

Randall C. Jimerson, The Private Civil War(1988)

Effort to get at the "popular view" of the Civil War as the view from the generals, statesmen, and eminences have been given attention. This is a look at how the "plain people" view this most searing event in our national history.

Notes that the north/south division was more psychological than geographical.

The dairies and personal accounts still extant make this possible. The war affected the entire population, which was highly literate. Quotes Henry Steele Commager: "Surely, no other chapter of modern history has been so faithfully or so elaborately commented upon by ordinary men and women; in the American CW Everyman was, indeed, his own historian."

1. All That We Hold Dear

Popular views about why the South must fight.

For slaveowners the Republic(Black Republican/abolitionists/John Brown)appeared a clear threat to their property. This was a central issue no matter how it was glossed over or articulated in more lofty language.

Slavery was the cornerstone of southern society--economics, social control, infringement on slavery(property)was an infringement on their liberty. The South would not be denied the right of self-government by northern majorities.

To southerners slavery and their espousal of liberty was not a case of cognitive dissonance. So completely had they excluded blacks from consideration as human beings that they could entertain the possibility of civil rights and liberty not pertaining to blacks.

Belief that God would support their just cause. Also the reference to preserving a Constitutional system of self-government and liberty that was the legacy of the Founding Fathers and Revolutionary legends like Washington and Jefferson etc.

Strong note here: that nonslaveholders looked upon the Union effort to "coerce the South by invasion as the tocsin call to defend their homes and families.

2. Freedom, Justice and Our Country"

For Northerners defense of the Union was the prime task. There was no significant sentiment about ending slavery when the war began. Union and Liberty was the clarion call from the North. But not liberty or freedom for the black man. Both sections went to war to protect liberty,etc. But their ideas of liberty represented two divergent ideological positions, both deeply rooted in American thought.

Northerners regarded freedom as something that the institutions of government protected and advanced. For Southerners liberty was freedom from the dictates and imposed will of the central authority or government.

Some northern soldiers saw clearly that in order to defend and preserve the Union that slavery had to be uprooted and destroyed. That the two issues were inextricably linked. That the North could not accomplish its goal of preserving the Union without uprooting slavery. Many saw this before Lincoln's EP. Many of these soldiers were of an abolitionist sentiment (a minority in the Union Army) or became raging abolitionists after they saw slavery at work close up as their units moved into the South.

Perhaps the more universal view among the Union ranks (influenced heavily by racialism) was that Union and slavery had no connection. Fighting to save the Union was one thing but fighting to free the dslave was an intolerable and unsupported additional and unacceptable goal. Abolitionists in the ranks were not altogether welcomed. Many Union men regarded the abos as partly responsible for the war along with the radical secessionists in the South., J claims that only about 10% of Union forces enlisted in the war with the aim of ending slavery/. Most Union troops opposed the whole idea of the EP. This was true at first. While it might be Lincoln's goal it was not the aim of most Union soldiers.

many believed that slavery was the natural condition of blacks. If they were freed wouldn't they flock northward and jeopardize working conditions and even threaten white families. While they may not have sympathized with slavery as it exsated in the South they were not enamored w/ the idea of upsetting the social structure of the nation.

At best, most Unionists greeted the EP with scepticism. . .if not outright hostility. Yet many were willing to try the new policy if it might undermine the South and bring the war to a speedier conclusion. This willingness to accept emancipation as a war measure was the only basis on which northern opinion would acquiesce in undermining southern institutions. All war measures would be judged on their effectiveness in contributing to the Union's defense. This change in attitude toward the EP would take an upward turn at about the time that Union defeats were reversed--the low point of Fredericksburg and Chancellorville were cancelled out in July '63 w. the news of Gettysburg and Vicksburg. These new military successes convinced the sceptics hat blows against slavery might hasten the end of the bloodbath. Add to this news of blacks and their combat worthiness at Ft. Wagner, Hudson, and Millikins' Bend.

