Robert Smith Bader’s *Hayseeds, Moralizers, and Methodists: The Twentieth-Century Image of Kansas* (1988) gathers together a large and wide-ranging collection of sources and molds them into an entertaining introduction to the state. Anyone who wants to learn about how Kansas has been perceived by its own residents or by other Americans ought to begin with *Hayseeds*. The problem with the book, however, is where it begins. After devoting only a few introductory pages to the state’s first forty-six years, Bader started his account in earnest with a chapter on the Progressive Era. He regarded these years in Kansas, from 1900 to 1920, as a golden age, “the most stimulating and auspicious period in the state’s history.”  

Because of his high estimation of Kansas at this time when it was “coming of age,” Bader enveloped the Progressives in an aura of originality that they do not deserve. In a more recent review of regional imagery, James R. Shortridge suggested that “the first fully formed assessments of the Kansas character” appeared earlier, in the late 1880s. As an example, he briefly noted an essay by Governor John A. Martin in an 1886 issue of the *North American Review*. Martin was eager to let the nation know about the progress Kansas had made in its first quarter century of statehood and especially in the years since the end of the Civil War. The “great fact” about Kansas that explained its rapid and dramatic development, said the proud governor, “was the existence of a vast body of arable ground lying ready for the farmer.” However, of nearly equal importance for Martin, as Shortridge noted, was the “brave, hardy and patriotic population” of Union veterans ready to till the soil.

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In this and other essays, Martin addressed many of the themes in the perception of Kansas that Bader attributed to the Progressives decades later: pride in the state’s past achievements and confidence in its future; a gospel of prosperity expressed through statistics; glorification of the pioneers and their combative spirit, especially during the territorial period; and a belief that Kansas was a microcosm of American society, and a leader in national politics and economic development. Well before Carl Becker famously characterized Kansas as a “state of mind,” or William Allen White portrayed the state as an “ideal Puritan civilization,” John A. Martin provided his fellow citizens with a major interpretation of Kansas’s distinctive identity.⁴

Central to this interpretation was Martin’s portrait of Civil War veterans in Kansas, their personal character, and the significant role they played in the state’s development. The veteran was a man whose character had been strengthened and burnished in the cauldron of military and ideological conflict. Contrary to the stereotype of the

Union veteran (held by many of his contemporaries, as well as later historians) as a party hack and pension grabber, Martin saw him as the driving force behind Kansas’s remarkable growth and prosperity. In this sense, then, he envisioned Kansas as a postwar society, one that was being shaped by a massive influx of veterans who brought with them their progressive Northern and Republican Party values.

Martin was so convinced that the success of Kansas was attributable to its many Union veterans that he declared it to be the “Soldier State.” Although he provided a precise rationale for employing that phrase, we can better understand its meaning by taking note of Martin’s own experience as a soldier and his postwar career as a newspaper editor, and, most importantly, by relating the image to his intense sectional and political loyalties. This, in turn, will provide us with a basis for evaluating the weaknesses and strengths of the image of Kansas as the Soldier State, and speculating about Martin’s reasons for using it.

George Armstrong Custer; the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad; Dodge City; buffalo soldiers; the Homestead Act; the Chisholm Trail: these names evoke a time when Kansas was the crossroads of America’s westward migration. Although no longer the political and journalistic obsession it had become in the mid-1850s guise of Bleeding Kansas, Kansas remained prominent in the nation’s consciousness throughout the first three decades of its statehood. In the twentieth century, popular novelists, filmmakers, and television producers returned to these subjects again and again. Historians have also shown enormous enthusiasm for the era and have studied it extensively. But scholars have neglected to examine the impact that many of the Indian fighters, homesteaders, and railroad builders had on Kansas when they stepped out of their distinctive occupations and into an identity that they shared in common.

Tens of thousands of early Kansans were Civil War veterans whose lives continued to be shaped, even as they transformed their youthful state, by memories of that terrible conflict. With the help of their families and friends, Union Army veterans established organizations such as the Grand Army of the Republic and the Woman’s Relief Corps. They frequently gathered together at reunions throughout the region, organized local Memorial Day activities, published specialized newspapers such as the Western Veteran, and erected over a hundred monuments in cemeteries and other public spaces throughout the state. Pictured here is GAR Post No. 339, Thayer, Neosho County.
local Memorial Day activities, published specialized newspapers such as the Western Veteran (Topeka), and erected over a hundred monuments in cemeteries and other public spaces throughout the state. Most importantly, they founded several institutions designed to care for the health of the veteran and for his family as he aged and passed on. The GAR and WRC were instrumental in creating, for example, the Western Branch of the National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers in Leavenworth, the State Soldiers’ Home at Fort Dodge, the Soldiers’ Orphans’ Home in Atchison, and the short-lived National GAR Memorial College in Oberlin.5

