



*Emory Upton: Misunderstood Reformer* by David J. Fitzpatrick.

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Henry David Thoreau wrote in *Walden* that “The mass of men live lives of quiet desperation.” Not Emory Upton. His short life (1839–81) was filled with extraordinary actions and experiences, beginning with his entrance into the US Military Academy at West Point in 1856. Raised in western New York State’s “burned-over district,” Upton became a teetotaling, religious abolitionist, bent on becoming a professional soldier.

Well before he took his own life on the night of 14 March 1881, Upton had become a controversial figure among military strategists and, to a lesser degree, the general populace. His critics claimed his ideas for army reform and tactical doctrine were intended to undermine the republic and pave the way for military superiority over civilian governance. He was a reformer; specifically, as historian David Fitzpatrick puts it, a *misunderstood* reformer. This welcome new biography provides counterarguments against nearly all of Upton’s adversaries.

After five years at West Point, Upton served with distinction during the Civil War, rising in rank from 2nd lieutenant to brevet major general; he was wounded three times and served in all three branches. Between the end of the war in 1865 and 1870, he wrote his *Tactics Manual*, served in Colorado, married and then lost his wife to tuberculosis. He returned to West Point as Commandant of Cadets (1870–75). In the last six years of his life, he undertook a world tour to inspect and report on the armies of Asia and Europe, authored his *History of American Military Policy*, and served at the Presidio of San Francisco, his last post.

Upton’s first biographer, Peter Smith Michie, professor of natural philosophy at West Point, published *The Life and Letters of Brevet General Emory Upton* in 1885,<sup>1</sup> just four years after Upton’s death. Including an introduction by Upton’s cavalry commander, Maj. Gen. James Harrison Wilson, the book beatified and sanctified its protagonist in one stroke: Upton was a good cadet, battlefield hero, despondent widower, strategist and tactician extraordinaire, army reformer before his time, and tragic suicide. Michie’s hagiography also gave scholars access to several letters written by Upton in the course of his life.

Though noted historian Stephen Ambrose made liberal use of Michie’s book in his 1964 volume *Upton and the Army*,<sup>2</sup> often without attribution, he mostly endorsed the arguments made by anti-Uptonians in the intervening eighty years. Writers cherry-picked elements of Upton’s philosophy to either attack him or advance personal agendas. Upton proposed ways to improve the Army’s response to problems that had existed from the country’s inception, centering on the need for greater professionalism and readiness, an expansible force, the provision of more formal education for officers and a living wage for all servicemen, the possibility of early retirement, and the clarification of the chain of command.

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1. Full title: *The Life and Letters of Emory Upton, Colonel of the Fourth Regiment of Artillery, and Brevet Major General, U.S. Army* (NY, 1885). Hereafter, “Michie.”

2. Baton Rouge: LSU Pr, 1964 (orig., diss. Wisconsin 1963).

The literature on Emory Upton is copious; nearly every reform proposal he made has been both rebutted and defended. One military historian<sup>3</sup> has hyperbolically labeled the last quarter of the nineteenth century the Army's "Dark Ages"; another has called the post-Civil War period the "Uptonian Hunker."<sup>4</sup> Samuel Huntington argued that the Army's focus on professionalism isolated it from American society,<sup>5</sup> a notion later rebutted by William Skelton and John Gates.<sup>6</sup> Upton's sixty-five letters (now in the Princeton Univ. library) to his recuperating wife reveal a robust social life.

Upton's greatest difficulty was that he was proposing a national army at a time when the United States faced no imminent threat or obvious enemy. Thus, he revisited Alexander Hamilton and John C. Calhoun's idea of an "expansible" army. The concept of a standing army had been anathema to Americans since the birth of the nation. Upton initially condemned the militia, but later admitted that the Constitution allowed for it. Russell Weigley, charging that Upton demanded that "national institutions" adjust to "military expediency,"<sup>7</sup> insisted it should be the other way around.

