

## Naval War College Review

---

Volume 60  
Number 2 *Spring*

Article 10

---

2007

# Leonard Wood: Forgotten Greatness

Richard J. Norton

Jack McCallum

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

---

### Recommended Citation

Norton, Richard J. and McCallum, Jack (2007) "Leonard Wood: Forgotten Greatness," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 60 : No. 2 , Article 10.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol60/iss2/10>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu](mailto:repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu).

## REVIEW ESSAY

---

### LEONARD WOOD: FORGOTTEN GREATNESS

*Richard J. Norton*

McCallum, Jack. *Leonard Wood: Rough Rider, Surgeon, Architect of American Imperialism*. New York: New York Univ. Press, 2006. 357pp. \$23.07

Leonard Wood was one of the towering figures of U.S. political and military history. He had a profound impact on the history of three countries, played an important role in one of the most important medical advances of the twentieth century, and was very nearly president of the United States. He was, in every sense of the word, a man of destiny, a man of action, a man of his time. Yet like so many men of their time, he is all but forgotten, at best remembered as an answer to a Trivial Pursuit question about the Rough Riders or as the name of an Army post in

Missouri. There are probably several reasons for his passage into obscurity. First, a similar fate befell many of Wood's Victorian-era contemporaries. Their military accomplishments, which loomed large at the time, seem insignificant beside the massive battles and technological fury of the two world wars. Their politics, especially those who favored the building of empires, appear to belong to a different and less complicated age, and their virtues, formerly extolled in prose and poetry, gradually became identified as racist and chauvinist. The fact that McCallum's book is only the third biography of Wood, and the first published since 1931, is indicative of how completely this remarkable man has been forgotten.

Wood was indeed remarkable. McCallum takes pains to prove this, as he traces Wood's life and time.

*Richard J. Norton is a professor of national security affairs at the Naval War College, where he teaches courses on military history. He is also the director of the policy making and process course in the National Security Decision Making department. He holds a doctorate in international relations from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy. As a commander in the U.S. Navy, he served at sea on cruisers and destroyers, and as a senate liaison officer he served on Capitol Hill with the Navy's Office of Legislative Affairs and in several political-military assignments on senior staffs. He retired from the Navy in 1996. He has published articles on failed states, humanitarian early warning, Africa, South America, and emerging security issues, as well as numerous case studies. His most recent area of research involves "feral cities," cited by the New York Times as one of the "new ideas of 2004."*

*Naval War College Review, Spring 2007, Vol. 60, No. 2*

Wood's early years read like a Horatio Alger story. Born into a poor Massachusetts family, Wood tried and failed to enter West Point, and then worked his way through Harvard Medical School. Successful completion of his studies resulted in an internship at Boston City Hospital, where the young Wood, presumably on his way to a successful medical career, ran afoul of hospital authorities for performing operations without proper supervision. Hemorrhaging money and faced with a massive fiscal crisis, Wood sought relief in the U.S. Army. Failing to obtain a commission, he was hired as a contract surgeon and sent west, where the Army was trying to find, fix, and capture the great Apache medicine man and spiritual leader Geronimo.

The Apache campaigns were some of the most grueling the U.S. Army had undertaken, and to the surprise of many Wood thrived in this environment, setting a rare example of endurance and stamina. As the ranks of the officers thinned, Wood occasionally found himself in command of line troops, where he experienced his share of deprivation, disease, and hardship, and he was there when Geronimo surrendered. As a result of this campaign, Wood found himself the recipient of practical lessons in civilian-military relations, the patronage of Gen. Nelson Miles, and the Medal of Honor. A series of relatively quiet posts followed, until at the age of thirty-five, ignoring the advice of his seniors, he actively sought a posting to Washington, D.C., where he made political enemies. When the Republicans came to power in 1897, however, Wood was in the right spot at the right time, becoming the personal physician to Ada McKinley (the hypochondriac wife of the president) and a staunch friend of Theodore Roosevelt. One of the book's shortcomings is that this real and deep friendship is not seriously explored.

With access to the White House, social connections to Roosevelt, a thirst for adventure, and promotion, what Wood needed now was an opportunity to prove himself. That opportunity came in 1898, with the Spanish-American War.

