Educational Reformer & Christian Soldier: General Oliver Otis Howard

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EDUCATIONAL REFORMER & CIVIL WAR GENERAL:

OLIVER OTIS HOWARD

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Contemporaries of Oliver Otis Howard and historians alike have disagreed on the degree of his success as a Civil War general and as commissioner of the Freedmen’s Bureau. Some describe his performance as inept and others as skillful. Some laud his Christian example while others believe that he allowed his religious and political beliefs to diminish his efforts. Whatever one’s perspective, evidence indicates that Howard’s political and religious beliefs influenced his actions as Civil War general and as Freedmen’s Bureau commissioner, and—although he experienced some failure in both arenas—his leadership is exemplified by what may be remembered as his finest hours in the battle of Gettysburg and in the development of African-American education.

**Christian Soldier**

Howard grew up in Maine on a family farm, working beside his brother and a black servant, but not until Howard was enrolled as a cadet at West Point did religion begin to play a prominent role in his life. While a student there, he joined a Bible class and lived an openly pious life. After graduating, he served in various posts in the army, eventually being stationed in Florida where, in 1857, he attended a meeting of a Methodist church. There he prayed with the preacher at the altar, experiencing a spiritual conversion that markedly changed his life. Shortly after his conversion, he read a book about British Army Captain Hedley Vicars who fought during the Crimean War. Vicars was known for being a strong evangelical Christian and an exemplary soldier. Howard determined that he would follow the model set by Vicars.

From Florida, Howard returned to West Point as a professor of mathematics. In addition to his teaching role, he led prayer meetings, served in the chaplain’s office, and volunteered in a

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2 Ibid., 280-2.
local church as a Bible teacher and Sunday school superintendent. In a dedication service for troops departing to Utah, Howard preached a sermon inspired by Vicar entitled “The Christian Soldier.” This became the moniker by which Howard became known in the Union Army.³

Howard’s spiritual fervor was such that he considered leaving the army to enter the full-time ministry. At the outbreak of the Civil War, however, Howard was convinced that his primary duty was to fight for his country.⁴ During the war, Howard’s religious convictions were expressed in a number of ways, many of which irritated other soldiers. For example, he was reluctant to engage troops in fighting on Sundays, did not condone the drinking of alcohol, and often led his men in prayer and Bible study.⁵ His prayer meetings welcomed as equals black men who served the troops as teamsters and cooks.⁶ Howard perceived his ministry to people and service to God as inclusive of his work in the army and in social causes. Some of his volunteer work involved helping to establish the First Congregational Church in Washington, D.C., providing relief efforts to the Chinese in Portland, and serving as president of two YMCA affiliates.⁷

**Civil War Service**

Howard entered the Civil War as a brigade commander. Marching his troops across the Potomac River into Virginia, he observed conduct among them, such as profanity and drinking, that did not sit well with his evangelical sensibilities. So, after the first battle of Bull Run—in which he led his brigade commendably despite their loss—Howard became more intentional

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³ Ibid., 282.
⁵ Ibid., 9-10.
about cultivating a Christian environment among his men by implementing regular prayer
meetings and Bible studies.\textsuperscript{8}

In the Peninsula Campaign at the battle of Fair Oaks, Howard lost his right arm and thirty-one years later would receive the Congressional Medal of Honor for his service that day. Even during his three-month recovery in his home state of Maine, he served the army as a recruiter. He then returned, having earned a reputation for bravery, ready to participate in the second battle at Bull Run, Antietam, and Fredericksburg.\textsuperscript{9}

Just prior to the battle of Chancellorsville, Gen. Hooker appointed Howard to command the 11\textsuperscript{th} Corps, which found itself on the defense against Confederate Gen. Stonewall Jackson.\textsuperscript{10} The 11\textsuperscript{th} Corps was made up primarily of German-speaking troops and, due in part to the blunders of its previous commander, had a bad reputation of not fighting heartily enough. The reputation of the 11\textsuperscript{th} Corps and the mistakes of Gen. Hooker may have saved Howard from harsher criticisms for his own failures at Chancellorsville, which were the inadequate protection of his left flank and lack of preparedness for Jackson’s attack.\textsuperscript{11}

Perhaps Howard’s finest display of generalship and also his most controversial actions were on July 1, 1863, the first day of the battle of Gettysburg. The night before, Howard had stayed up late chatting with his old friend from West Point, commander of the 1\textsuperscript{st} Corps, Gen. John Reynolds. They discussed Meade’s most recent orders directing Reynolds to fall back to Emmitsburg if he encountered a Confederate force, but they were expecting more current orders

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\textsuperscript{8} Thomson, “Oliver Otis Howard,” 283-4.
\textsuperscript{10} Ibid.
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that night to prepare for the morning. When no orders came, they parted and retired for evening.  

