
This carefully written and clearly argued book successfully tells the sprawling history of the Army and American railroads across the nineteenth century. Previous writers on the topic tended to draw straight lines between the West Point military academy as the early republic’s leading source of engineers, the General Survey Act of 1824 that sent them into the field, and the evolution of a more-or-less standardized railroad system that took form with significant military influence. Angevine is in no such rush. While earlier authors such as Forest Hill, William Goetzmann, and Charles O’Connell stressed the Army’s impact on railroading, Angevine emphasizes several countercurrents. He stresses the intense political polarization that constrained proposals for internal improvements and that buffeted the Army. Brave speeches everywhere about building railroads for national defense frequently amounted to overblown rhetoric. Following the Baltimore & Ohio, railroad officials quickly learned the game of mobilizing local politicians and fabricating military utility as needed to line up a valuable engineering survey and an apparent government endorsement. In their surveys, Army engineers typically preferred routes that offered significant economic benefits and rarely recommended routes with only military benefits. A wave of resignations (107 former Army engineers worked for railroads in 1837) paved the way for military professionalism at West Point, which esteemed traditional military drilling and military history. Army engineers, then, served less as vectors of uniform practices and more as agents of capitalism.

From the mid-1840s, the Army’s role in railroading remained marginal until the Civil War broke out. Not much came from the four transcontinental railroad surveys commissioned by Secretary of War Jefferson Davis. They produced, as one railroad engineer put it, a “dearth of that kind of practical knowledge which capitalists require to induce them to invest in railroads” (119). More consequential were the land grants, beginning with the Illinois Central’s receiving nearly a quarter of the public land of
Illinois in 1850. The transfer of federal property to state control proved so popular that by 1871 eighty railroads had received over 155 million acres to sell, retain, or develop as construction subsidies. In his treatment of the war, Angevine outlines the use of railroads by the Union generals Grant, Sherman, and Sheridan (West Pointers all), observing that railroads dramatically increased the size of armies that could be assembled on a battlefield. Yet his real concern is the wartime funding, managing, and organizing of railroads. The hands-off Confederate railway policy was a disaster: when its loads were carried at all, the Confederacy was fleeced by profit-minded southern railroads. They also refused to exchange rolling stock needed for through shipments. Southern roads captured by the Union were for some years directly owned, operated, and controlled by the U.S. Military Railroad.

In sharp contrast, Angevine judges the Union railroad policy as a striking success. Certainly, tensions existed over rates and both sides made threats during tough negotiations, but by and large the Union and northern railroads cooperated harmoniously. After the war, a symbiotic relationship between the Army and railroads developed in the trans-Mississippi west. Angevine details the Army’s cold-blooded strategic use of transcontinental railroad building, troop mobility, and the spread of “civilization” to battle the Plains Indians. Even before the Golden Spike was driven in 1869 the railroads facilitated a deployment of troops more than 3,000 miles from Washington to Sacramento in just 20 days. By 1883, according to Sherman, the completion of four transcontinental lines “has settled forever the Indian question, the Army question, and many others which have hitherto troubled the country” (216).

From an interdisciplinary viewpoint, there is clearly more to be done. While Angevine briefly cites Theda Skocpol, his focus is more on the Army as an evolving institution rather than “the state” as a dynamic entity. Accordingly, such state activities as patenting, regulatory and corporate law, and the antitrust movement receive at best cursory mention. (Readers can follow up with James Ely’s *Railroads and American Law* [Lawrence, 2001] and Steven W. Usselman’s *Regulating Railroad Innovation: Business, Technology, and Politics in America, 1840-1920* [Cambridge, 2002].) And while political history is part of his narrative frame, concepts from political science are not
given prominent attention, as in Colleen Dunlavy’s *Politics and Industrialization: Early Railroads in the United States and Prussia* (Princeton, 1994). Angevine also obliquely addresses a growing literature on standardization and “network” dynamics. All the same, *The Railroad and the State* is a significant contribution to several distinct historical literatures and a successful example of synthesis. Scholars consulting this work will appreciate its clear structure, complete bibliography, and helpful index.

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