mentions, but not analysis.

There are some factual mistakes and typos. Grant left the presidency in 1877, not 1887. At the battle of the crater the Black Union soldiers were not massacred en masse. A take no prisoners policy was initially started, but Lee ordered the commander on the spot, General Mahone, to take prisoners and he replied that he had already issued such an order.

Now that the criticisms are dealt with, time for some praise. He goes into how geography affected the war effort in more detail than other writers, but as he demonstrates he is right to do this. General McClellan usually gets blame in Civil War histories: his pomposity, lack of aggression and overcaution usually get the spotlight, but as Keegan points out, he did organise the Army of the Potomac, initially out of nothing but raw volunteers and enthusiasm and he trained this force of almost totally raw recruits into a formidable fighting force. McClellan was not as weak a commander as many think: he won at Williamsburg and won several small victories as he advanced towards Richmond, forcing the Confederates to yield territory. The peninsula campaign was a good idea for ending the war quickly. His scheme nearly worked and might have if Lee had not replaced a wounded Johnston, as even Johnston cheerfully admitted. McClellan was also popular with his troops. He had the humanity to forbid plundering and depredations and the integrity not to endorse the Democrats peace program, even though his stance on this weakened his campaign for the presidency.

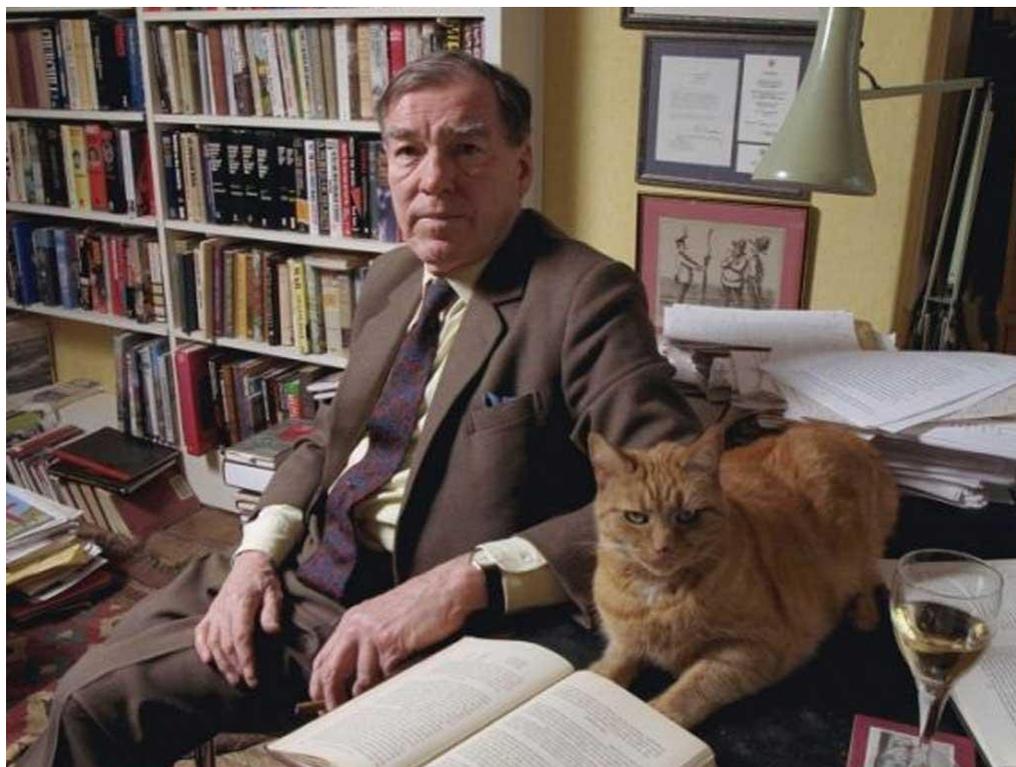
Keegan also gives succinct portraits of Grant and Lincoln, Sherman and Davis and accurately shows the effects of their actions on the war effort. He points out how new they were to high command, but how they saw with insight and then acted decisively – when those with much more experience were limited by a lack of imagination, energy, commitment and sometimes even loyalty.

He has sections that are also accurate about the divisions that led to the war. He shows how important slavery was to the south and how it shaped racist and patronising attitudes. The attitudes and activities of blacks in the North and white attitudes towards them are also given generally unknown revelations. The importance of the hospitals, the blockade and the war at sea are covered well. He has a whole chapter on his speciality, the nature of battlefield warfare. He also writes of how warfare was changing at this time.

In his penultimate chapter ‘Could the South Have Survived?’ he gives the standard answer: almost certainly no. However to disagree: there were three moments that could have seen a Confederate victory. The first was during the aftermath of First Bull Run, when Jackson and Longstreet separately concluded that a small advancing force could have taken Washington D.C. Both men however found that their forces and those of others were too disorganised, split up and tired to make the effort. Then there was Gettysburg. Both sides were showing strong signs of war weariness. If the North had been soundly defeated there, could Lincoln’s iron will combined with his executive powers have held the northern war effort together?

The South’s last chance was if McClellan had won the presidential election and been inaugurated on March 4<sup>th</sup> 1865. To use Lincoln’s phrase: would he have “snatched a Union defeat out of the jaws of victory?” Apparently not: although he disagreed with many of Lincoln’s policies, he wanted the war won.

Once Lincoln inspired enough with that wish and combined it with the North’s numerical superiority, technological advancement, finance and the abilities of Sherman, Sheridan, Farragut and Grant, the South’s best chances were gone.



John Keegan 1934-2012