The purposes of this large statewide community were rooted in the monumental events of the recent past. It sought to preserve a memory of the North’s glorious victory and to demand the gratitude that the nation owed its heroic saviors. But veteran activists were also devoted to meeting certain present needs, such as caring for aging and physically disabled survivors of the conflict, or facilitating the old soldiers’ desire to fraternize with their comrades. Eventually, as the Civil War generation vanished, remnants of the community became more concerned about bequeathing the legacy of the Union’s war effort to future generations. Numerous leaders emerged over time in the effort to articulate and to realize these varied goals, including one man who wanted to understand what it meant for Kansas to have such an extensive and vibrant veteran presence.

John A. Martin, newspaper editor, Republican Party official, and tenth governor of Kansas (1885–1889), was also a Civil War veteran. For three years as a soldier Martin distinguished himself with his leadership abilities and his courage in battle. Mustered into the Union Army at age twenty-two as lieutenant colonel of the Eighth Kansas Infantry, he was promoted to colonel in November 1862. Martin was appointed provost marshal in Leavenworth, Kansas, and later in Nashville, Tennessee, where he worked closely with Governor Andrew Johnson. When his brigade commander was mortally wounded at the disastrous battle of Chickamauga, Martin assumed command of his own and three other regiments. On November 25, 1863, the Eighth Kansas, with Martin leading it on horseback, were among the first troops to reach the crest of Missionary Ridge, one of the most stunning and significant Union victories in the western theater of the Civil War. He left the service a year later as commander of the First Brigade of the Third Division, Fourth Army Corps in the Army of the Cumberland. Martin was brevetted brigadier general for his meritorious service.6

It was as editor of the major newspaper in one of Kansas’s largest cities, the Atchison Champion, and as a leader of the Kansas-dominant Republican Party, that Martin became the most prominent Union veteran in the state. For a quarter of a century he tirelessly promoted the welfare of

his former comrades in blue. When the Veteran Brotherhood, a statewide organization of veterans, decided late in 1866 to join the new national Grand Army of the Republic, the members elected Martin commander in chief of the Kansas Department. They reelected him the following year. Martin was twice elected to the Board of Managers of the National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers. He was proud to have played a role in locating a new western branch of the home in Kansas, even though it was eventually built in Leavenworth, rather than Atchison. Like most people active on behalf of disabled old soldiers, Martin frequently called upon the federal government to provide them with generous monthly pensions. His particular contribution to the cause was to press the Kansas legislature to take a special census of veterans in the state, thereby enabling men who had not yet received a pension to contact former comrades for evidence of service.

Martin was especially eloquent when he evoked the pleasures of soldier reunions and when he defended such gatherings against charges of disorderly behavior. Readers of the Champion could also count on editorial support for the building of soldier monuments, the commemoration of Memorial Day, government grants of land and cash bounties, the preference of veterans in public employment, and the writing of war histories. As governor, Martin succeeded in urging the state legislature to make Memorial Day a legal holiday. In addition, during his four-year tenure a complete enrollment of the honorably discharged soldiers in the state was compiled, a home for the orphan children of loyal soldiers was established in Atchison, and laws were enacted to ensure preference for Union soldiers in public employment and to provide for their burial at public expense.

Introducing a collection of the governor’s addresses, Daniel W. Wilder proclaimed Martin to be “a man whose whole life and thought is wrapped up in Kansas.” Kansans would prize these speeches, Wilder thought, because they reflected their pride in the state’s short, but colorful, history. Indeed, the booster spirit suffuses the volume from cover to cover. Martin had been, after all, a newspaper editor almost from the time he moved from Pennsylvania to Kansas at the age of nineteen. He took credit for possessing the resilient faith characteristic of his chosen profession. “Day after day, week after week,” he told the Northwestern Editorial Association, “the editors of Kansas have sung the praises of Kansas, and glorified her name, and neither border wars, nor Indian raids, nor drouths, nor grasshopper invasions, have ever for a moment discouraged, dismayed or disheartened them.”

Nothing excited Martin’s pride more than the growth of his adopted state, the character of his fellow Civil War veterans, and the achievements of the Republican Party.

7. Accounts of these and other activities on behalf of the veterans can be gleaned from Martin’s editorial columns in the Atchison Champion from 1865 through 1889.
are a modest people, and are not puffed up,” he told a group of Missourians, “even if we have the best and greatest State in the Union.”

