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Book Review: The Railroad and the State: War, Politics, and Technology in Nineteenth-Century America

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Ward, James A., "Book Review: The Railroad and the State: War, Politics, and Technology in Nineteenth-Century America" (2006). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 154.

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The Railroad and the State: War, Politics, and Technology in Nineteenth-Century America. By Robert G. Angevine. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004. xvii + 351 pp. Tables, figures, notes, bibliography, index. \$70.00.

Commentators from Henry Varnum Poor to Robert C. Angevine have struggled to assess the central role railways played in nineteenth-century American development. Angevine, however, has taken a somewhat different tack on the subject. Using the Army's relations with the railroads as his focus, the author, in a well-written, finely wrought book, traces that association from the first government turnpikes through the Spanish-American War. What makes this study doubly interesting is the author's analysis of how the railways changed the military. Railroads cut deeply into the long-standing dispute over whether the United States would best be served by a small, professional military or should rely on a more democratic militia system.

That debate determined, for example, that the military would not build or own the nation's railways. A compromise allowed West Point civil engineers to promote, survey, and in some cases oversee construction of private railways. In an especially good chapter on the history of West Point, the author explains how the Jacksonian aversion to elites and professionalism triumphed in the 1830s and ended military aid to private corporations. This separation hurt the Army; during the Civil War it had few officers with direct railway experience.

The war was pivotal, however, as officers found rapid transport a key to victory. The

military commissioned professional railway managers and put them in charge of the United States Military Railroads. These men, such as Herman Haupt, hailed from railroad companies that had earlier adopted military organization to their own roads.

After the war the Army worked closely with the transcontinentals on the Great Plains to locate, survey, and guard construction battalions against Native Americans who were naturally hostile to encroachment on their lands. Some 111 forts on the Plains helped to keep Natives at bay while the new railroads "civilized" them.

The Army's relationship with large western private railroads was cozy and raised ethical questions. But the roads got built. The Army concentrated its troops along them and cut its costs of movement and supply. This new relationship between the Army and large private corporations was severely tested in the Spanish-American War when the chaos at Tampa's port illustrated the need for the military to coordinate its requirements with private rail corporations.

Angevine's book is a thought-provoking new look at how the railroads affected the United States. Among other things, it promotes a fresh understanding of why the government took over the railways in 1917 to unsnarl traffic at eastern ports.

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