DL to SM, 1/1/'68

Most Unionists came to accept the emancipation of blacks as critical to the war effort. To preserve the Union liberty for blacks was essential. This became clear by the end of the struggle. It was Lincoln's special genius that combined war for Union with war against slavery at the point at which antagonisms would be minimized. Emancipation would never win approval on moral or ideological grounds, but northerners accepted it as a pragmatic war policy justified by its contribution to winning the war for the Union. . . . Only by proposing emancipation as a war measure could it be made palatable to racist Unionists. The war finally gave liberty to blacks, but northern prejudice would prevent significant progress toward equality.

3. The Test of Slaves' Loyalty

Discusses the Southern ideal of the loyal slave. Necessary to believe as a counter to abolitionist diatribes against the brutality of the peculiar institution.

Test of loyalty would be severely challenged by the war. Would there be slave uprisings once the men left the women in charge of the farms and plantations.

Accusations against Unionists as purveyors of slave insurrection. the John Brown model was always ready at hand.

While most slaves were not Nat Turners most were not Sambos. Notes that once the word got out that Union troops were in the area slaves became anxious, recalcitrant, and fractious and not open to discipline. Once Union forces were in an area all discipline collapsed. Slavery was impossible with Yankees in the region. Black responses ranged from passivity to armed resistance.

There was an absence of major insurrection. But despite this, slaves were not loyal as the southern stereotypes would have it. Blacks avoided major resistance because they saw it was basically unnecessary and too dangerous. But they did want to participate in their own liberation. They contributed by refusing to work, striking for wages, refusing to submit to punishment, giving information to Yankees, and hundreds of other low-level acts of independence.

Desertion to Yankee ranks was the most common form of voting against slavery w/ their feet.

In Sherman's March some 19,000 slaves followed in the wake of the Union columns. Throughout the South, those slaves who found an opportunity to flee to Union lines did so. While most of the South's slave population that was isolated from the war zones by geography and other barriers remained passively loyal. But only because the opportunity to escape to Union forces was never a real possibility.

J concludes that the exodus from the plantation to Union lines puts to lie the myth of the loyal slave.

4. Black Soldiers

Discussion of the racism of the North on the eve of the CW. Blacks as second class citizens north of Dixie. Best rendition of this can be found in Paludan for lecture material.

Blacks could not fight. Their only use would be to dig fortifications, as teamsters, and cooks, etc. freeing up white men to do more of the daring acts of war. Host of other arguments: black cowardice, black laziness, blacks in uniforms would reduce the prestige of white soldiers, black soldiering was but the first step toward full equality, etc. . . .

The only arguments that could overturn white racism was that black soldiers would save white lives and might assist in the preservation of the Union.

It all boiled down to a chilling calculus: Faced w/ the threat of indiscriminate death (after Shiloh and Antietam, etc) on previously unimagined scale, soldiers began to think that the danger should be shared by blacks. If some one must die, let it be the black man. As long as war aims were now changed to free the black man, even though this was not immediately popular with most Union soldiers, they preferred that blacks lose their heads, and take their chances on the battlefield as well. Blacks were just as well equipped to stop a bullet as a white man. This was the talk around the Union campfires.

Points made: the war emergency nature of the EP and the reasons for the turnaround of attitudes toward recruiting blacks for war. None of these reasons had a thing to do with morality of the issue nor did they erode away racial prejudice in the white North. The reasons were practical and based on self-interest alone.

Capt. Pythagoras Holcombe of the 2nd Vermont Battery declared: If a bob-tailed dog can stick a bayonet on his tail, and back up against a Rebel and kill him, I will take the dog and sleep with him, and if a nigger will do the same, I'll do the same by him. I'll sleep with anything that will kill a rebel (circa 1863).

When a soldier was mere fodder for the cannon's mouth, the color of his skin did not matter. Callous disregard for black lives (did not compare w/ great white race) led white Unionists to view them as ideal candidates for the position.