Optimism shaped Martin’s understanding of the state’s brief past. He neatly divided his history of Kansas into three decade-long periods of material development. In the first “Period of War,” from 1855 to 1865, Kansas was basically an “armed camp,” he thought, preoccupied with border conflict and raising troops for the full-scale war that commenced in 1861. Only in the last couple of years of the war was there any significant growth in population and property values. There was a sudden boom in the number of people arriving in Kansas immediately after the war, composed most notably of returning soldiers riding newly constructed rail lines. And yet the following decade, 1865 to 1875, was one of “Uncertainty,” caused largely by the dry weather and insect plagues of 1873 and 1874. Martin lauded the decade commencing in 1875 as a “Period of Triumph.” A greater accumulation of wealth and the construction of substantial buildings on farms and in towns did wonders for the confidence of the state’s citizens. Moreover, this decade brought a welcome end to Kansas’s stint as the Wild West:

The bone-hunter and the buffalo-hunter of the plains, the Indian and his reservations, the jay-hawker and the Wild Bills, the Texas steer and the cowboy, the buffalo grass and the dug-outs, the loneliness and immensity of the unpeopled prairies, the infinite stretching of the plains, unbroken by tree or shrub, by fence or house—all these have vanished, or are rapidly vanishing.

Martin was pleased that the frontier era was over and that an unsettled Kansas was rapidly being replaced by a more sober and cultured civilization. He looked forward to a time when “the majestic lyric of prosperous industry is echoing over eighty-one thousand square miles of the loveliest and most fertile country that the sun, in his daily journey, lights and warms.”

Martin was convinced that such dramatic material progress was possible because Kansans were a special people. The “richest heritage

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of Kansas,” he claimed, “is the imperial manhood of its citizenship. No State in the Union, no country in the world, can boast of a braver or more intelligent, enterprising, liberty-loving, and law-respecting population.” They were a people made by war. Hosting the first bloodshed of the Civil War was to Kansans’ advantage. The early fight against slavery in the 1850s attracted daring young men, equipped them to endure hardship, and offered them the opportunity to prove their courage. Martin theorized that, by the time President Abraham Lincoln called the nation to arms in 1861, Kansans had become a “singularly martial people.” And when the war ended he believed that civilian life was more intelligent and prosperous because the former soldiers had learned valuable lessons in obedience, promptness, and respect for the law. While other commentators in this era praised the soldier for his masculinity, his patriotism, or his willingness to sacrifice for larger ideals, Martin emphasized the veteran’s role in creating an orderly civilization. Even though he had witnessed men at their most destructive during the war and was aware of the great extent of disability among the war’s survivors, Martin was convinced that the soldiers’ courage, discipline, and vigor made them the vanguard of a progressive Kansas.

In fact, Martin declared Kansas to be “the great ‘Soldier State’ of the Union,” and he sought to carefully substantiate his claim, much as the prophets of material growth had, with statistics. First, he noted that the Civil War had begun in Kansas a full six years before it spread to the rest of the country. Between 1855 and 1861 Kansans “had measured the desperate ambitions of slavery; they understood its intolerant and destructive spirit; and when it finally assailed the life of the Republic, they were neither surprised, dismayed, nor unprepared.” Second, with this advance preparation the brand new state enthusiastically furnished far more men for the Union Army than was expected. Over a four-year period the federal government requested 12,931 men, but Kansas sent 20,661. Indeed, based on the 1860 census count of just over 28,000 men between the ages of twenty and fifty, Martin averred that Kansas sent more soldiers to the conflict, in proportion to population, than any other state. “Such a record of devotion to a cause is . . . unexampled in the history of any other war that has ever occurred in any age or country,” he boasted. Martin next pointed to official statistics indicating that no state had a larger percentage of its soldiers killed in battle than Kansas (61.01 per 1,000). He quoted Provost

Marshall General J. B. Fry, who thought the high mortality of Kansans was due to their “singularly martial disposition.”

Shifting his perspective toward the present day, Martin noted a fourth reason for honoring Kansas as the Soldier State. Since the end of the war it had become “the new home to which the veterans turned their footsteps when their marches and battles were over.” So many boys in blue had migrated to Kansas that fully one-twelfth of the state’s citizens, he claimed, had served in the Union Army. Although this time he had no statistics to back up his claims, Martin said he believed the veteran population was so vast that it included men who had served in every regiment in the Union Army:

Plodding along in all the walks and ways of our now peaceful and quiet Kansas life are men who have fought on every battlefield of the civil war; men who were active participants in all the events of the greatest and most stirring drama of the world’s history; men whose personal recollections embrace the story of every march, camp, bivouac, skirmish and battle in which the armies of the Union engaged; men whose blood has been poured out in every combat where patriotism maintained the supremacy of our flag.

