

Provides an instructive picture of a complicated military career

Politician in Uniform

General Lew Wallace and the Civil War

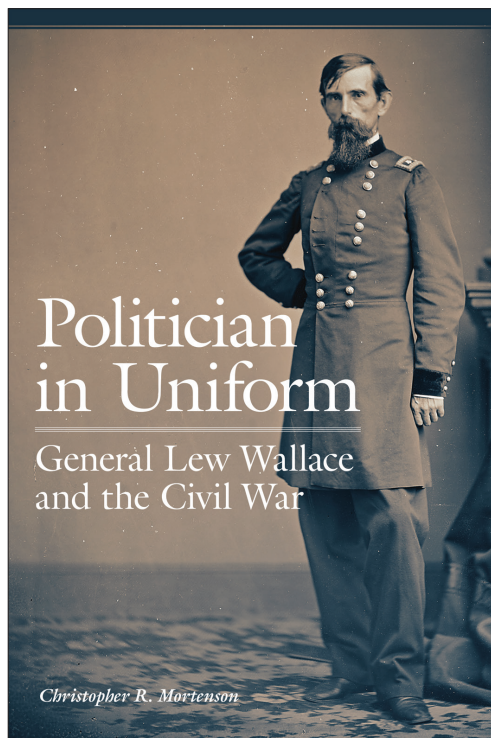
By Christopher R. Mortenson

Lew Wallace (1827–1905) won fame for his novel, *Ben-Hur*, and for his negotiations with William H. Bonney, aka Billy the Kid, during the Lincoln County Wars of 1878–81. He was a successful lawyer, a notable Indiana politician, and a capable military administrator. And yet, as history and his own memoir tell us, Wallace would have traded all these accolades for a moment of military glory in the Civil War to save the Union. Where previous accounts have sought to discredit or defend Wallace's performance as a general in the war, author Christopher R. Mortenson takes a more nuanced approach. Combining military biography, historical analysis, and political insight, *Politician in Uniform* provides an expanded and balanced view of Wallace's military career—and offers the reader a new understanding of the experience of a voluntary general like Lew Wallace.

A rising politician from Indiana, Wallace became a Civil War general through his political connections. While he had much success as a regimental commander, he ran into trouble at the brigade and division levels. A natural rivalry and tension between West Pointers and political generals might have accounted for some of this, but many of his difficulties, as Mortenson shows us, were of Wallace's own making. A temperamental officer with a "rough" conception of manhood, Wallace often found his mentors wanting, disrespected his superiors, and vigorously sought opportunities for glorious action in the field, only to perform poorly when given the chance.

Despite his flaws, Mortenson notes, Wallace contributed both politically and militarily to the war effort—in the fight for Fort Donelson and at the Battle of Shiloh, in the defense of Cincinnati and southern Indiana, and in the administration of Baltimore and the Middle Department. Detailing these and other instances of Wallace's success along with his weaknesses and failures, Mortenson provides an unusually thorough and instructive picture of this complicated character in his military service. His book clearly demonstrates the unique complexities of evaluating the performance of a politician in uniform.

Christopher R. Mortenson is Associate Professor of History at Ouachita Baptist University and holds a PhD in History from Texas A&M University, College Station.



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