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The Conscription Act of 1863 cleared the way for the recruitment of black troops. This allowed whites in the North a degree of freedom from the draft. The black was a good substitute. Also, by 1863 the Union's manpower pool was shrinking.

Cites poem by Charles G. Halpine who was on the staff of "Black" Dave Hunter.

Xerox pp. 99-100 (done w/ Irish brogue)

It was published under Halpine's pseudonym, "Private Miles O'Reilly."
It was circulated among Hunter's troops at Hilton Head, S.C. It worked wonders in softening attitudes among white soldiers there. Later was given a title "Sambo's Right to be Kilt" and was published nationally. It worked wonders w/ the NY Irish, the most bitter opponents of black enlistment.

Discusses the arrangement: blacks were segregated in black units; and they were led by white officers.

This opened up opportunities for whites to reach officer status by volunteering for black units.

Blacks faced withering discrimination by white troops. The question that all white Unionists wanted answered: Would they fight? The black regiments were under heavy scrutiny.

Then came the battles of summer of 1863: Port Hudson, Milliken's Bend, and Ft. Wagner. Dispelled the suspicion that blacks would not fight.

J records the grudging reversal or modification of white attitudes toward black soldiers. See esp. a Charles Wills (pp. 109ff).

The record of black troops earned their race a right to be looked upon as ready to take full responsibility for their freedom and their rights.

J has a good section of Confederate atrocities against black soldiers. Much of it familiar but some of it new material. Why the violent fury of southern reaction?

Blacks who acquitted themselves well in combat would disprove assertions about the race's inferiority and dependency. It ran to the very heart of white South's arguments about the need for slavery. The roots of the southern slave system were exposed for what they were. This was a threat to the South's self-image as noble guardians of the inferior and therefore "naturally" consigned black race to slavery. Blacks who took up arms against their masters was the ultimate and unforgiveable act of betrayal.

Notes Genovese on this Roll(pp. 97-102).

subsection entitled "The Habit of Injustice:" Despite changing attitudes toward blacks largely as a result of their war record, still the habit of injustice was too strong in white America.

5. Perceptions of the Enemy

Little different here than I find in Mitchell's Solder's War

6. The Limits of Sectional Consciousness

Sectional consciousness constitutes the most pervasive and significant dividing line in popular thought during the CW. In this chpt, Jimerson looks at those issues in both sections that worked against unity. These internal divisions provide a persuasive counterpoint to the dominant theme of sectional unity. The issues he chooses are: state loyalty, social class, military rank, ideology and patriotism, and morale.

1. A War Between the States:

Emphasis on local community/state loyalty that muted any close or passionate identification with the central or by wartime the national power. The local perspective is best typified by a So. Carolinian who explain his heirarchy of loyalties: "I go first for Greenville, then for Greenville District, then for the up-country, then for So. Carolina, then for the South, then for the U.S., and after that I don't go for anything. I've no use for Englishmen, Turks, and Chinese."

Siminal, if not so rigid, this theme of localism was true of northerners as well.

J argues that Union and Con. armies were recruited, armed, and equipped and trained by state governments.

Discuss the intense and bitter rivalry between the Army of the Potomac(easterners)and the Western Union forces. Westerners believed that the Army of the Potomac was all starch and style. Charles Wills: ". . . the Potomac Army is only good to draw greenbacks and occupy winter quarters."

Easterners responded that they fought the South's best generals and troops while the Westerners took on a rabble of bushwackers.

Not as intense but evident, this regionalism was present among Con. troops. Especially w/ Army of Northern Virginia troops taking a dim view of their confederate fighters in the West,.

In the North there was blantant resentment against New England, believed to be the hgame of radical abolitionism and w/ a insatiable appetite to run the whole Union effort.

In the Con. resentment and distrust was rife between the deep Southern states and the border states like Virginia, which were suspect in their "political faith" as far as commitment to independence and the perpetuity of slavery. Deep southern states who went out first were suspicious of the perserverence of those border slave-holding states who waited to join the Con. until after Sumter and Lincoln's calling up the first 75,000 volunteers.