The volunteer army appeared to be another of Upton's targets. Maj. Gen. John "Black Jack" Logan, who was anti-West Point, fiercely opposed Sherman and Upton and wrote a ponderous tome extolling the virtues of a volunteer army; he implied that Upton owed his status as a war hero and strategic thinker to all the volunteers "who won the war." Logan believed generals like Sherman and Upton were "dedicated to the preservation of the military class and indifferent to the well being of the nation."<sup>8</sup> In fact, Upton never opposed volunteers per se, only their lack of proper training, for which he blamed Edwin Stanton and the War Department, political generals like Logan, and Congressional politicians. He did not attack Lincoln or Grant. Upton believed a strong, standing army would preserve, not imperil, the republic.

Upton's detractors criticized his praise of the German staff system and their drill as terribly un-American and not at all democratic. Fitzpatrick calls out Weigley and Ambrose for presenting history backwards. Writing in the post-World War II years, both projected their dislike of Otto von Bismarck and Adolf Hitler back to Upton's time. They ignored the fact that generals Sheridan, Sherman, and others had viewed the German maneuvers and found much to be desired and copied in the American military. One author wrote that "Upton wanted a much more thoroughgoing professionalization—more specifically, Prussianization—of the U.S. Army, and he made his case for it in his 1878 book *The Armies of Asia and Europe*."<sup>9</sup> Weigley and others overlooked Upton's admonition to his friend and colleague, Henry DuPont, in 1877: "We cannot Germanize, neither is

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3. William Ganoe, *The History of the United States Army* (NY: Appleton, 1924).

4. Eliot Cohen, "Making Do with Less, or Coping with Upton's Ghost," US Army War College Sixth Annual Conference (26–28 Apr 1995)—cited by Fitzpatrick, 427–28.

5. In *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge: Harvard U Pr, 1957) 257–59.

6. In, respectively, "Samuel P. Huntington and the Roots of the American Military Tradition," *Journ. Mil. Hist.* 60 (1996) 325; and "The Alleged Isolation of US Army Officers in the Late 19th Century," *Parameters* 10 (Sept. 1980) 32–45.

7. *History of the United States Army* (NY: Macmillan, 1967) 109–10, 115, 125.

8. See further Richard Allen Andrews, "Years of Frustration: William T. Sherman, the Army, and Reform, 1869–1883" (diss. Northwestern 1968) 53–54, and Russell F. Weigley, *Towards an American Army: Military Thought from Washington to Marshall* (NY: Columbia U Pr, 1962) 128–29.

9. Charles Royster, Comment on John Shy, "The Cultural Approach to the History of War" and on Russell Weigley, "The American Military and the Principle of Civilian Control from McClellan to Powell," *Journ. Mil. Hist.* 57.5 (1993) 61.

it desirable, but we can apply the principles of common sense during peacetime that will save the government in the next conflict in 'blood and treasure.'"<sup>10</sup>

Upton was not alone in his admiration for Teutonic ways. In fact, Americans were caught up in all things German in the period 1875–1900. Noted German historian Leopold von Ranke promoted a scientific approach to history that downplayed the human element and stressed data and hard facts. The results of the Franco-Prussian War devalued French military prowess and increased German influence on continental and British militaries. Additionally, Upton's reform ideas coincided with enormous American industrial and managerial change coupled with material inequity.

David Fitzpatrick has produced both a biography and a compelling counterbalance to anti-Upton scholarship over the past 137 years. He is fully conversant with the relevant literature as well as newly surfaced Upton correspondence that exposes Michie's heavy editorial hand. The letters verify Upton's dedication to his ideal of the American republic. Fitzpatrick skillfully uses them to defend his protagonist's nuanced views regarding military enrollment; the nation's need of a strong, well-educated army; equitable treatment of officers and enlisted men alike; and responsiveness to ever changing threats to the country. Were I the marketing director at the University of Oklahoma Press, I would have titled this book simply "Emory Upton: Army Reformer."

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10. Salvatore G. Cilella, ed., *The Correspondence of Major General Emory Upton* (Knoxville: U Tenn Pr, 2017) 2.160–61. See also Peter D. Skirbunt, "Prologue to Reform: The 'Germanization' of the United States Army, 1865–1898" (diss. Ohio State 1983).