The next morning, Howard received an order from Reynolds directing him to move his 11th Corps to Gettysburg. Upon arriving, Howard found himself in a battle already underway in which Reynolds was killed. This placed Howard in the position of command over Reynold’s 1st Corps and his own 11th Corps. In the chaos of the moment, Howard had to decide whether to follow Meade’s earlier orders to fall back or Reynold’s most recent plans. He chose to follow Reynold’s plan, dispatching his 11th Corps to position itself on Cemetery Hill. Anticipating that he might become outnumbered by the Confederates while waiting for reinforcements, Howard separated out a third of his corps as backup, positioning them a mile away—close enough to arrive quickly when needed. He found that his hunch was correct when two additional Confederate divisions arrived. It was this quick strategic thinking for which Howard was later praised.

Critics, however, focus on what happened next. Outnumbered and with no additional reinforcements beyond the third of his corps that he had set aside for backup, Howard called for a withdrawal to a designated position on Cemetery Hill. The timing and orderliness of the withdrawal were questionable. Howard definitely made mistakes; he waited too long to call for the withdrawal and no specific directions were given for moving artillery. Considering the conditions and how events played out, however, his key decisions ultimately proved advantageous.
A further incident that provided fodder for critics resulted from the cavalry commander’s written plea to his superior: “General Reynolds was killed early this morning. In my opinion, there seems to be no directing person. . . . P.S. We need help now.”

Gen. Winfield Scott Hancock, 2nd Corps commander, then arrived on the scene with orders from Gen. Meade to take command. Howard refused. He was four steps above Hancock in seniority. Also, by the time Hancock had arrived, most of the day’s decisions had already been made. They agreed at the time to work together so that Howard would give the orders and Hancock would second them. Later, however, each would claim to have had full command without the assistance of the other until Slocum arrived, who outranked them both and took over command.

In January 1864, Congress passed a resolution to extend gratitude not just to Gen. Meade but also to two other officers, Howard and Hooker. This action set off a firestorm of controversy, especially between Howard and Hancock that would continue through the remainder of their lives. Howard was recognized as “the man who selected the position where the battle of Gettysburg was fought.”

Politically, Howard was a Radical Republican and an abolitionist, which was rare in the Army of the Potomac, especially among officers. While his religious views resulted in his being periodically mocked and ostracized, his political views resulted in more serious conflicts. For instance, Gen. Meade, a Democrat, could not hide his disdain for Howard, so much so that he transferred him to the western frontier to serve with Gen. Tecumseh Sherman soon after Gettysburg. Sherman, also a Republican but not as religious as Howard, spoke commendably of Howard, and the two worked well together. “When exposed to the fire,” Sherman spoke of

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16 Ibid.
18 Ibid., 451.
19 Ibid., 119-25, 450.
Howard, “there is no braver man living than he.”

Regarding Howard’s religion, Sherman said, “I believe Howard is a real Christian. . . . he has something about him, which I haven’t, but which I wish I had.”

Reviews of Howard’s generalship have been mixed—from commendations to accusations of being incapable of controlling the conduct of his troops. For example, in the occupation of Columbia, South Carolina, his troops looted during a fire. He directed his officers to ensure the looting ceased, but then he proceeded to take a nap as the looting continued. Overall, however, Howard proved, in difficult circumstances, to provide effective leadership. This was true in the Civil War and also in his subsequent service with the Freedmen’s Bureau.

Freedmen’s Bureau Commissioner

Volunteer freedman’s aid societies in the North had joined together to lobby Congress for a government agency to assist in the transition of emancipated people into their roles as citizens. One such organization was the New England Freedman’s Aid Society that lobbied especially for the establishment of free schools in the South. Their efforts were rewarded when on March 3, 1865, Congress passed a bill approving the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, known more commonly as the Freedmen’s Bureau. It was to last until one year after the war but was later extended until 1872. Before his assassination, Lincoln had selected Gen. Howard as the bureau’s Commissioner, and later President Johnson officially appointed him to the position. The nation overwhelmingly supported Howard’s appointment as

