

# Book Review: Presidents and Their Generals: An American History of Command in War by Matthew Moten

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**Matthew Moten** looks to trace a history of the evolving roles of civilian and military leaders in conducting war, demonstrating how war strategy and national security policy shifted as political and military institutions developed, and how they were shaped by leaders' personalities. Reviewed by Jeff Lupo.

**Presidents and Their Generals: An American History of Command in War.**  
**Matthew Moten. Harvard University Press. 2014.**

Find this book: 

In the 2008 presidential campaign, it was a big deal when retired four-star general Colin Powell endorsed Barack Obama. Obama's campaign had been steadily gaining momentum, but Powell's endorsement somehow made the Junior Senator from Illinois feel more solid.

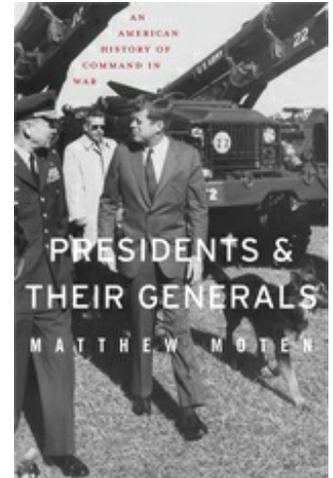
This really shouldn't have been the case. The United States likes to think of itself as different, and civilian control of the military is something that is supposed to set it apart. When generals become kingmakers, the king will at some point find himself indebted to them. Powell didn't come anywhere near to crossing the Rubicon, but his endorsement, and the weight it gave, might be an indication that the military's voice in public affairs is perhaps too loud and well headed. It hasn't always been so — at times it's been better, and at others, certainly, it's been worse.

Matthew Moten's *Presidents and Their Generals* examines precisely this topic, and throughout its 380 pages, doesn't stray from it. Moten means his title literally, and the reader gets a full twelve chapters on presidents, their generals, and how they got on. The book doesn't fit into any one category, and is at points an awkward agglomeration of biography, events-driven history, military analysis, and academic inquiry into how the story of civilian control of the military, or lack thereof, has evolved in the US from the Revolutionary War to roughly the present. But it is a worthy topic and Moten, former Head of the Department of History at West Point, should be commended for exploring it.

First off, it should be said that everyone's favourite chapters will be the two dedicated to Lincoln and his civil war generals. There's nothing wrong in this and perhaps it's best to simply come out with it: Abraham Lincoln, in the American mind, is God, or at least God-like. As if to begin with a sacred text, Moten begins his first Lincoln chapter with the full prose of a letter Honest Abe wrote in 1863 to the then newly appointed General of the Army of the Potomac, Joseph Hooker:

I have heard, in such a way as to believe it, of your recently saying that both the Army and the Government needed a dictator. Of course, it was not for this, but in spite of it, that I have given you the command. Only those generals who gain successes can set up dictatorship. What I now ask of you is military success, and I will risk the dictatorship.

Moten doesn't go to great lengths to analyse Lincoln's letter line by line, but had he done so, one hopes he would have focused in particular on just one of Lincoln's ever carefully chosen words: risk. When the system works, when generals win wars for their presidents, this is the exact time at which the system is at the greatest risk of breaking down, with generals in one way or another potentially gaining pre-eminence.



There are other, non-Lincoln highlights to Moten's tome. Thirty-seven pages on George Washington and the Continental Congress, with their insight into how the nascent US government managed to fight off imperial Britain are interesting, and thirty-two pages on John Adams, Washington, and Alexander Hamilton are well worth reading, at the very least to get a sense of who these men were on a personal level (George Washington feels patrician; Alexander Hamilton comes off as wily, genius, and chaotic; and John Adams reads every bit the hard-working New England protestant he undoubtedly was, earning more due credit for his role in founding the republic with every passing year, it seems).

Moten splits his book into three parts, with the American Civil War and the Second World War forming the turning points for each. Solidly into the twentieth century, the final three chapters of the book deal to a much greater extent with the machinery and personalities that make up modern bureaucracies, and rightfully so, seeing as the institutions that make up the US military are modern bureaucracies *par excellence*. Moten covers Vietnam, the first Gulf War, and the latter conflict's post-9/11 deranged cousin, the Iraq War. His chapter on Vietnam may be his finest. He gets it right on all of his book's genres, the biographical aspects of John F. Kennedy's Best and Brightest who screwed things up immeasurably, the sense that the United States' role in the world was something irretrievably different in the post-WWII world, and a terrible undercurrent that no longer is it only men as civilians and generals who are vying for power, but that bureaucracies also have an insatiable appetite for power and can end up sucking up the vast majority of it with hardly anyone noticing.

Fittingly, Moten mentions the still relatively recent but growing practice of military officers making political endorsements. Colin Powell is mentioned. Powell might in the end be forgiven, seeing as his last position was as secretary of state, a firmly civilian role. But Moten discusses the endorsements issue almost as a let down father. At this point in the book one begins to wonder whether Moten had an ulterior motive in writing *Presidents and Their Generals*. In various ways recently, people have brought aspects of the military into disrepute. *Presidents and Their Generals* seems Moten's way of bringing some stateliness back to the fore. He leaves the reader with the impression that more than anything what the military needs is restraint. Preferably self-restraint, but if that is not forthcoming then one imagines Moten would happily champion a political leader willing to stake out a clear position on civil-military relations for the good of the country. It's a point of view very much of the old school, but Moten's *Presidents and Their Generals* provides a good number of historical examples to convince his readers that it might be none the worse for it.

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**Jeff Lupo** is a graduate of the University of Washington, Seattle, and earned an MSc (Research) in International Political Economy from the LSE in 2012. He has since worked in political risk consulting and completed the Graduate Diploma in Law, awarded with Commendation. He lives in London and plans to work as a commercial solicitor. [Read more reviews by Jeff.](#)

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