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The Confederate Spin on Winfield Scott and George Thomas

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

The Confederate Spin on Winfield Scott and George Thomas Francis MacDonnell A tape-recorded message informs visitors to the Robert E. Lee Museum on the grounds of Arlington National Cemetery that in 1861 "no other choice was possible" for Lee except to fight for the South. The museum's conclusions regarding Lee's decision survive as a vestige of Confederate propaganda. Approximately 190,000 Southerners, black and white, obscure and illustrious, chose differently than Lee, going so far as to don a blue uniform and fight for the Union. Determined to forge a new nation, secessionists successfully depicted Southern Unionists as disreputable and unprincipled. No honorable man, they said, could bear arms against his native land. The Confederacy proscribed as insurrectionaries freed men who fought for the North and decried as outlaws and

tories ordinary white Southerners who took up Federal arms. Secessionist publicists particularly targeted Winfield Scott and George Thomas, two of the most important Southerners who remained loyal to the Union. Attacks on Scott occurred primarily in 1861, while the most serious effort to discredit Thomas took place shortly after his death in 1870. During the war, men like Scott and Thomas were dangerous to secessionists because of their military talents and their example of steadfast loyalty to the United States. Afterwards, Lost Cause apostles continued to vilify Southern Unionists on the grounds that honorable men had no other choice than to support the Confederacy. ' Several weeks after Virginia's secession, J. E. B. Stuart expressed a desire to hang George Thomas. In June 1861 the hue and cry against Scott was so severe that Catherine Edmonston called for a halt: "I wish we would cease this lamentation first & abuse now of General Scott." Edmonston believed Scott "a hoary headed old traitor;" but thought the apostasy of an "old vain, inflated bag of wind" would do little damage to the cause of Southern independence. At the I would like to thank Betsy Brittigan of the Leyburn Library at Washington and Lee University and Dr. David Hays of the archives at the University of Colorado, Boulder, for their generous assistance to me while I researched this essay. 1 Twenty-five percent of U.S. Army officers resigned to join the Confederacy and 24 percent of U.S. Navy officers went South. Only 15 percent of West Point graduates from Confederate States Civil War History, Vol. xlv No. 4 © 1998 by The Kent State University Press 256 CIVIL WAR HISTORY war's end, Edmund Ruffin bitterly reflected on the part Scott and Thomas played in bringing down the Confederacy: "It is a singular coincidence, & an additionally galling infliction, that this war began & ended in Virginia with the operating Yankee armies under the command of two traitor Virginians." Ruffin's only consolation lay in his belief that both generals had earned infamy throughout the South, while being "secretly despised in the North." Former Virginia governor John Letcher argued that Scott and Thomas's treachery had been compounded by cowardly and dishonorable indecision. Both men, he contended, offered clear indications of a willingness to support Virginia in the period before secession, only to recant at the hour of decision. Letcher went so far as to claim that in November 1860 Scott intentionally betrayed the United States government by forwarding to Richmond a copy of his "Views" on the sectional crisis: "I supposed his object in sending these papers to me was to inform me of the troops the United States had for use, where they were located, and also the condition of the Forts, and how they were manned."2 In fact, Scott pursued policies that offered evidence of his intention to stand by the Union. In the last days of the Buchanan administration, he desperately urged that federal forts in the South be resupplied and reinforced. Early in January 1861 he outfitted the Star of the West for a relief expedition to Sumter. Though the effort failed, Scott's action precipitated a near fistfight between the seventy-four-year-old soldier and Georgia secessionist Robert Toombs. Scott also brought more troops to the District of Columbia as a precaution against possible attack by Southern agitators. In February he provided Congress with military protection in case extremists should try to...

THE CONFEDERATE SPIN ON WINFIELD SCOTT AND GEORGE THOMAS

Francis MacDonnell

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