

# The Most Complete Political Machine Ever Known: The North's Union Leagues in the American Civil War

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## Review

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**Taylor, Paul.** *The Most Complete Political Machine Ever Known: The North's Union Leagues in the American Civil War*. Kent State University Press, \$45.00  
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Paul Taylor's *The Most Complete Political Machine Ever Known: The North's Union Leagues in the American Civil War* reestablishes the significance of an underappreciated force in America's political past. Once celebrated roundly for their contributions to Union victory, Union Leaguers have faded somewhat from our collective national memory. However understandable such amnesia might be given the trend of historians in recent decades to question the significance of everyday politics in the lives of wartime northerners, it is nevertheless unfortunate. Indeed, Taylor argues that the collective effect of the Union Leaguers on wartime Northern politics and the broader home front was anything but unimportant or inconsequential.

Rooted in the broader culture of benevolent, fraternal, and secretive societies that characterized the age, the Union League movement was all but predictable. And, motivated primarily not by opposition to slavery but by esteem for their political nation and all it stood for in their imaginations, Union League members were often neither equalitarian nor particularly fair in their vilification of political foes and their unwillingness to grant the premise, for the most part, of reasonable dissent. But they were there, and in that constancy, they were heroic. Men and women, some wealthy but most not, sometimes in public but very often in secret, were always hard at work in the name of Union victory. In twelve well-designed, masterfully researched, and accessibly written chapters that trace the Union League movement from its antebellum antecedents to its various Reconstruction Era iterations, Paul Taylor reclaims their place in America's Civil War history.

At least in terms of scholarly conversations, *The Most Complete Political Machine Ever Known* is difficult to pigeonhole. Taylor for instance characterizes the rank-and-file men and women who formed the backbone of the movement as members in a de facto wing of the

Republican Party. By so doing, he engages historians who have made much less of their partisan associations and impulses, scholars such as Adam I. P. Smith in *No Party Now: Politics in the Civil War North* (2006). In highlighting the ways in which Union Leaguers propagandized loyalty and maligned Peace Democrats as just another kind of “Copperhead” in the grass moreover, Taylor adds to the rich discourse on wartime civil and political liberties and the meaning of disloyalty and treason in the North, a historiographical dialogue most recently shaped by Bill Blair, Robert Sandow, and a host of other scholars. Mark Neely Jr.’s important work to reemphasize the common locus of wartime political life in the North, best and most succinctly presented in *The Boundaries of American Political Culture in the Civil War Era* (2005), is essential to Taylor’s analysis. Looking intently at everyday patriots who added their names to Union League rosters in “lesser” cities, small towns, and villages, Taylor challenges the “elite” legacy of the Union League movement in America that has been disproportionately influenced by high-profile clubs in places like New York and Philadelphia. But perhaps most importantly, in portraying these Union polemicists as men and women of ordinary means who were motivated first and foremost by love of country and who did all that they could afford and then some to thwart the internal forces then arrayed against their nation, Taylor seconds Gary Gallagher and others who have illuminated the ideological underpinnings of the Union war effort.

It is there even in the name. Dedicated to the perpetuity of a nation in the midst of its greatest existential crisis, Union League members collectively served as the Union’s greatest private defender. Better and more completely than anyone before, Paul Taylor not only chronicles, but fairly celebrates, that service.

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