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21 Ibid., 289.
have historians over time—despite criticisms of poor judgment, fiscal mismanagement, conflicts of interest, and politicization of the bureau.\textsuperscript{26} Howard was only 34 years old as the war came to a close and had been considering what he would do afterward. He accepted the commission as God’s providential will and would go on to lead the agency to provide medical and hunger relief, negotiate work contracts, distribute abandoned lands, and educate millions of children and adults. Of these efforts, education was by far the most successful initiative of the bureau.\textsuperscript{27}

Considering anti-literacy laws in the South that had severely limited the education of slaves and even freed blacks, the bureau’s educational efforts would be transformational for the black population and highly controversial among white Southerners. African Americans had displayed a strong desire for schooling and—even before the creation of the bureau—had already been involved in self-education and cooperative efforts with Northern aid societies. By 1869, bureau schools had enrolled 114,000 students.\textsuperscript{28}

The bureau’s role was primarily in renting or constructing school buildings and in the administration of the schools. Howard appointed J. W. Alvord as superintendent of schools for this purpose. The bureau was limited in that it could not fund teacher salaries or curriculum materials, so it relied on the aid societies for teachers and textbooks.\textsuperscript{29} Some schoolbooks were customized for freed students. One such textbook with content for both children and adults was L. Maria Child’s \textit{The Freedman’s Book}. Published in 1865, it contained a collection of writings by Child, Frederick Douglass, William Lloyd Garrison, Frances E. W. Harper, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and many other authors both white and black. Like other readers of its day, it included

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\item \textsuperscript{26} William S. McFeely, \textit{Yankee Stepfather: General O. O. Howard and the Freedmen} (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1968), 8.
\item \textsuperscript{27} Daniel J. Sharfstein, \textit{Thunder in the Mountains: Chief Joseph, Oliver Otis Howard, and the Nez Pierce War} (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2017), 33.
\item \textsuperscript{28} Allan C. Ornstein, Daniel U. Levine, Gerald L. Gutek, and David E. Vocke, \textit{Foundations of Education} (Boston: Cengage Learning, 2017), 146.
\item \textsuperscript{29} Jay and Wills, “Freedmen’s Bureau,” 387-9.
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selections from the Bible, poems, short stories, and biographies of Benjamin Banneker, John Brown, and Phyllis Wheatley. Other curriculum materials were the same as those used in New England schools, following the idea that a traditional education would better prepare freedmen to assimilate into white society. These New England textbooks taught traditional subjects of reading, writing, grammar, history, geography, and mathematics.

Bureau teachers were made up of blacks and whites both from the North and the South. To prepare future teachers and to promote higher education among the black population, universities were established with the bureau’s assistance, including Fisk University, Atlanta University, and Hampton University. Named in honor of Gen. Howard was Howard University in Washington, D.C. Gen. Howard would serve as university’s president from 1869 to 1874.

Much of the college-level curriculum focused on industrial education. For example, Hampton Institute, founded by Col. Samuel Chapman Armstrong with the help of the Freedmen’s Bureau, followed a philosophy of industrial education. The premise was that black students needed practical vocational training and moral instruction more so than a traditional university curriculum. This experience offered male students training in such trades as brickmaking, bricklaying, shoemaking, carpentry, and blacksmithing. Female students learned domestic skills. Many slaves welcomed practical education as a means of gaining a livelihood and sought basic skills to help them ensure fairness in dealing with contracts, weights, and

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32 Ibid.
measures. However, this narrow curriculum in higher education came to be criticized as a means of keeping freed people at the bottom levels of society.\(^{34}\)

Howard’s detractors claimed that he refused to eliminate graft and corruption.\(^{35}\) Some individual agents were accused of acting more in the best interest of whites than of freedmen, of mistreating clients, and of imbibing excessively in liquor. Howard was therefore portrayed by critics as a weak and ineffective leader. Yet, the record indicates that he went to great lengths to monitor and to take action against incompetent and corrupt agents in the field. Perhaps the agents that were monitored least were those who served in the Washington, D.C., headquarters, especially in the disbursement of funds. When it came to financial issues, there were complaints that the bureau simply was too costly; an article in the *The Baltimore Sun*, for example, complained that a sub-agency of the bureau cost more than the entire U.S. President’s salary.\(^{36}\) There were, however, more legitimate financial concerns; Howard himself was guilty of stretching the parameters. For instance, in his zeal to promote education, he manipulated funds to arrange payment for teachers, which was prohibited by bureau regulations. One of the most publicized financial controversies related to the use of funds for manufacturing bricks for the construction of Howard University. Intended to create brickmaking jobs for university students, the practice was so questionable that it came under Congressional investigation. Though Howard was exonerated, the incident tainted his leadership and the bureau’s reputation.\(^{37}\)

Another criticism of Howard was that, as a Republican, he was politically motivated, used the bureau as a tool for the Republican Party, and sought to indoctrinate freedmen to become Republican voters. While Howard clearly preferred Republican ideology, his official


\(^{35}\) Fredriksen, “Oliver O. Howard.”