He discusses the familiar examples of states' rights governors like Brown and Vance and their resistance to the draft, taxation, and suspension of habeus corpus.

Notes the two years of parlay with the trans-Mississippi states about leaving the Con. and setting up their own confederacy--that never happened.

The actions of Raleigh publisher Wm. Holden in No. Carolina.

J does not subscribe to the epitaph that the Con. died of states' rights. But it is part of an impotent truth that state lopyalty did limit the complete realization of southern section consciousness. The CW as truly a sectional conflict waged between North and South, however, geographical divisions could cut it several directions.

2. A Poor Man's Fight

Social division cut through a sense of unified purpose in both North and South. He deals with the increasingly public expression among Rebs that it was a rich man's war and a poor man's fight.

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Most explosive as far as social or class tension was the "20 nigger law." exemption in the Con. draft provisions. This infalmed a sense of class legislation discrimination among the poor farmers and nonslaveholders in the Con. ranks.

The planters' rebellion was troubled on two fronts: against the North and the real concern about the loyalty of nonslaveholders. The charges against the slaveocrats in letters home from the ranks indicated that their concern was a reality. The extent of Unionism in their ranks and the desertation among nonslaveholders indicates their conditional loyalty to the Con. cause. As wartime pressures sharpened class conflict, the slaveholders government gradually lost the support of many nonslaveowners.

Efforts of the Con. leadership to cement unity was a twofold approach: racial unity among whites (herrenvolk concept/ with emphasis on democratic equality among all whites/and subordination of blacks as a common racial interest. And Jeff Davis promotion of the idea behind secession as not to protect slavery but to protect the constitutional liberties of all white southerners, etc. Add here, that southern poor and nonslaveowners stayed the course--for most part--to protect their communities/homes/ families against the invading hordes of northern vandals, etc.

It was present in the North but not as corrosive as in the South. The issues were the substitution rule and commutation, which allowed a man to escape the draft for \$300.00.

Class conflict was present in both sections, but in neither did it seriously disrupt either side's ability to wage war.

3. The Insolence of Rank:

Those singled out inside the Con. for public and private calumny were the stay-at-home patriots and slackers and the speculators. As the impact of war grew more oppressive these types were more and more vilified. No question but these practices had a deleterious impact on wartime morale. The fact that Richmond was not able to address these divisive issues more successfully--if at all--speaks volumes for the failure of leadership.

In the North the slackers and sunshine patriots also came under the gun of criticism. But the most prominent symbol of soldiers disdain were the "Copperheads." This term was used to describe anyone who was not 100% in agreement with Northern war aims as laid out by the administration. As the war dragged on and casualties mounted, the "Copperhead" or "traitors" became anathema to Union soldiers. They were more inclined to pop them off than the Rebs in the field.

4. Tired of Fighting Each Other:

Discusses initial enthusiasm of soldieries on both sides to take part in the grand drama. Expectations that war would be glorious and short. An adventure; a break from the routine of home; opportunity to see new sights, etc.

pressure to join from the community.

Then the boredom, frustration, dirty work of war, and the greatest demoralizer--defeat in battle.

The horrors of war unimagined by warriors on both sides. Union morale plummeted after Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville. The same was true with Rebs after G'burg and Vicksburg.

Sentiment in ranks on both sides was to see the war over with regardless. Truer among Union because they had less to risk with a southern victory. By 1863 war weariness was pervasive on both sides.

All this expressed in the desertion rates on both sides. This became critical for the South by the fall of 64.

But overall war weariness and declining patriotism could not end the fighting. These limits on sectional unity did not prevent a final military settlement. Peace advocates never reached a wide audience and even war weariness did not begin to weaken the Confederacy seriously until the fall of 1864 (that Rebs troops showed more loyalty to the Cause than it deserved). State rivalry, class conflict, and inequality of rank created social fissures in sectional unity. But the demands of the fighting kept these internal divisions from threatening the war policies of both govts.

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Epilogue. Victory/Defeat