



The Butcher Burbridge

Bryan S. Bush

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One of the most vilified and hated men during the Civil War in Kentucky had to be Kentucky born Union (brevet) Major General Stephen Gano Burbridge, but why have Kentuckian historians continue to cast him negatively. Burbridge had a meteoric rise as a military commander, starting out as a colonel of the 26th Kentucky Union infantry and becoming a Major General by 1863. He had fought well at Arkansas Post and Champion's Hill during the Vicksburg Campaign and received the praise of Union General William T. Sherman. Burbridge also received the thanks of President Abraham Lincoln for his victory over Confederate General John Hunt Morgan's forces at Cynthiana, Kentucky. Burbridge's problems arose when he became military commander of Kentucky in January of 1864. With encouragement of Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, Burbridge helped to raise and arm slaves for the United States Colored Troops, which offended Kentucky Union slaveholders and Kentucky Governor Thomas Bramlette. He also issued Order 59 in which every Union soldier killed by a guerilla, four Confederate prisoners would be taken to the spot and shot. His brutal tactics to stop guerilla warfare in Kentucky ended up alienating Unionists in the state and moved Kentucky away from the Republican Party and towards the Democratic Party. Burbridge has also been accused of fixing the 1864 state and presidential elections and accused him of being involved in the Great Hog Swindle of 1864. The thesis of this book will deal with the military career of Stephen Gano Burbridge and the factors that eventually led to his downfall as military commander of Kentucky and his eventual ostracism from Kentucky. The thesis will demonstrate how Burbridge's policies towards guerillas did not differ from Union General William T. Sherman's treatment of guerillas and Sherman actually influenced Burbridge's policy decision towards guerillas. Not only did Union General William T. Sherman influence Burbridge's decisions, but so did the Reverend Robert Breckinridge, Secretary of War Henry Stanton, Kentucky Governor Thomas Bramlette and the Radical Republicans. While Burbridge commanded a brigade in Kentucky in early 1862, he made friends with powerful radical Republicans, who later helped him secure his position as military commander in Kentucky and influenced his decisions on how to govern the state. While Burbridge fought in the Vicksburg campaign, he became friends with Union General William T. Sherman, who also influenced Burbridge's decisions as military commander in Kentucky. Governor Bramlette also influenced Burbridge's decisions, but Burbridge's decision to recruit and arm blacks and disarming the state guard, brought an end to their friendship and the governor's efforts to remove Burbridge from command.

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