\(^{36}\) “Freedmen’s Bureau,” *The Sun* (1837-1993), May 22, 1866, 1.

stance with bureau agents was that they were to remain politically neutral in their conversations and actions. This, however, was difficult to monitor, and questionable incidents indeed occurred.\textsuperscript{38}

The early historiography of the bureau included a single national survey and a few state studies written from the South’s perspective.\textsuperscript{39} Later W.E.B. Dubois concluded that both Howard and the bureau had been a failure by allowing outside forces to limit its efforts and by missing a historic opportunity to bring about monumental change for African Americans.\textsuperscript{40} In the twentieth century, Paul Skeels Peirce depicted the bureau as an arm of the Republican Party\textsuperscript{41} while George R. Bentley acknowledged the bureau’s relief efforts and educational accomplishments but claimed that it was detrimental to race relations and to equality for African Americans.\textsuperscript{42} A shift began, however, especially with the biography of Howard written by John A. Carpenter at the end of the twentieth century. Carpenter conveyed great respect for Howard as both Civil War general and Freedmen’s Bureau commissioner. Any failings of the Bureau, Carpenter claimed, would have been much worse without the leadership of Howard.\textsuperscript{43} In the twenty-first century, Robert Harris—acknowledging the complicated context in which Gen. Howard and the bureau functioned—wrote, “Within the parameters set by the unforgiving dynamics of Reconstruction, Freedmen’s Bureau agents, most of them at least, struggled manfully to negotiate terms of freedom for African Americans.”\textsuperscript{44}

\textsuperscript{38} John A. Carpenter, \textit{Sword and Olive Branch: Oliver Otis Howard} (New York: Fordham University Press, 1999), 139-46.
\textsuperscript{40} McFeely, \textit{Yankee Stepfather}, 2-7.
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 3.
\textsuperscript{43} McFeely, \textit{Yankee Stepfather}, 5-7.
\textsuperscript{44} Harrison, “New Representations,” 219.
Considering the challenges faced by the bureau, Gen. Howard provided commendable leadership. He managed a vast operation in the face of harsh opposition by white Southerners, constant turnover of personnel, and a relatively short window of time for the bureau to achieve such massive goals. As a result of the bureau’s work, in the early 1870s, a higher percentage of black children than white children were enrolled in Southern schools.\(^{45}\) By 1870, there were 4,329 new schools created with approximately 9,500 teachers working with over 247,000 students.\(^{46}\) Disappointing as it was that neither land nor sufficient civil rights were obtained by freedmen, the bureau’s legacy of education was built in large part by Oliver Otis Howard’s determination to carry out what he perceived was a calling of God.\(^{47}\)

**Conclusion**

On November 8, 1900, a gathering of over two hundred friends met in New York to celebrate Howard’s seventieth birthday. He was honored by organizations such as the American Tract Society and the YMCA and by a variety of individuals. “His life in peace,” stated former Speaker of the House Thomas B. Reed, “has been as great as his life in war.” Naval officer Captain Alfred Mahan said, “In him we see the combination of the Christian and the soldier.” Booker T. Washington said, “The name of Howard is in the hearts of the negro race beside the names of Garrison, Grant, and Lincoln. . . . We went into slavery a piece of property; we came out American citizens. Thanks to such men as Gen. Howard, we came out with the spelling book in one hand and the Bible in the other.” In response, Howard told of the last time he met with Lincoln. The president had pointed to a map of the Cumberland Gap, asking, “Can’t we go through and free those people?” In his birthday celebration closing remarks, Howard said, “And

\(^{45}\) Spring, *The American School*, 186.
\(^{47}\) Carpenter, *Sword and Olive Branch*, 156.
now as the last act of my life, I am anxious to bring about the education of the boys and girls of Lincoln’s beloved mountains.”48 Consistent with the pattern of his life, Howard indeed spent his last years following what he sensed as his calling, his mission, and his purpose.

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