

Stephen F. Austin State University

SFA ScholarWorks

Faculty Publications

History

2008

Planting the Union Flag in Texas: The Campaigns of Major General Nathaniel P. Banks in the West

Archie P. McDonald

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/history>



Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

[Tell us](#) how this article helped you.

Review

McDonald, Archie P.

Fall 2008

Dupree, Stephen A. *Planting the Union Flag in Texas: The Campaigns of Major General Nathaniel P. Banks in the West.* Texas A&M; University Press, \$40.00 hardcover ISBN 9781585446414

Nathaniel Banks in Texas

Over the years Gary Joiner and others have offered examinations of various parts of General Nathaniel P. Banks's Western command in the latter years of the Civil War; comes now a full review of Banks's activities by Stephen A. Dupree. The author's efforts remind us that the Civil War, of all American experiences, is not the exclusive preserve of the trained academic. Indeed, Dupree's formal training in the field of nuclear engineering and career at Sandia National Laboratories is a long way from the muddy bayou bottoms of Louisiana or the numerous waterways into Texas that Banks explored, but obviously he is as expert in one field as the other. Like many enthusiasts, or "buffs," Dupree has studied and thought more about this topic than any "teaching" historian.

Banks came to command in Louisiana during the Civil War because of earlier public service in Massachusetts and also representing his state in Congress, including leadership of the House of Representatives. Banks was not the only politician who achieved high military rank in those volunteer armies of the Civil War, but he became one of the most criticized for it. The historical guild—buffs and teachers alike—long ago accepted the Holy Writ that political generals necessarily lack military leadership ability. One must remember generals George Washington and Andrew Jackson, both quite successful in military leadership, not because of training but because of political skills. On the other hand, Colin Powell and Wesley Clark have demonstrated that military expertise does not necessarily lead to political success. In other words, both sides produced good generals and bad generals, some had been politicians and some had not.

Then, too, there is the Gospel that most Western Theatre leaders of the Blue side, such as Banks, and of the Gray side, such as Edmund Kirby Smith and John Bankhead Magruder—two of Banks' opponents in the West—received their commands mostly because they could not cut the mustard in the East. Such a view overlooks the competence of Richard Taylor, who *wanted* to come home to Louisiana despite success with Stonewall Jackson in Virginia, or U.S. Grant, whose rehabilitation started in the West long before the culmination of his and the Union's success at Appomattox—again, some good, some bad.

Dupree has looked at Banks's command in the West more closely than anyone whose work I have read. He points out that Banks was given three assignments—opening the Mississippi River, attacking and securing Mobile, and occupying some part of Texas—and suggests that he partially accomplished two of them, which is a pretty good average in any league.

Dupree criticizes Banks for several failures in leadership, among them excess baggage that slowed the movements of his armies, sustaining subordinates, especially General William B. Franklin in command after his colossal failure at Sabine Pass in September 1863, and that he lacked imagination, one might even say curiosity, about his opponent's abilities and capabilities. But Dupree does credit Banks with compassion for the suffering civilians whose property was pilfered or destroyed by men could not control, and his disdain for the cotton profiteers who regarded his mission as enabling their own.

In the end of it, I guess I find compassion for Banks. He was not the first or last general history has or will condemn in the wisdom of its hindsight. What we have here, then, is a careful examination of Banks's and his subordinates' efforts to open the Mississippi River, which he did help Grant to accomplish by capturing Port Hudson, and to plant Old Glory in Texas, which he did not do in any meaningful way. Dupree examines all five of Banks's efforts to invade Texas, pointing out how and why each failed. Let us remember that Grant tried that many times to capture Vicksburg before finding the right way, and as many times again to whip Bobby Lee before settling down to another siege and capitalizing on his "overwhelming numbers and resources." Maybe, but for Grace, goes Banks.

Archie P. McDonald teaches at Stephen F. Austin State University in Nacogdoches, Texas. He directed the East Texas Historical Association from

1971 until 2008 and is the editor of Make Me A Map Of The Valley: The Journal of Stonewall Jackson's Topographer [Jedediah Hotchkiss].