The large size and enormous diversity of the state’s veteran population contributed to Martin’s vision of Kansas as a “cosmopolitan” society. All nationalities and all sections of the country were sending their brightest and strongest people to the plains. This “wonderful aggregation of peoples” also served, he believed, as a model of sectional reconciliation, a land where erstwhile foes would work together to build a new commonwealth. Martin envisioned a future Kansas “combining the sturdy independence, firm convictions and all-conquering energy and industry of the North with the intense enthusiasm and fine courage of the South.”

This expression of generosity toward the South was unusual for Martin, however. His designation of Kansas as the Soldier State needs to be understood within the context of his extremely sectional and partisan political perspective. The political arena, as he understood it, was the site of a deadly conflict between the force of good, the Republican Party representing Northern values and interests, and the embodiment of evil, the Democratic Party of Southern values and interests. The principles each combatant stood for were rooted in the sectional battles of the 1850s and the Civil War, and they were kept largely unchanged for the next thirty years. Martin was the sort of Republican for whom the “Southern Question,” of how to reconstruct the South with equal rights and representative state governments, was the premier political issue of his generation.

“I am a Republican because I was a Union soldier,” he said. Whenever he reviewed his party’s record, even into the mid-1880s, Martin proudly reminded his audience that it was the Republicans that “crushed the Rebellion, abolished Slavery, preserved the Union, and made this a great Nation.” Democrats, by contrast, remained “the same party that, from 1854 to 1861, held Kansas by the throat, and by fraud, and murder, and arson, and turbulence, and every crime that ever disgraced humanity, endeavored to fasten upon it the curse of Human Slavery.” The freedmen could depend on Republicans alone to defend their civil rights, particularly an honest ballot and a fair count. And, of course, only Republicans could be relied upon to ensure “that the debt of gratitude the country owes to the soldiers and sailors of the Union shall be honestly remembered and repaid.”

Although he acknowledged Democratic complaints that politicians like him continued to revive the old sectional animosities in each election, Martin did so without apology. To “wave the bloody shirt” was for him simply an expression of pride in the sacrifices and accomplishments of his comrades in blue. Besides, no one was more committed to keeping alive the hatreds of the war than the “Solid South,” terrorizing Republicans both black and white.

We create an image in order to better understand the world; it is a tool for aiding the mind. Like any tool, however, it may entail certain disadvantages and actually alienate us further from reality. At the same time an image may reveal, it may also conceal. As simplifications of the real world’s complexity, images serve to focus our attention while also limiting our perspective. Martin’s image of Kansas as the Soldier State suffered from obvious weaknesses. Firstly, it was a very narrow perception of the state. Martin boasted that fully one hundred thousand soldiers inhabited Kansas but, large as that number was for the time, it was still less than one-sixth of the state’s male population in 1885. The image was also exclusive in that it idealized the character of the soldier. Not every veteran was transformed by his war experience into an engine of progress and civilization. Moreover, the particular sectional and partisan identity that Martin imposed on the state unfairly ignored any contributions by Southerners or Democrats to Kansas’s development. Secondly, it was an image that would inevitably lose its relevance over time. By the 1890s the “boys in blue” had become the “old soldiers” and more of them were mustering out for the last time with each passing year. The larger veteran community worked hard to continually refresh memories of the war and its ideals, but this became more difficult as the heroes themselves died. Eventually, soldiers at reunions were replaced by monuments in town squares.

Why, then, did Martin and many others in the veteran community proclaim Kansas the Soldier State? For personal and political reasons, to be sure. Closely associating his own experience as a Union soldier with

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the identity of the entire state fed his personal pride and promoted his political aspirations. As noted above, Martin was a newspaper editor and in the business of boosting his town and state. What better way to do this than to depict Kansas as a society made distinct in that it was led by the heroes of the Civil War? We need not impugn Martin’s sincerity in his use of the image, however. After all, we can safely assume that collectively the tens of thousands of veterans in Kansas did play a vital role in the state’s development. Moreover, no historian of nineteenth-century Kansas would question the image’s characterization of Kansas culture as predominantly Northern or its politics as overwhelmingly Republican.

John A. Martin understood, then, what historians are only now beginning to recognize: the continuities between the Civil War and the Reconstruction Era. The war did not end at Appomattox, nor did Reconstruction cease in 1877. Americans continued to struggle, even violently, with the key issues of the Civil War throughout the nineteenth century and even beyond. What to do with the ex-slaves may have been the central issue of the age, but Martin recognized that the welfare of unprecedented numbers of veterans was also an extremely important national challenge. In addition, he believed that the victory he and his comrades had won could be squandered if the South did not accept the Union and freedom for blacks. Northern society bore the heavy responsibility of expressing its gratitude to the nation’s saviors and liberators. As the Soldier State, Kansas would lead the way. KH