The story of the Spanish-American War is in many ways a tale of the suspension of the laws of probability. There was perhaps a no more outrageous example than the success of the 1st U.S. Volunteer Cavalry, the "Rough Riders." Although Teddy Roosevelt was always the unit's dominant personality, he refused command and made it clear he would not join unless Wood was placed in charge. So it was that Leonard Wood, army surgeon, became the commanding officer of perhaps the most flamboyant and media-friendly military unit the United States ever created. He and Roosevelt pulled every string and called in every favor when outfitting and training their unit. The story and success of the Rough Riders is well known, and much of that success is owed to Leonard Wood.

Following the war, Wood commanded occupation forces in Santiago and made the city a model of modern health and services. He allowed no obstacle to

stand in his way in improving the city and its occupants. By all accounts Wood was a model administrator, and he used this reputation to good advantage, consistently pressuring the White House to make him governor general of Cuba.

While not without controversy, Wood's tenure in Havana was successful. Among his more significant accomplishments were active support and advancement of the effort that led to the discovery of the origin of yellow fever, and although Walter Reed would rightfully reap the lion's share of the credit, Wood's role was not an insignificant one—implementing health and sanitation protocols that for the first time prevented yellow fever epidemics.

In 1902, when the pacification of the Philippines was nearly complete, Wood was selected to be its governor. By now a brigadier general in the regular Army, Wood was also due for promotion. The result was a political firestorm in Washington that saw Theodore Roosevelt pitted against political strongman Mark Hannah. The fight would last four months and demand all of Wood's connections and Roosevelt's pull and clout, but it would ultimately result in victory for Wood.

The fight Wood faced in the Philippines would last six years. Unlike Cuba, where Wood did not condone or use violence, in the Philippines he waged war with ferocity—indiscriminate killing, scorched-earth tactics, assassinations, and torture were common tactics on both sides. His methods were brutal and his tools of choice almost exclusively military. To be sure, Wood was, by the measure of the day, effective. Revolts were put down, revenues were collected, and the islands were made quiet.

By 1910, Wood was the senior general in the Army. As chief of staff, Wood devoted himself to repairing a thoroughly antiquated, disorganized, and ineffective force. He had seen modern European armies and was intent on creating something similar in the United States when problems with Mexico diverted his efforts. Wood moved forces to the southern border and fumed when the president refused to do more. The experience convinced Wood more than ever that the Army needed an overhaul. Possessing perhaps more vision than many of his counterparts, he was convinced of the power of aviation and from the beginning was enthusiastic about advances in metallurgy. He sought higher pay and more respect for private soldiers. Above all, Wood wanted a larger army, in fewer bases. His biggest defeat was his failure to create a large, well-trained reserve or appreciably expand the Army. His most powerful enemy was Woodrow Wilson.

The president and the general clashed over U.S. preparedness for war, and if history bore Wood out, he paid a heavy price for being right. In part this was due to his penchant for name-calling and to his devotion to Theodore Roosevelt, who delighted in excoriating Wilson. That a serving general should not openly disagree with a sitting president apparently never occurred to Wood. It also never occurred to him that when the United States did enter the war, Woodrow

Wilson would find another general to command the American Expeditionary Force. Wood spent the war training troops in Kansas.

With the war over and Roosevelt dead, Wood briefly became the political hope of the Republican Party. While still on active duty he hammered the Wilson administration, but as the 1920 Republican convention opened Wood lacked the required votes for the party's nomination. Warren G. Harding emerged the victor.

Wood returned to the Philippines as governor general. But he had become a bitter man, afflicted by a brain tumor and acute bouts of memory loss. By 1927, his health rapidly deteriorating, Wood left for the United States, where he died on the operating table.

McCallum's book does a fine job of laying out the life story of Leonard Wood. It is well organized, credibly documented, and, in the best sense of the term, an easy read. Given that there is so little known about Wood, this book's major contribution may simply be to acquaint American readers with this fascinating man.

However, there is more to a man than simply his history. Readers hoping to gain insight into Wood himself are likely to be disappointed. It may simply be that Wood, the man of action, was not a man of introspection. For example, as McCallum notes, on the day Roosevelt died, Wood penned only the briefest of entries in his diary. In a similar vein, the book contains little contextual or comparative analysis. Wood dealt with many of the issues that beset military leaders today, such as insurgencies, asymmetric opponents, military transformation, the need for interagency cooperation, and the nature of the civil-military relationship in a changing world. Deeper investigation of these issues and a search for meaningful lessons, however, is left to future writers.

McCallum suggests that part of the reason Wood has been forgotten is that his strengths and weaknesses remind us too much of ourselves. Perhaps, but if this is so, then the life and fate of Wood are more deserving of study than ever.